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Portrait of the artist as an indie star: Kristin Hersh and the memoir of process

Fraser Mann

Since early fame as the guiding creative force behind Rhode Island indie band Throwing Muses, Kristin Hersh has been a slippery and innovative artistic figure that has pushed boundaries and blurred disciplinary lines. Hersh's work combines musical composition, abstract lyricism, memoir and the visual arts. Her performances swing between spoken word and music and her subject matter addresses American landscape, mental health, family life, loss and, above all, the artistic process required to shape and communicate such myriad experience.

In November 2016 I watched Kristin Hersh perform songs to promote the release of her album *Wyatt at the Coyote Palace* in The Crescent Community Venue in York, UK. The partisan audience fell very quiet as this stalwart of alternative rock music sat down on a slightly too tall stool and plugged in her electric guitar. After tuning up she looked up and said, 'my friend told me last week that you should never start a show with something new, the crowd won't like it'. She then proceeded to do just that; hammering through a new song packed with oblique and opaque references to her New Orleans home. The trademark shifts in tempo and tone were certainly familiar but the music was undoubtedly new. As the song reached its conclusion, a small smile appeared on Hersh's face. 'Sorry about that', she said, 'I'm still figuring out how to do this shit.' She then read a short passage of prose and dared the audience to make connections with the new song. This was a show about process. This is not to say that her songs lacked polish or professionalism, more that this was the work of an artist who was self-consciously examining her own role and her own creative activities. It was an exhilarating performance and this is a reading of Hersh as that artist in process.

Despite its ostensible status as memoir, Hersh's 2010 publication *Paradoxical Undressing* (published as *Rat Girl* in the US) bears close resemblance to the traditions of the *künstlerroman*. The artist's coming of age is most famously explored in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2000); a text in which the young protagonist forms an artistic identity shaped by experience, conflict and a wild array of interactions. Hersh's memoir explores similar territory and this analysis examines the ways that exterior and interior forces shape Hersh's creative practice and artistic identity. The memoir depicts the seismic twelve months during which, as an eighteen year old, she is diagnosed as bipolar, has her band signed by 4AD and discovers that she is pregnant. As the year in question unfolds, the teenage Hersh narrates her bohemian life in Rhode Island and Boston. Hersh writes about a loose community of artists, junkies, teachers and music industry workers. These figures help to form Hersh as songwriter and performer. Her bandmates (including half sister and fellow indie superstar Tanya Donnelly) offer friendship and ballast to Hersh while an unlikely union is formed with Golden Age Hollywood star Betty Hutton. Rhode Island and Boston's indie scenes are replete with a cast of fellow artists, scenesters and reassuringly odd fans. Hersh's wild and unpredictable creativity finds relative stability and direction in the form of record label 4AD's visionary leader Ivo Watts-Russell.

Hersh's unique relationship with sound is informed by her synaesthesia, bipolar disorder and pregnancy. Her visceral depictions of sonic performance evoke the claustrophobic energy of indie venues. These consciously creative locales sit alongside the pastoral openness of Rhode Island, the urban energy of Boston and the liminal depths of the Atlantic Ocean. The combination of these spatial configurations and the communities that inhabit them produce artistic practice. In turn, artistic practice helps to further develop Hersh's experiences. The memoir explores Hersh's creative process and the ambiguous role

of the musical practitioner. This is an open-ended account of the artist in process. Hersh the performer says 'I am still working out how to do this shit' and Hersh the writer repeats this. Process leads to creativity and creativity brings us back to process.

