

So what am I doing here?

Part 1: Theory: writing in and about performance

A persistent tension infuses modes of writing in and about performance. Writing persists. Even when read as evoking an unstable present, writing locates and is located in time;¹ it persists across time. In performance, time is both elastic and paradoxical. Performance works at the intersection of real time, recalled time, social time and fictional time, as it simultaneously creates and occupies a continuous and vanishing present. Writing about performance labors to recreate a moment of engagement, now long gone. Writing in and for performance sustains unstable relationships with other compositional elements, including other ways of planning what might go on, and recording what has gone on, while a performance is in progress. A gap remains.

This instability is magnified with research performance, which sits uneasily between traditional models of research and recognized genres of performance. Special conditions may apply, depending on the component elements in any particular research performance “mix”, and the compositional conventions adopted. What is spoken in performance may or may not originate from a written text. Writing, whether or not it is the first element formed, may or may not go on to “fix” other elements and their relationships to one another. Written and spoken language, and writing and other expressive modes, are not mutually exhaustive in performance, any more than they are in the social world.

Responses to a particular research performance are a product of complex perceptual, individual and social factors including assumptions and expectations based on levels of prior enculturation; understanding of research protocols; familiarity with the specific styles, performance conventions and hierarchies of taste being canvassed; and the position and status the spectator, participant or assessor is invited to occupy with regard to the process at hand. A demonstrated command of technical competences and expected behaviors, expressed as key signs and cues, may also be required to signal and unlock sub-matrices of the knowledge-in-action demanded of those co-present.

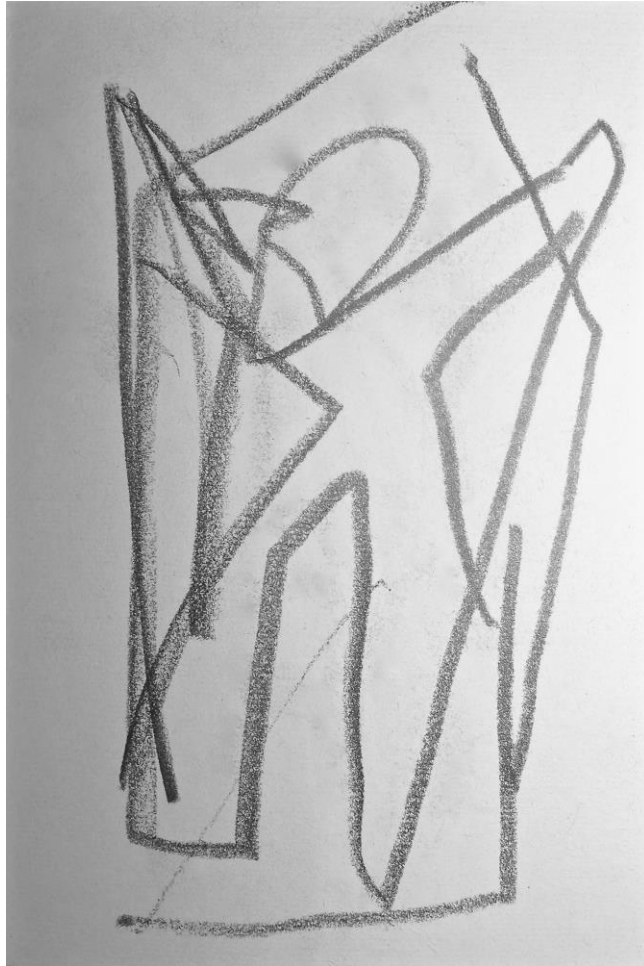
The bulk of what is written/configured/notated for any performance (ideas and directions for movement, sound and visual elements, but also the endless drafts, budgets, memos, sketches, notes and emails, scribbles on plans, records of discussion) never reaches the eyes and ears of most participants in the prepared event. What those participants see and hear — or are prompted to feel or imagine — may include moments that have not been the subject of writing beforehand and are difficult to write about after the event. There is always so much more going on than writing can grasp.

Performance is enfolded, insofar as bodies are its working, signifying and perceiving vehicles, but bodies are far from the only element available to the spectator when receiving or constructing meaning in performance. Performance practice is by habit accretive and agglomerative, subject to technological change, greedy for new effects, preoccupied with human experience and perceptions but humanist only by convention. Despite challenges to notions of “the live” posed by contemporary technologies² it is still reasonably safe to assume that for any performance event someone, somewhere, is attending to what is going on and someone, somewhere, has chosen and organized the material made available for display within appropriate parameters. It is also reasonably safe to assume that what gives the event its significance is its relational quality. Here as elsewhere, the borders between performance and other forms of relational aesthetic presentation are blurred and bleed.³

In this project, I wanted to investigate performance from the perspective of the performer, testing the matrix of knowledge, power, desire and expectation at issue in the slippage between real and theatrical experience, with a particular focus on the representation of physical and emotional pain⁴. The creative works through which this particular research project was pursued were built around the co—presence of performer(s) and observer(s), in differently configured contexts of performance presentation.

A performer’s body may be seen as gendered, located and textual insofar as its behaviors are practiced, scripted, inscribed. Flesh, as idea and substance, is more mute. How does flesh become embodied in performance? In what follows, I write to create a frame through which experiences of the flesh might be re-membered. I will use “plain label” terms as far as possible — writing rather than text, flesh rather than body — trying

to do without the accretions/associations attached to alternative concepts used in recent writing about performance. I know that the sticky polysemy of performance will soon sully such attempts at linguistic cleanliness. Apart from that, I remind myself, I know nothing. Failure is inevitable, but we can try to put it off for a while ...



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

Part 2: Representing Research, researching re/presentation

I begin from the proposition that, as a dynamic set of active practices, performance requires active modes of creative investigation — the exploration of ecologies or horizons of alternate moments, of possibilities in flow, rather than the

accumulation of static taxonomies.⁵ Instead of starting with a traditional research question or an “enthusiasm of practice”⁶ I prefer to operate with a series of dilemmas, each suggesting a trajectory to be teased out. Identifying performance as a paradoxical field, I adopt paradox and perversity as methodological tools.⁷ Taking a speculative stance on different sides of a paradox allows me to fashion performance propositions to catch different kinds of perceptual, conceptual or behavioral residue. Such propositions can also act as disruptive interventions, pushing us past the boundaries of received ideas and into new ways of understanding what we are doing, endlessly approaching that imagined point on the horizon where ontologies and epistemologies coincide.

In this instance, the dilemmas identified as subjects for enquiry were:

- What are the optimum conditions for the presentation and reception of research performance, and how might they be secured?
- How might different contexts of performance affect the presentation and reception of such performance?
- What does this tell us about performance in general?
- If conditions are less than optimum, what are the chances of change?

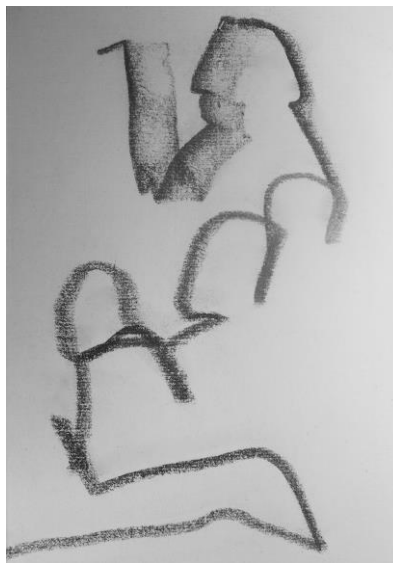
Pursuing paradox as methodology produced further questions:

- What goes on in the gap between the experience of pain and its representation in performance?
- What goes on across the gap between actor, observer and bystander in performance?
- How might different framings of the female body and different relations of word, flesh and image affect observers’ responses in performance?
- What’s the relationship here between signification and significance?
- For whom might my flesh be perceived as textual, objectified — by me and/or by others ... who sets the rules? Who or what controls the definition of the situation?

In what follows, my examples are drawn from a series of original research performance works, *The Bride Stripped Bare* (2003—5), *Event Horizon* (2009) and *Instability Strip* (2010); I will also refer to other events that fed into the score for the final

work. These linked works used a range of different compositional and presentation strategies to focus on particular problems of presentation and reception. Flesh – my white, aging, female flesh — was on each occasion brought into a different relation with writing, spoken word, stage images, sound and with co—present others, to tease out how the nexus of desire and distance evoked in these relations might operate in practice. My writing in and for performance, *before*, and my writing about performance, *now*, stand either side of a space that cannot be filled; it is not my intention here to force it to stand in for what is absent. Rather, I want to draw attention to the persistence of that flesh, staying in excess of any writing that attempts its capture through syntactical iteration.

Mind the gap ...



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

Part 3: Contexts of Performance

Recent performance theory, whether anthropological/ethnographic, phenomenological or structuralist/poststructuralist, tends to take the effectiveness of communication as an axiom — it begins by assuming that signifying systems, syntax and comprehension of context will be shared between performers and spectators at a level

sufficient for conventions to be established and to eventuate a more or less agreed understanding of the frame and content of the performance to eventuate.

Many go further, claiming the communion of co—presence as fundamental to the power of the performance experience: the implicit project of 20th Century performance theory and “experimental” theater since the 1960s being to rediscover in other cultures the communal sense supposedly lost to the First World with the advent of modernity.⁸ The focus on social performance at the heart of the ethnographic approach and our own human desires to be included, to be understood, tend to blind us to the prevalence of miscommunication, and to the clashes between modes of perception, frames of reference and styles of physical and emotional response on the part of makers, shapers and receivers, that are equally characteristic of interactions in the time and space of performance.

The wonder is that communication happens at all. It may be productive to investigate, as Goffman suggests,⁹ the conditions under which the felicitous accident of mutual comprehension is most likely to occur. We know that language, memory and behavior all have a role to play in making our understanding of social conventions, our command of appropriate techniques of social interaction and our communicative intentions apparent to others and available for their response.

In social performance, as in art performance, those co-present will have expectations with regard to the blending of language and behavioral cues. We are quick to pick up anomalies, to find it jarring if a gesture of invitation is accompanied by words spoken in a cold tone, or if the delivery of a prepared speech sounds hesitant or insincere. We are alive to the marks of gender, race and class that situate a performer as authentic, relative to the performance they attempt — the more distant the particular performance is from our personal or social experience, the less alert we may be to detail and nuance and the more reliant on convention via visual, vocal or embodied cues. Campaigns for culturally appropriate and/or color-blind casting in the theater, mounted in an effort to address the cultural and economic disadvantage experienced by performers from minority backgrounds, have highlighted the degree to which systems of real social and political power underly the paradoxical politics of audience expectations.¹⁰

How then might such systems be investigated, resisted, challenged or changed? Radical and oppositional performance traditions or movements have used various strategies in an effort to shift the ground of representation and establish new modes of discourse and economies of symbolic exchange. Options include: changing the context of the performance; altering the form and/or content of the performance; modifying the matter/materials of the performance; shifting the parameters of the performance: or, by way of contrary motion, adopting a strategy whereby visibility is achieved slowly, through persistence.¹¹