Paradoxical Undressing is a *bricolage* of diary entries, snippets of lyrics and more impressionistic memories of Hersh's younger childhood. Together, these create a temporal tension in which relational textual voices and modes communicate links and contradictions between experience, narrative and creativity. Like her performances, Hersh's focus here is on process. Her text resists teleology and closure. Sidonie Smith (1995: 110) argues that the contemporary 'autobiographical subject' engages in 'multiple stages simultaneously' and is 'called to heterogeneous recitations of identity' (ibid.). Crucially, 'these multiple calls never align perfectly [and] create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, limits and transgressions' (ibid.). This is the mode at play in *Paradoxical Undressing*. Hersh as narrator exists in the visible sutures in her story. Textual artifice and patchworks of narrative provide opportunities to analyse fluid constructions of self. The text has no authoritative pivot and no one voice dominates. Susanna Egan (1999: 3) describes autobiographical voices that 'foreground the processes and present time of their own construction' and 'exchanges that authenticate presence but only in the fragile moment'. These are not memoirs written by an omnipotent self looking back and making sense. They are, Egan argues, more interested in communicating 'the strategies of their own composition' and so 'stake no claim for a unified or coherent identity' (Ibid., 8). *Paradoxical Undressing* offers just this. It is a text in which curatorship takes centre stage. The brief foreword to the text is the only part of the memoir that is written by a present day Hersh and in it she candidly discusses the process of reworking diary entries into a new shape. The diaries themselves are 'full of holes' (2010: i) and reading each page is 'oddly like crawling in a window' (Ibid., ii). Hersh also comments on the ways that fragments of her song lyrics 'reflect on a moment and its reverberations'

(Ibid.). Songs, Hersh writes, ‘don’t commit to linear time – they whiz around all your memories [...] they tell the future and they tell the past’ (Ibid.). This is chiefly a process of textual ambiguity and paradox. Hersh is the curator of her life’s materials. She is in charge of organising a construction of self. Her role as artist is evident in the material and in the organisation of material. This is both literary product and literary process.

Paradoxical Undressing is structured around music and musicality. Hersh’s songwriting dominates the text with fragments of lyrical abstraction dropping in at moments that suggest their genesis. Hersh’s music making is a visceral and overpowering corporeal experience which ascribes sound and noise a frenetic agency. Her descriptions of live performance are impressionistic, destabilising and unbearably loud. During a performance early in the text, for example, Hersh rubs tiger balm into her eyes in an attempt to ‘fuzzify all the faces in the room’ and leave her equipment a ‘soft blur’ (2010: 38). Her deliberate sensory impairment means that she can give herself up to the ‘pounding noise’ (Ibid., 40). The band’s sound is hallucinatory, textural and multi-sensory. Songs are ‘liquefied’ and ‘murdered perfectly with finesse’ (Ibid., 45) while Hersh’s identity is subsumed her subjectivity vanishes. She writes that ‘the creepy, goofy mess that is our sound is finally playing itself – song tattoos glow all over me, I’m looking and seeing nothing, and I’m nowhere. Nowhere at all’ (Ibid., 47). On lyrical composition she adds that ‘before I know it, inflatable words fill my rib cage, move into my mouth, I gag on them and they fly out, say whatever they want, yell and scream themselves’ (Ibid.). Hersh is not the creator at this moment; she is a corporeal conduit for sound and abstraction. Her songwriting is open-ended and the creative object itself appears to have an agency and power that battles with its creator. Songs are never complete; they are always reshaping in performance and in memories of those performances. Text, language and art are locked in struggle. Hersh’s authorial power is almost entirely absent. She is, to use Watson and Smith’s term (1998: 39), engaged in a

process of ‘negotiating strangeness’. Music’s unpredictable abstractions and temporal fluidity are an organisational force on the text. Sonic experience jostles with memory and with the constructed self.

It would be overly simplistic, as Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1996: 372) note, to ‘hem in her songs’ as a ‘document of a specific individual with a specific mental disorder’. However, Hersh does describe her unique relationship with sound resulting terms of her experiences of synaesthesia and bipolar disorder. In hospital recovering from the road accident that triggers the former condition, Hersh describes sounds that begin as ‘industrial noise’ and ‘a wash of ocean waves, layered with humming tones and wind chimes’ (2010: 76). Over the coming days this cacophony begins ‘organising [...] into discernible parts’ and ‘melodies’ (Ibid., 76-77). Hersh’s brain is ‘making sense of something, turning this sonic haunting into vocabulary with which I was familiar’ (Ibid., 77). As with her performances, sound moves beyond auditory objectivity and achieves colour, texture and a ‘visual pattern’ (Ibid.). The sounds are ‘gentle swathes of sound-light’ and ‘beats have a shape that appear and then disappear’ (Ibid., 78). Ultimately, these organised noises become Throwing Muses songs. Hersh teaches them to the band but insists that this is not ‘a journey from chaos to song [...] the song just walks into the room fully formed’ (Ibid.). Music ‘lives across time as an overarching impression of sensory input’ (Ibid.). This memoir’s form, therefore, in all of its temporal elasticity, owes as much to music’s shifting agency as it does to Hersh’s open and fluid narrative composition. It is as if music leads Hersh the musician and Hersh the musician leads Hersh the writer. This loose causality self-consciously reveals the text’s own narrative processes.