The recent theoretical focus on performativity and performance¹² highlights the imbrication of modes of social being and modes of embodiment,¹³ demonstrating the power of discourse in defining what can be said/understood/done, and what cannot.¹⁴ Judith Butler's influential work on performativity and gender draws on Foucault, Austin and other figures in phenomenological, linguistic and feminist philosophy, to highlight the degree to which individual social actors become complicit in "performing" dominant expectations about the execution of social role. These then acquire the status of reality, being reproduced through reiteration. As Butler points out, many of these cuing systems will "naturally" reflect unstated preferences and modes of expression in the surrounding culture, which when challenged may be enforced normatively or under threat of sanction:

as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences ... we regularly punish those who fail to get their gender right.¹⁵

For Butler, gender as compulsory performance is enabled by the performativity of discourse. The possibilities for change open to any one individual or group of individuals are determined by the degree to which the contingent character of that performance is revealed:

if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts ... the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.¹⁶

The proposition that unstated assumptions affecting the constitution and perception of the performer might be revealed through a series of deliberately non—identical iterations,

was central to the approach adopted for this research project. In her discussion of the links between theatrical and social role, Butler hesitates to make too strong a claim for the disruptive potential of theatrical performance, pointing to its inherently contingent relation to “the real.” She does however suggest that it “*constitutes* a reality that is in some sense new, a modality ... that cannot readily be assimilated into ... pre-existing categories.”¹⁷ If her observation that the performativity of gender “is real only to the extent that it is performed”¹⁸ is extended to the performance of social role in general, it suggests that research into and by means of performance practice could work to enable revelation of the “arbitrary relation” at the heart of other apparently real and eternal norms, currently restricting more exploratory modes of expressive social interaction. Proponents such as Haseman have argued strongly that performance-led research should be classed as performative.¹⁹ Under what circumstances might this be so?

Although Butler suggests that the grounds of power might be shifted through the “choreography” of transgressive or oppositional performances, in her formulation performativity itself becomes something of a bounded universe, in which performing bodies are subordinate to the performative power of language

the reading of ‘performativity’ as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms ... constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names.²⁰

Like Foucault, Butler maintains a distance from those who might wish to take up the promise of change held out by her implicitly liberationist rhetoric, reminding her reader that the ultimate test of the performativity of any utterance is its effectiveness. The power of discourse, while contingent on the complicity of those whose behavior it prompts and mediates, is likely to persist well beyond individual behavioral iterations, whether compliant, parodic, or transgressive.

Despite her emphasis on the meanings attached to and transmitted by bodies and behaviors, for Butler the available horizon of signification is bounded by discourse. While contesting Foucault’s notion of the body/flesh as simply an inscribed surface, she fails to articulate clearly the ground from which any newly configured performance of identity might emerge; except to conclude that “the task is not whether to repeat, but how

to repeat ... *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.”²¹ How, indeed?

Rather than an exclusively discursive universe, the space and time of performance might better be understood as a field, in the Bourdieuan sense, in which hierarchies of taste and claims to material and cultural capital drawn from within as well as outside the boundaries of the field, affect the status and the habitus of those involved as social actors.²² The power to define meaning attached to particular poles or positions within the field will have a material impact on exchanges playing out within the frame of a particular performance—and so affect the outcome of any clashes between competing views about what is going on. It might also be useful, as I have argued elsewhere, to adopt Goffman’s suggestion that both verbal and non—verbal behaviors are syntactical in character, produced and interpreted according to contextually determined rules.²³

Amongst Goffman’s more enduring contributions to performance theory have been, first, his observation that communicative performance interactions include both “expressions given and expressions given off,”²⁴ and second, that they will tend to assume a triadic character, oscillating between notional positions of “those who perform; those performed to; and outsiders”²⁵ however many people are actually involved.



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

I would add the possible position of author or director (those engaged in a performance interaction may be doing so at someone else's behest), and acknowledge the influence of the person who is present but has actively or passively withdrawn (an economy of attention is vital in sustaining the performance event). Those actually co-present may shift overtly or covertly between these notional positions, including by paying or withdrawing attention to what is going on.

The key variable for the researcher in this case, I would suggest, is time. Given time and over time, shifts in position reflective of tensions between expectation, flesh and writing in the paradoxical time and space of research performance can themselves be productive of difference.

Part 4: Research by Means of Performance: The Instability Strip

This research project reflexively investigated the parameters of performance through a series of thematically connected workshops and performance presentations. During the seven-year life of the project, the core written text was held more or less constant. Realization/presentation strategies including repositioned passages of text and reconfigured relationships with other performance elements, varied from one presentation to another.

The number and character of audience members and participants also varied enormously from one iteration to another: My observations of group or global responses are summarized below, but the ethic of this investigation included resisting the desire to forecast or over-determine the position of the watching other; the accompanying images from sketches made in performance by artist Giz James propose their own imaginative answers and responses.

Central Images/Metaphors

a) **The Horizon.** What are we looking at? What do we think we know? How far can we see and where, if anywhere, does our gaze intersect with that of another?

i. Marcel Duchamp worked for much of his career on the paradox of meaning and meaninglessness in art, engaging with issues of the endless operations of desire in ways inherited from Dada and reminiscent of themes later elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari. Although Duchamp's writings are extant, for the purposes of this project I was more interested in proposals or dilemmas pursued through visual means. Alternative answers multiply through one or more series of sequential propositions, each of which occupies shifting and unstable ground. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* "The Large Glass" of 1915-23,²⁶ provides an overt model and method for this project, both in the way sections of the text are structured as "shots" and by suggesting an approach to the overall conduct of the research project via a series of non-identical iterations, employing more or less constant elements whose relationships vary over time and from one iteration to another. The image and metaphor of the bicycle wheel as an analogy for the artist's driven but ultimately fruitless striving towards the horizon was a feature of Duchamp's early to mid-period works and the foundation of his "ready-mades" — a bicycle was literally present in the first two iterations of this project but was later replaced with metaphors from astronomy and the more "performance near" idea of the tango. I also located images of unreachable horizons in texts by other artists working at the interface between modernism and the postmodern — Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*,²⁷ Heiner Müller's playscript for *Hamletmachine*,²⁸ and Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.²⁹

b). **The Event Horizon.** I became intrigued by scientific explanations of the probable effect the operation of a black hole would have on the relative perceptions of time and space of imagined observers situated at the rim of a surrounding "event horizon,"³⁰ such that a person approaching the rim would see but never actually meet up with a person standing facing them, but rather closer to the vortex.³¹ This was a wonderfully clear analogy for the "impossible" relations I wanted to test in performance,³² later extended by Marta Savigliano's engaging notion of the history of the tango as "a story of encounters between those who should never have met or ... those

who, having met, will remain forever disencountered.”³³ Both ideas proved particularly productive in thinking through the cultural and economic exchanges enmeshed in the unstable yet unstoppable social performance of postcoloniality, in Australia and elsewhere: tango music and culture were integral to the final public version of the work.

c.) **The Strip.** How is the female performer displayed to others in performance and what control can she exert over the conditions of her exposure?³⁴ What is revealed and what concealed, through the ostension of an enfleshed, physical body in various states of nakedness and relations of proximity to the gaze/touch of the audience?

i. Draupadi/Dopdi: narratives of power centered on the female body. In the “original” version enshrined in *The Mahabharata*,³⁵ Draupadi, the common wife of the hero Pandava brothers, is saved from the prospect of violation through the intervention of the god Krishna. As her husbands’ victorious enemies prepare to strip her naked, the god intervenes, magically extending her sari and ensuring that her modesty is preserved.³⁶ The “subaltern” retelling by Mahasweta Devi, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,³⁷ casts Draupadi as a tribal rebel leader, Dopdi, who has been captured and savagely abused by soldiers. There is no god here, but despite her degradation Dopdi refuses to be ashamed. She confronts the “civilized” senior officer with the mute evidence of her flesh, pressing her ravaged body against his and daring him to “counter” or eliminate her. Dopdi’s use of the marks of her abuse as sign anticipates the concrete “collapse” of signifiers in the display of the naked female body that Rebecca Schneider indicates as having been typical of feminist performance art in the 1990s,³⁸ but also suggests the power of the Other, outside discourse and other realms of signification.³⁹

ii. Related images: the flesh, the veil, the screen, read alongside Butler’s notions of revelation.

iii. “Strips of activity”: according to Goffman “any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity ... as seen from the perspective of those subjectively involved in sustaining an interest in them.”⁴⁰ I have also found

Goffman's concepts of frame, keying, tracks and channels of activity⁴¹ useful as images and prompts, when shaping the grammar and phrasing of action over time.

iv. The Instability Strip: another suggestive astronomical concept, derived from the Hertzsprung-Russell (H-R) diagram classifying types and stages in stellar evolution. Pulsating stars of variable size and brightness cannot be plotted on a single branch of the diagram, but occupy different data points at minimum and maximum absolute magnitude and are thus described as evolving through an instability strip:⁴² given the multiple doublings and ghostings appearing in the final performance composition, the term was adopted as a leading metaphor and title for the public season.

Part 5: Writing for Performance

Example 1: constant 2003—10

THE INVESTIGATOR PACES OUT THE SPACE, REFERRING TO THE BOOK AS SHE DOES SO

Five. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. Thirty-six. Forty-three. Nine hundred and eighty-one. Two. A billion and five. And a half (etc).

SHE ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE

I have to warn you that it may not be possible to reconstruct with any rigour the moment, the rate, the intensity. *La durée*. You do understand that we are dealing with phenomena of considerable complexity. Or it may be not. That is our problem, exactly, in a nutshell. To reveal, by means of a properly constructed mechanism, a science of the exception. The actuality of events that we have not, to be perfectly frank, so far managed to capture with any degree of accuracy. You can see therefore the importance of precise measurement. We – or, rather, I – or, rather, rather — (coughs) are building an instrument of great exactitude, of fine tolerances to a degree of — (coughs) and benchmark performance to international standards. We must have a program ready to go. Please observe closely as I – (coughs) procedure — (coughs) the methodology has been carefully calibrated to embrace the schizophrenia of prediction in universes parallel to ... (she stands with open mouth).

LETS BOOK HANG, BEGINS TO SHAKE HER HEAD AS IF TRYING TO DISLodge A BLOCKAGE IN HER EAR AFTER SWIMMING

I can't remember.

I can't remember.

Short written sequences composed in 2003 became the core text for the research. My strategy was to compose for spoken word, with the pressure of complex language fragmented through incomplete sentences, sudden changes of tone and direction of address. Treatment of the writing varied from one iteration to another: examples 2a, b and c were performed as one sequence in 2003; in 2009 and 2010 the passage was segmented with sections delivered at different points in the piece.

2a

At any moment – this moment, now! No not yet, the moment after the attention wanders, then it comes. They are watching, they must know. Effort as intense as mine, glued in a duet of guessing, waiting for the pure moment. Vulnerable, I imagine their gaze, like a lover's it wraps along my body, twines behind my eyes, follows the contours of organs, muscles, veins, bones, finds the most precise location, the exquisite point of feeling. They won't give me comfort. Oh yes, they want me like a lover, they want me open, wet, panting, bound to them, into them, but not tied. Not tied to me. These variations are caused by a poorly understood correlation between ... I must not suppose I am an object of actual interest.