Hersh’s relationship with sound darkens as the text enters its central section. Her diary entries are starker, shorter and increasingly abstract as she suffers from a breakdown later diagnosed as a manic bipolar episode. Hersh has consistently maintained that simplistic

conclusions regarding mental health and creativity are all too easy to jump too. Speaking to Sam Shepherd (2010), for example, she makes clear that she doesn't believe there is 'any validity to the idea that a mind would have to be broken in order to make sense'. Hersh asserts that she has had to 'learn to separate the music for the bipolar disorder' and the 'glaring light and dark shadows' that it produces. In a *Guardian* interview with Gareth Grundy (2010), Hersh goes further and says that she has always 'hated the connection between mental illness and art'. Hersh dismisses such discussion as cliché and rejects outright that you have 'to be sick in order to create beauty or confused to create truth'. The harrowing sections of the text in which Hersh attempts to communicate the rapid nature of her breakdown certainly support this. Thus far in the text, Hersh's relationship with sound has been productive and broadly symbiotic. However, as her health deteriorates, sound becomes malevolent, menacing and frightening. Rather than learning the songs and making them familiar, Hersh's hands 'can't play all the parts at once'. The sounds are 'brutal', 'horrifying', 'fractured, disjointed and harsh' (2010: 129). Multiple sounds are 'crashing into one another' and 'are flung into me through the sick orgasm of colour' (Ibid., 128). The frightening instability in Hersh's consciousness is a barrier to her artistic process.

Hersh's ill health is communicated through formal textual experiments and a palpable shift in tone. Felicity Nussbaum (1998: 165) contends that 'the minute particulars of an interiority' are best communicated in diary form. 'By eschewing narrative codes and opting for discontinuity and repetition [...] diaries and journals [...] avoid assigning meaning or a hierarchy of values' (Ibid.). As already established, this text is a diary at several removes. Hersh the author curates and edits Hersh the teenage diary writer. Nevertheless, this particular section of *Paradoxical Undressing* opts for a stylistic and visual form that marks it as distinct from the rest of the text. Each diary entry is short and truncated. The open spaces on each page are a void; they are oppressive emptiness. Minimal syntax and grammar replace

more familiar prosaic shapes. Hersh's song lyrics share equal space with the diary entries. Whereas previously the poetic abstractions have sat in contrast to the linear narration of memory, at this stage of the text they merge. Lyrics and memories are only distinguished through italicisation as the text gives itself up to figurative experimentation. Her illness is described as an elusive 'snake' that 'fades to static and disappears' or as a 'wolf [...] growing dirty and sick, gaunt and broken' (2010: 141). When the illness reaches its nadir, the sounds 'play on erratically, torn sails on a ship' and a fragile Hersh details how she uses a 'razor blade' to 'cut the songs out' (Ibid., 143). Hersh's relationship with art and with her own creative process is constantly in flux. Her songwriting has the potential for happy productivity but also for violence and harm.

Hersh's creativity and relationship with sound fluctuate once more when she discovers later in the text that she is pregnant. She seeks permission from her amiable yet verbose psychiatrist 'Dr Syllable' to discontinue her medication and focus on the new rhythms of her body. Music and sound's exterior agency now fade; the 'white noise [...] whispered then fell – a pregnancy casualty'. The power held by sound takes a 'backseat to the Body Monster, letting it drive for a while' (2010: 233). Typical of a figure so attuned to musicality, Hersh's developing pregnancy is understood in these terms. The 'baby's heartbeat' is 'unconcerned with the universe' and in its rhythm Hersh finds a peace she has 'only ever associated with music' (Ibid.). Once more, there is an interesting link here between the form employed in *Paradoxical Undressing* and the manner in which Hersh's reworked diary entries communicate her formation as an artistic figure. Egan argues that the self-conscious construction of self in memoir is driven by the 'emphatic presence of the body' (1999: 5) and that the 'crises that generate autobiography [...] begin with the body' (Ibid., 7). Susan McClary (2002: xvii) argues that, in writing about music, there is a focus on 'the experience of the body as it performs music' and on music's 'uncanny ability to help us