2b

This is the thought, that I exist as they start watching, start applying breath, kicks, observations, fragmentation, life, self, everything. And yet each surface gives, retreats. Splitting, already, eternally. Words cannot reach me, moments ache forever, waiting, tensing, holding breath, anticipating blows that never come. I am flat, mechanical. And the light is always on.

2c

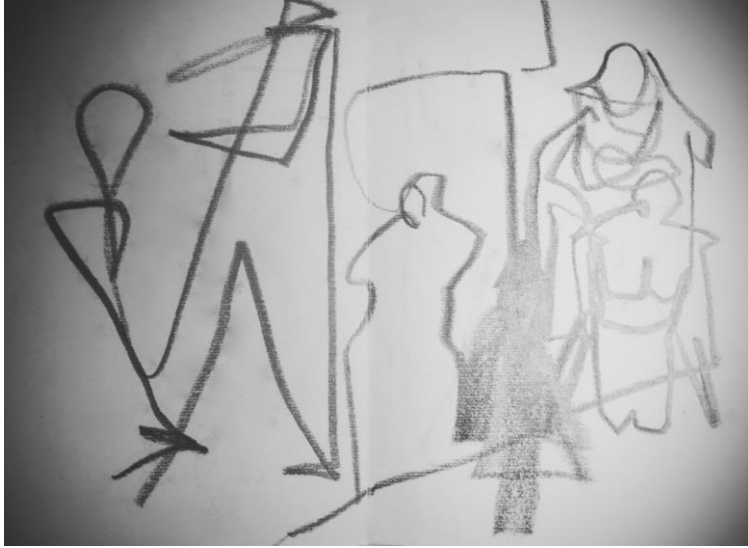
What did you say?

Nothing. I ... nothing. I put my feet out, each step in the anticipation of knives.

I look to the left.

I — (intake of breath)

I – (intake of breath)



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

In performance, I treated the audience as actively co—present, using both direct and indirect address and challenging hierarchies of observation by speaking about the audience in their presence. In later iterations, transitions between text fragments were also signified through changes in tone and proxemics, including new passages of intimate and apparently informal chat, with the aim of recalling audience members to the present moment and prompting them to think about their “real” comfort or discomfort with the conditions of performance.

Example 3: final performance version 2010

WOMAN A (to audience):

Hi. Hullo. Um ... Hi. What next?

It's going all right so far, I suppose. Is it?

Are you feeling OK? Not too cold? Not too hot? Is the seat the right height for you? It's terrible isn't it when the seat's just that bit too low or too high, it's the knees I think, well for me it is anyway, the edge catches you just under there or your legs kind of fold up somewhere near your chin and the trouble then of course is it's very difficult to think about anything else. There's never enough room, really. Or too much, and not in the right spots.

FADE IN MUSIC TRACK 3

PAUSE

Sorry. Where was I?

The Form/Statement of the “Research Question”

The central dilemma of pain and its representation was directly articulated, although complexified through a variety of performance strategies:

Example 4: constant 2003—10

Pain is so random. Uncontrolled response to unexpected stimuli, that’s the trouble. A rat gnawing at the pie—crust of attention, not like pleasure, pleasure you can live with. If only we could tell the difference up front. The amnesia of the senses. Gone, and then ... oh yes. I know this. I am from that country.

It lurks without volition. Recurring, unexpected, always familiar. It may be that multiple singularities exist.

Pain is swift, and we, always on the move behind it. One move behind it.

And yet art is painful. Making art is always painful – that at least is predictable.

Further writing was undertaken in preparation for the 2010 season when, in parallel to the more elaborate use of other performance elements, other bodies and a second major character were introduced into the piece. Initially invited to perform as an onstage musician,⁴³ conversations with violist Guillermo Anad about commonalities in the postcolonial experience of Australia and Argentina led to the creation of The Explorer, a male, nineteenth century figure framed in counterpoint to my role as The Investigator. His was an episodic but connected narrative, beginning with his departure in search of a legendary, lost treasure and ending with the disaster of his imminent demise.⁴⁴