experience our bodies' (Ibid., 23) . Toril Moi (2005: 65), when defining what she terms the 'lived body', argues that 'the body [...] does not carry its meaning on its surface. It is not a thing, but a situation'. The 'situation' is fluid and resists Cartesian dualities. Moi states that 'lived experience [...] will shape our experience of the body' (Ibid., 66) and that, in turn, 'the body-in-the-world that we are is an embodied intentional relationship with the world' (Ibid., 67). Hersh's understanding of self and the manner in which this self engages with the world comes out of such embodiment. Her creativity depends upon careful and attentive openness to sensory and corporeal experience. Her body drives her psyche and her textual selfhood follows this same path. This notion is evident in Hersh's descriptions of performance late on in her pregnancy. In addition to awareness of her newly 'active body part' and 'dancing gut', Hersh interprets performance through the response of the 'tiny heels' and 'little fists' that she can feel 'pound away' and 'push against' (2010: 243) her abdomen. The vanishing subjectivity in the early stages of the text is no longer viable. Now she 'no longer disappears' because 'mothers shouldn't disappear [...] they need to be present' (Ibid.).

Thus far, it appears that art and creativity are a solipsistic process and that Hersh is prone to turning further and further inwards. However, such a conclusion ignores the social and spatial constructions at work in the text. Hersh's art comes out of engagement with a broad and humane cultural community and with the physical and geographical spaces of Rhode Island and Boston. She navigates the personal, social and spatial in ways that break down distinctions between them. Her love for swimming brings together an intensely embodied experience with an aesthetic love of the Atlantic Ocean. Hersh is an island person but the ocean provides a liminal blurring at its edge rather than hard and defined borders. *Paradoxical Undressing* explores space in ambiguous ways. It is both lived and constructed; past and present.

As a narrative voice, Hersh is always alert to the space around her. The text is full of creative enclaves that exude bohemian spirit and subversive non-conformity. The Rhode Island home of a long deceased and semi-mythic ‘old man’ (2010: 1) named Napoleon now houses a ‘loosely associated group’ (Ibid., 2) of creative and disaffected subjects whose lives exist outside of the mainstream. Touring musicians, painters, ‘bored kids’ and ‘the lonely and lost’ shelter here with the absent owner elevated to ‘a kind of saint’ (Ibid.). The opening pages of *Paradoxical Undressing* offer homage to this unruly bunch. Hersh’s humour and affectionate caricaturing depicts scenes of happy squalor and absurdist dialogue. Painters and musicians argue over the ‘gaggle of lost souls’ that haunt Napoleon’s place with ‘Manny the drummer’ (Ibid., 3) so spooked he asks for a ‘Narragansett medicine woman’ to ‘smudge the place with sage’ (Ibid., 4). Hersh is self-deprecating about her own trade and cultural identity insisting that ‘musicians are sorta ridiculous’, lack in ‘normal hair’ and wear an expression that is ‘perpetually stunned’ (Ibid.). Painters, meanwhile, ‘dress like it’s 1955’, with clothes that they ‘spatter [...] on purpose so everyone can tell they’re painters’ (Ibid., 5). In Boston, Hersh and her band live in a neighbourhood in which ‘blue collar old people’ (Ibid., 183) outnumber artists. Their neighbours are less concerned with indie aesthetics than ‘town meetings where they discuss issues like litter and barking dogs’ (Ibid.). In response, Hersh and her bandmates close in on each other and form a tight protective unit. Their house is a ramshackle utopia of artistic endeavour. Bassist Leslie’s room is described as a ‘Zen den [...] dimly lit and empty, nothing but a futon and a sewing machine’ (Ibid., 183). Her religious devotion to her craft never seems to produce finished products but this does not matter. It is ‘the act of sewing that’s important to her’ (Ibid., 184). Also along for the ride is Vicky the Painter, a creative ally from Rhode Island. Vicky’s space is exquisitely disordered with ‘old movie posters and records [...] crooked on her walls [and] toys and paintings strewn around the floor’ (Ibid.). The absence of a window is made up for ‘tenfold with Day-Glo

psychedelia' (Ibid.). Vicky's artistic process 'makes sense of chaos but also makes chaos' (Ibid.). In among the clutter and debris it is easy to miss the significance of this paradoxical claim. Art is open ended; it is never a finished product. It sorts the chaos into further chaos and this notion drives Hersh's own creative self. Her cultural communities are chaotic and disordered. Her writing adds shape but then those shapes too become chaotic. Like Leslie's sewing, the finished product is unimportant. This is art concerned with process.

Hersh frequently comes back to the chaotic spatial nature of Rhode Island Throwing Muses gigs. These cramped and sweaty spaces are well known to anyone who spent large chunks of the 80s and 90s squashed into small and intimate back rooms watching a favourite local band. Hersh playfully explores the manner in which gig space is organised on quasi-tribal lines. Moving from front to back, she sees the 'overtly enthusiastic', 'goth chicks who knit', 'neohippies', 'junkies', 'painters' and 'psychos' (2010: 31). Each group is lovingly portrayed in an affectionate paragraph full of wry observations. The neohippies, for example, 'all have the same hair, the same voice and the same clothes'; they 'dance like goofballs' (Ibid.). The junkies, meanwhile, are 'precious' to Hersh. They are a 'ghostly group' who she adds to the guest list because 'they don't have shit' (Ibid.). The tone shifts when the performances move to the edgier environs of Boston. There is a greater focus on competition and bands treat one another with suspicion. Hersh dismisses such behaviour as simply 'people [who] care about bullshit' (Ibid., 189). Still, the spaces themselves are gloriously dishevelled and the band takes great pleasure from the mysterious codes they suspect lie beneath the surface of the ostensibly prosaic graffiti. The vulgarities and occasional profundities are 'notes passed to faceless friends'; even the ubiquitous 'fuck you' which appears on 'every wall' (Ibid., 235).

The gig spaces and the atmosphere that accompanies performance are examples of what Bennett and Peterson term 'music scenes' and define as 'situations where performers,

support facilities and fans come together to collectively create music for their own enjoyment' (2004: 3). The key issue here is that the creative act is its own reward. There is little sense that this is an activity designed to elicit profit or develop status. Hersh's egalitarian relationship with her audience and the affectionate manner in which she describes them suggest a commonality of purpose and a sense of community. Art in this instance is intensely social. Bennett and Peterson go to add some specific analysis regarding 'local scenes' (Ibid.). They examine the relationship between 'local music-making processes and the everyday life of specific communities' and find a 'focussed social activity' in which a local community engage in 'collectively distinguishing themselves from others by using music and other cultural signs' (Ibid., 7). This is what Hersh's text depicts in great and loving detail. The cultural and artistic community that surrounds her is varied and heterogeneous but united by its bohemianism. This is a cultural community that enables a two-way creative process. It exists as a result of the production and performance of music but that existence leads to the performance and production of further music. For Hersh, the social aspect of her role as artist is as fluctuating and amorphous as that which she attributes to her body and psyche.

Large parts of *Paradoxical Undressing* are given over to the closeness that Hersh shares with her colleagues in Throwing Muses. The love and affection that unites these four musicians is held together by a loose manifesto of two 'bullshit principles' (2010: 42). The first point asks for a physical and emotional empathy in which the band does not distinguish 'toothache' from 'happiness [that] should seep out of pores, and clouds of jealousy and all the different kinds of love and disappointment [that] float around us' (Ibid., 43). Emotions have a physical presence evident in their texture and agency. Being alert to this is 'the kindest way to live on planet earth' (Ibid.). The second point calls for a minor but consistent level of inebriation. The band should always be 'kinda buzzed, enough to let go' (Ibid.). Hersh