Example 5 final performance version 2003

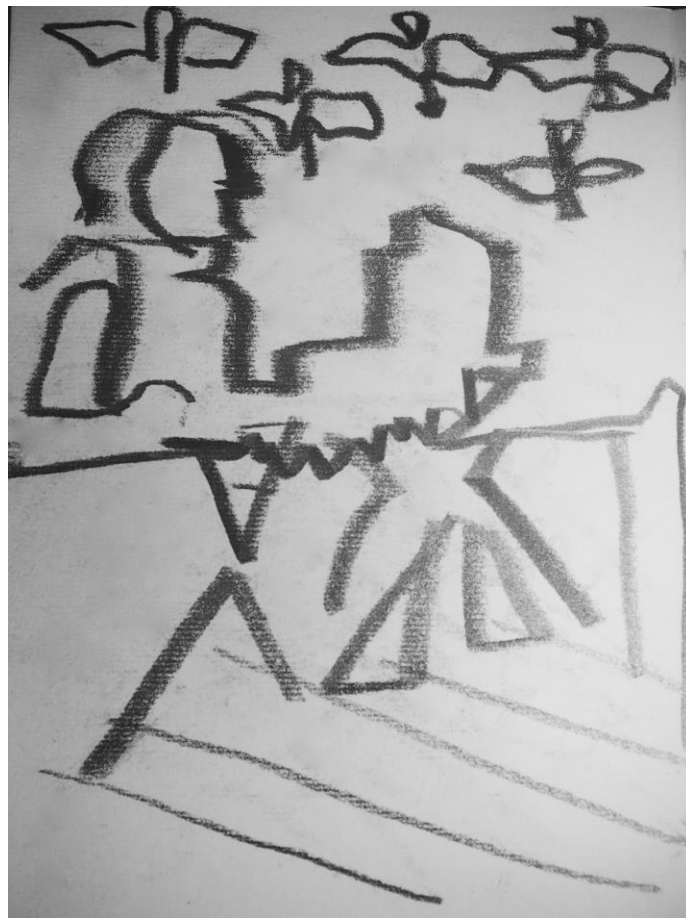
The Explorer, Episode 1 - part B

PAUSE – MUSIC TRACK 4 FADES IN AND OUT

The central range was not visible from where we stood. In fact, the horizon was completely flat and featureless. Da Silva was eager to set a course south by southwest, but my proposal prevailed, to head due west, the most direct route to the mountains. There was no compelling reason not to set off cross country. We had wasted enough time in the foothills. The packhorses were carrying ample supplies and we had a good stock of beads, mirrors and small axes to trade, should we encounter members of the native population. I must confess I had expected to see native settlements by now, near one watercourse or another, but we saw no evidence of human habitation, nor indeed any rivers, lakes or lagoons. No water at all. Nothing but grassland, stretching out in every direction. The seedheads were turning silver and billowed in a wind that blew constantly from the south. A whispering sound filled the air — I had never before seen such extensive vegetation.

PAUSE – MUSIC TRACK 4 FADES IN AND OUT

Other shifts of tone, time and location came through a sequence influenced by Mary Oliver's work with video and live performance,⁴⁵ and an episode of *Ellen* playing on a cafe TV during one of my meetings with dramaturg Yoni Prior. We saw Ellen DeGeneres in the studio coping with a series of feeds from an outside broadcast reporter who had become hopelessly lost on her way to an agreed location. The resulting sequence, filmed on location at Gasworks Art Park in South Melbourne, allowed me to interview "myself" in real time, suggesting parallels between The Investigator and The Explorer as each became increasingly disoriented. At the conclusion of the performance, a duet for violin and viola played live by Guillermo and myself, allowed the two characters to dis/connect wordlessly as each individual reached out beyond their own small corner of space and time.



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

Part 6: Contexts of Presentation

A. *The Bride Stripped Bare*

1. 2003

Solo	Conference performance.
Gardiner Gallery	<i>Double Dialogues</i> “Art and Pain” conference opening.
Informal	Performance space outlined in white tulle, chair facing back wall, exercise bicycle.
Artist researcher as	The Investigator: black shirt and trousers, helmet, goggles.
Audience members	Gallery and conference attendees.
Performance space	Boundary blurred due to crowd pressure, “outsiders” talking in neighboring room.
Performance focus	Task focused. Verbal, vocal, physical and emotional “tracks” marked via different relative rhythms, including the use of repeated movements and/or held effort—shapes, to mark changes of emphasis between tracks and layers at different times during the performance.
Writing	Read from “little black book.”
Clean break	Direct address at the end of the performance; audience members asked “Are you hurt? Do you need to talk about it?”
Vocal focus	Impulse, flow.
Informal feedback	No discussion session scheduled in conference format.

2. 2005

Solo	Performance paper.
ADSA (Australasian Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies Association) Conference	Victoria University, Wellington NZ.
Studio /lecture space	Exercise bicycle, chair, projected image sequence at rear.
Artist researcher	White overshirt and trousers, bare feet.
Conference delegates	Tiered lecture hall seating; clear demarcation between performance and audience spaces.
Performance focus	Rhetorical. Use made of observers' angles of view including front on, side and back views of the performer.
Writing	Reading from leather bound "red book" Some passages memorized.
Vocal focus	Rehearsed tempi, breathing marked, room for impulse.
Formal feedback	10 minutes for questions. Discussion focused on issues of composition/ realization, the female body and problematics of the gaze (gendered/queer/neutral).
Viewing distance	A sense of being scrutinized was enhanced by the spatial configuration.

Interlude:

1. No title.

Workshop demonstration

Performance as Research working group, FIRT/IFTR conference 2007, Stellenbosch SA.

Participants: women delegates.

Studio space, bare floor, observers “in the round” on chairs and on the floor.

Performance focus: group support, occupy and claim space.

Relationship to text: minimal.

Vocal focus: breath, sounds, questions “are you OK? Does it still hurt? Do you want to talk about it?”

Physical intervention by male audience members, one of whom tried to trip one of the performers, others laughed; a 20-minute discussion focused on issues of “entertainment,” engagement, and gendered occupation of space.

2. *Where the Land ... Lays* La Mama Theatre Carlton, Lloyd Jones Ensemble 2007

Microperformance, repeated over 1 hour, part of longer durational event.

Tiny space in an old shirt factory, with seats on raised platform along-side wall and a second raised platform for performance (floorboards were raised for excavation and artifacts displayed).

Artist researcher wrapped in tulle over white shift, divining rod/staff, mixing bowl, sieve, sand.

Observers came and went at will.

Performance focus: trance—like, sacerdotal.

Short memorized (nonsense Latin) text written for this event.

Vocal focus: text fragmented and intoned, exploring component sounds in improvised combinations.

Informal feedback from other artists and audience members following segment.

Spoken score and aspects of imagery incorporated into later work.

B. *Event Horizon* 2008

Solo	Research performance presentation.
National Performance as Research Symposium	Monash University Melbourne.