associates such a state with being ‘light, non-judgemental, truthful’ (Ibid.). The result of powerful empathy and a commitment to being a ‘little tipsy’ (Ibid., 44) is a set of creative colleagues who share a friendship around which Hersh’s fluctuating life can organise itself. Her bandmates are a constant. They are the one presence and influence on Hersh’s artistic process that alters very little. Even when the band relocates from the relatively provincial Rhode Island to urban Boston, they remain constant, funny and endearingly kind. They are Hersh’s ‘allies’ and make ‘everything clean and good’ (Ibid., 183). Art may be chaotic but friendship, it seems, is reassuringly simple.

At this particular cultural moment, Boston is home to a lively and increasingly high profile scene that will go on to spawn indie luminaries such as Pixies, Breeders, Belly and The Lemonheads. As such, the city’s music scene is a site of creativity and innovation. Inevitably, though, it is also the site of aggressive aspiration and the vulture like presence of the recording industry’s amoral executives. Hersh divides local bands into two camps; those whose ‘ambition’ is ‘an embarrassing tap dance’ and those who ‘make noises for noise’s sake’ (2010: 189). The former are ‘uptight and self-conscious’ while the latter are ‘slamming joy and desperation, lethargy and force’ (Ibid.). As with her own band, Hersh vales emotional range and flux. The ability to communicate this musically suggests an ability to be alive to it in others. Empathy and emotional pluralism equal artistic authenticity. These bands - what Hersh terms the ‘subculture’s subculture’ (Ibid.) - provide creative community and cultural influence. Hersh describes the manner in which ‘the bands are in the audience until it’s their turn to play’ and that ‘no-one seems to headline, bands just pile up, watching each other and cheering when somebody throws another log on the fire of *real* music’ (Ibid.). Hersh wants to make and experience music that gets ‘lower and dirtier’, music that makes her ‘hungry for a body depth or a mind mess’ (Ibid., 190). Again, there is a melding of mind and body here. The scene is a receptive and productive mass of music and art.

Of course, this tangled mess of creative opportunity is undermined by the record industry's singular and simplistic attempts to monetise it. The industry, as Hersh sees it, is one that 'performs the questionable service of telling people what to think while reaching into their pockets for cash' (2010: 195). They are 'the fashion industry, not the music industry', unaware that 'music is timeless [and] fashion ephemeral' (Ibid.). Hersh draws an aesthetic line between superficial products that are 'scary chemical candy' and beauty that is 'valuable' in its ability to 'allow substance to shift styles' (Ibid.). The music industry is interested in static and sellable 'entertainment' rather than music that exists 'in the moment' (Ibid.) before morphing and moving on. Hersh reserves particular vitriol for 'the coke guys, the VIPs with orange tans and tinted glasses' (Ibid., 195-196). These are executives 'far removed from anything musical' (Ibid., 196). The tone adopted for one such 'legendary, brilliant man' (Ibid.) is marked by its hostility. He is 'dying one piece at a time, [his] money holding up what's left of [his] corpse' (Ibid.). Hersh equates creativity with life force whereas this figure only represents moribund commerce. Despite the fact that he assures the band that he is ready to begin 'answering our prayers, fulfilling our dreams' (Ibid.), Hersh knows that this transaction will only hinder their artistic process. The creative decisions are taken away from the band and the record company 'tell you how your record will sound' (Ibid., 197). More significantly, 'your record is essentially their record' (Ibid.). Fluctuating and plural art is now reduced to a singular commodity and, as a result, 'your songs are gone' (Ibid.). The medium that should provide the income and listenership required to bolster a creative life is in fact a hindrance. Aligning with an executive like this means abandoning creative agency.