Open stage	Black box theater, with tiered seating.
	Table, divining rod/staff, mixing bowl, sieve and sand, white tulle used to divide space diagonally.
	Short recorded sound track by Frank Tetaz repurposed from another presentation, played behind performer's extended silent spinning to conclude.
Artist researcher	As The Investigator. White lab coat, black trousers, red sunglasses. Fictionalized lecture/demonstration in character: some sequences delivered amongst or at rear of audience.
Symposium attendees	In tiered seating, some at floor level .
Performance focus	Heightened delivery, vocal display of "pain/affect": dynamic interplay between vocal and physical/embodied "tracks."
Physical focus	Scored physical "track", with one clear abstract action (pacing, kneeling, rolling) or linked sequence of actions (sieving, stirring actions with bowl and spoon) in each section.
Writing	Relationship to text varied between sections. Black book taken up and put down to signify shifts, some sections memorized.
Vocal focus	Clear shifts in bodily origin/zone of vocal impulse, varying tone, pace, pitch, emotional color etc. between sections.
Formal discussion	20 minutes, grew quite heated. Performance

	<p>structure was critiqued for representing rather than “being” research. A “revelatory” or autobiographical element identified by a number of those present proved especially controversial, with some championing what they saw as my vulnerability and others finding it distasteful. Both parties agreed that what they were seeing was confessional, despite my verbal disclaimers.</p>
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C. Instability Strip

1. 2009

Solo	Conference paper with performance excerpts.
ADSA Conference	Australian National University, Canberra.
Large lecture hall	Empty raised stage, curtained at rear, with lectern SL.
Conference delegates	Tiered seating.
Artist—researcher	Rehearsal “blacks,” bare feet.
Lecture/demonstration	“As” professional self. Informal tone, direct address.
Performance focus:	Clear shifts between exposition and examples drawn from performance text. Text examples chosen beforehand, actions chosen on impulse from a “menu” of task based on abstract continuous actions (pacing on line, running on the spot, spine drop etc). The audience was invited to “hold apart” the way

	they viewed my body and heard the text.
Physical focus:	In lecture mode, support for content. In performance mode, physical action “in the moment.”
Writing	Written lecture (loose A4 pages) and performance text (black book) both ostended, lecture text read from page, performance text located and then recited from memory.
Vocal focus	Clear enunciation of lecture text with focus on content. Performance text recited in “rehearsal” mode, connected to impulse but exploratory, as accompaniment to physical actions.
Formal discussion	15 minutes, engaged and positive in tone, with different observers volunteering what they had perceived and how they felt. One had responded by sketching, prompting my invitation to artist Giz James in the final performance season. My presence “in role” and a shared understanding of the academic conventions surrounding delivery of a “nearly straight” conference paper made negotiating the conventions of this performance exchange unproblematic for all concerned.

2. Full performance, *Instability Strip* during *Girls at Work* Melbourne Fringe Festival season, Theatre Works St Kilda 5-9 October 2010.⁴⁶

Full performance score, set and costume design, lighting, live music, digital recorded sound score by Natasha Moszenin, live and recorded (video) action sequences and animate and inanimate performers (four live performers, three plus—size molded female

torsos). Like the core written material, the sound score referenced Western high modernism including *musique concrète*.⁴⁷

Location: Theatre Works, St Kilda, a mid scale open stage theater space in a converted church hall. Festival audience, drawn from the general independent theater going public, including other theater/performing artists. The performance space was arranged on the diagonal on a flat stage floor, with audience members individually seated at the same level in two blocks of 20. A “runway” of black rubber matting separated the two seating blocks and continued to ceiling height along the join of the two walls; overflow seats in conventional tiered seating at rear. Two wheeled “trucks” 2mx1mx.5m, one along each wall, were pulled and pushed into and out of the main playing space. One, stationed SR, was set with a mini TV “studio”, video screen and chair, the other stationed SL was occupied even when “off” by The Explorer, equipped with travelling trunk, writing desk, chair, hurricane lamp and viola in its case. Entrances and exits could be made either side of the seating bank, from behind the seated audience and from either of two screened doorways, one at each end of the wall SR.

Performance focus: a different task focus for each entrance/section, entailing shifts in proximity to the audience, modes of address and balance between physical, vocal and emotional “tracks.” Guillermo Anad as The Explorer/Violist read aloud from his journal and played live, Faye Bendrups and Bec Etchell as workers/stage managers followed a task-based and gestural score.⁴⁸

Relationship to text: The Investigator/Woman 1: all text memorized, vocally extended — some sections on radio mic. The Explorer: read aloud (unamplified) from journal with focus on narrative.

Audience response: engaged and positive, although critical response varied wildly from extreme enthusiasm to utter bafflement (one male reviewer for a local classical radio station asked his wife to explain it to him).

Part 7: Conclusion

Over the life of the project, responses by spectators during and after performance events indicated that writing, and discourse in general, by no means dominated meaning-making in performance. The writing was deliberately “difficult” and this may have had an impact. Spatial, proxemic, social, non-mimetic and non-verbal cues, however, all affected the response of observers and bystanders at different times, in varying contexts of performance. Confirming Butler’s observations about the power of social norms, the physical layout of the performance space, the context of the performance event and the gender balance of the audience played a major part in cuing an audience’s response as a social group to unfamiliar or unexpected elements of a performance: from engaged intimacy through “expert” critique, to outright hostility. The physical intimidation of young women performers at FIRT and the insistence of my (mostly male) academic colleagues at Monash in attributing a “confessional” status to my performance despite my disclaimers, were clear examples of attempts to regulate and/or sanction any perceived failure to “get the performance of gender right;”⁴⁹ insufficient opportunity for discussion at academic conferences simply underlined the need for more productive conditions for research performance presentations. On the other hand, given adequate time and space—whether for workshops or fully staged performance presentations—there was little qualitative difference between academic and general audiences, in terms of their level of engagement and range of response. “Theatergoing” spectators seemed, if anything, to be more comfortable with the state of “not knowing” demanded of them, and more willing to share their reactions, especially their responses to the emotional cues provided by “the grain of the voice.”⁵⁰