As with so much else in this text, however, the opposition between art's authenticity and the industry's shallow greed is more complex than it first appears. As a student at her father's university, Hersh forms an unlikely friendship with the actor Betty Hutton. A Hollywood star during the 1940s and 1950s, Hutton provides mentorship and advice. The

text's fragmented makeup and temporal fluidity demonstrate the lasting influence that Hutton has on Hersh. Alongside the prose lie snippets of Throwing Muses' 2010 composition 'Elizabeth June', a song written in tribute to Hutton after her death that same year. Hersh's father, a philosophy professor known as 'dude' by colleagues and students alike, introduces the pair as Hersh is 'too young to make friends' and Betty 'too old' (2010: 16). Hersh is told that Betty overcame a 'fatherless, poverty stricken childhood in Denver' to become a 'rich, famous movie star in Hollywood' (Ibid.). She is a 'shiny beast' and a 'warm heart in a cold world' (Ibid., 17). Hersh is unsure as to whether Betty's tale is true but, ever alert to narrative, she 'doesn't care if it's true or not' because 'she loves the story too much' (Ibid., 16). Betty's advice and influence on Hersh's artistic formation is very different from other characters in the text. She sees little wrong with the manner in which her era of filmmaking told stories of 'beautiful people living beautiful lives' (Ibid., 250). The key is that the stories are 'hyperreal' and 'a reality that should have been' (Ibid.). Betty sees artifice and knowingly celebrates it like an artist should. She tells Hersh that her audience will always see a 'caricature' regardless of how 'real' (Ibid.) the music is. The 'persona' and 'the personality' (Ibid., 251) are not separate entities. They are all part of a 'process of building up and tearing down' and of 'construction and destruction' (Ibid.). The artistic self is incomplete and changeable. Artifice and surface image are as much a part of her creative practice as the authenticity she is so desperate to maintain and communicate. It is important to find a way to make peace with this supposed dichotomy.

Of equal significance in helping Hersh to find a way to make progress in an industry she despises is 4AD head Ivo Watts-Russell. Hersh uses a chapter of the text to document their initial telephone conversations. These are funny and rambling exchanges in which they discuss names, their shared experiences of flu, Ivo's boil ('like a veruca and a carbuncle combined' (2010: 221)) and the fact that he is a fan of Throwing Muses' 'integrity'. Ivo is

‘open’ and entertaining; his English accent and ‘childlike’ honesty mean that she pictures ‘a six year old with a bowler hat’ (Ibid.) on the other end of the telephone. Despite his repeated apologies for ‘not signing American bands’ (Ibid., 220), a contract arrives in the post that merely offers to ‘fund, release and work on one record, then see how we all feel’ (Ibid., 222). The simplicity and modesty in this offer sits at a significant distance from the bombast and empty discourse offered by the other record companies. The deal is open-ended and is an opportunity for Hersh and her band mates to experiment with their fluctuating sound. Ivo, Hersh decides, is a ‘misguided angel’ (Ibid.) and a kindred creative spirit.

Recording the album proves to be a testing experience, though, and the confines of the ‘too nice’ (2010: 305) studio are a stifling space. Fatigue and the search for a temporarily elusive creative energy take over and the very notion of recording songs becomes a ‘stupid idea’ (Ibid.). The paradoxical nature of the recording industry has infiltrated this most open of labels. It takes another phone call from Ivo to clear the creative hurdle. His oblique anecdote regarding an ‘old man with a cauliflower ear’ and the ‘filthy London pigeons’ that are ‘all over him’ (Ibid., 306) taps into the creative centre of this text. It combines spatiality with a visceral corporeality. It is strange and funny and contains no conclusions.

This is the tone in which Hersh thrives as an artist. Sounds, visions and ideas that are without a fixedness or linearity are her muse. As the album’s recording is completed, Hersh reflects on the process and the manner in which it allows her to embrace duality and opposition. Music represents the ‘ability to navigate a pristine or polluted terrain’ and recognises that ‘light and dark are two different moods a mind shines on the subject matter at hand’ (2010: 311). Hersh’s songwriting and her role as an artist are focussed on a full engagement with complexity and paradox. This is why the open and unfinished nature of her aesthetic is so central in the ways that she constructs her autobiographical self. Hersh is an artist that is constructed by the intensely interior as much as she is by the overtly social. Her

private world and that of her friends and community bleed into one another. 'All humans embody this dichotomy', she argues, 'and music's just what that sounds like' (Ibid., 311). All of this comes back to Hersh's claim during that performance in York. Art is about admitting that you are 'still figuring out how to do this shit'.

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