The ideal of perfect communion is a productive delusion that draws us as co—present bodies into the space of performance. The multivalent character of situated performance produces an inherently unstable field, productive of social, physical and spatiotemporal misalignments that constantly escape from the performative into the realm of the unexpected. Such moments take us to another imagined realm: a space and time of joy and terror, the fantasy of pure play and free expressiveness. This realm is also a figment of our desires and so no less an illusion than the effectiveness and significance

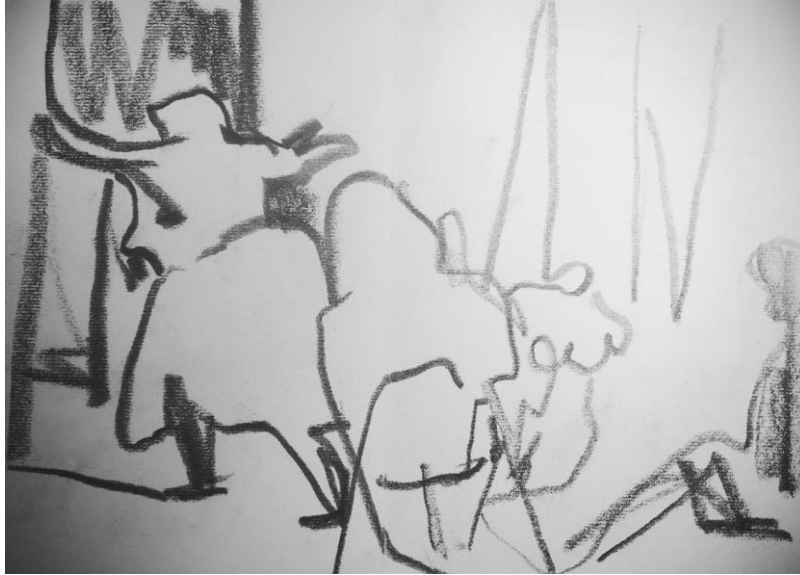
promised by the notion of performativity. I would argue, however, that it is in the escape from performativity, past the “now” of the performance moment—poised somewhere in that charged gap between what we know now, what we can speak and write about, and what we won’t know until afterwards—that flesh comes closest to knowing itself. Here/not here, in the dis-encounters of research performance, an imagined change has a chance to feel itself, to be fleshed out, before being tested in the rough and tumble of real world interactions.

A major finding from the project, I would suggest, is that the relations of writing and flesh in research performance are also resolutely paradoxical. The frame of collegial academic exchange was no guarantee of an appropriate context for the presentation of research performance; the scholar’s drive for certainty made it no more likely that the dilemmas being presented would be any better grasped by an academic than by a general audience.

Through persistence, however, the trajectories of my research did become clearer.

I now feel more confident that productive parameters can be identified and are achievable, in the formation of communities of practice with a tolerance for difference and a perverse willingness to go on investigating, while learning to manage the real and metaphorical risks that taking a position of “otherness” to established realms of signification inevitably entails. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, difference continues to generate becoming — and in becoming, we are and encounter the new.⁵¹

Ladies, gentlemen and Us/Others, welcome to the Instability Strip ...



Instability Strip 2010: artwork Giz James, image Dagmara Gieyzstor

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44. The Explorer was partly based on the figure of the narrator in Jorge Luis Borges, "El Etnógrafo" in *Obras Completas* vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989), 367, working English translation by Guillermo Anad and Alison Richards, 2010; and partly on explorer and naturalist Wilhelm Blandowski, the Australian colony of Victoria's first government zoologist, who after quarreling with his superiors following more than one disastrous expedition, finished his days in a Prussian asylum for the insane. See Harry Allen and Elizabeth A. Weldon, eds, "William Blandowski and His Contribution to Nineteenth Century Science and Art in Australia" *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 121,

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46. *Instability Strip*: public performance season
Original and additional text by Alison Richards
Music and sound by Guillermo Anad, Natasha Moszenin
Performed by Alison Richards, Guillermo Anad, Bec Etchell, Faye Bendrups
Dramaturg Yoni Prior
Production Manager/Designer Bec Etchell
Stage Manager Faye Bendrups
Set and Costume Zoe Stuart
Lighting design Lucy Birkinshaw
Poster design Max Thompson
Video John Cumming
YouTube video documentation Pat King, Night Elephant Productions
Technical Operator Katelyn B
Season producer Angela Pamic for Theatre Works, St Kilda
Engineering advice Jason Whyte, history of science advice John Keane

47. Natasha Moszenin, *Instability Strip*, (Melbourne, 2010); John Cage, "Experimental Music" in *Silence: Lectures and Writing* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1974); John Dack, "Pierre Schaeffer and the Significance of Radiophonic Art," *Contemporary Music Review* 10, no. 2 (1994): 3-11.

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Alison: Just keeping on keeping on 5

Sequence 22 THE EXPLORER EPISODE 4 WOMAN A and MAN B

B: Should I go back or should I go on? Should I sit here and wait? Did Mendoza sit here too as the days passed? If I go on, will any trace remain of this testament I write here? If I somehow regain the city, will I be able to tell what I have seen, to describe the way here and back? Or to warn the next madman of the hazards in store ... ?

TOCAR VIOLA:
TANGO DEL DESENCUENTRO

VIOLA 

TANGO DEL DESENCUENTRO

(END)

Working Script: Guillermo Anad, *Instability Strip* 2010