Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Walker, Nathan (2024) Writing Performances of the Vocal Body. Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, 16 (1). pp. 67-84.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/7998/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcp_00046_1

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Nathan Walker

Writing Performances of the Vocal-Body

York St John University

Abstract

This article uses in-depth performance descriptions to engage in what Donna Haraway terms the 'view from a body' (1988: 589). I frame my practice-led research in performance art by scoring and *writing through* four selected performances: Nape (2013), Scaw (2014), Mean (2016) and Faults (2019). These performance descriptions are presented as performance documentation providing insight to an established practice in performance art that is language-oriented. This writing is both descriptive and autobiographical and explore methods and tasks that use the vocal-body as 'writing with the voice' and 'live writing' over extended duration. These texts position the creation of language-oriented performance art from within, expanding and reframing my own performances that bring new understandings on how we read, witness and experience experimental writing practice in performance.

Keywords

Vocal-body, practice-led research, performance art, sound poetry, writing performance, action-oriented

Introduction

My dad sang in a local band and played folk songs on the guitar and mandolin. For many years I disappointed him in my complete inability to sing: I sang nasal and flat and couldn't get the notes. Eventually I had singing lessons from a woman named Carol who lived on my street, near the sea in West Cumbria. Carol had a strong Cumbrian accent, yet when she sang her voice transformed into an exaggerated opera style soprano. I became a good pupil and was able to sing properly around about the same time in my life that I discovered the noisy dissonance of British punk. In 1999, like most young people in secondary education, I was obliged to undertake one week of work experience in an area I had 'genuine interest'. At that time my interests lay in performance, music and theatre. My school sent me to BBC Radio Cumbria's smallest local station in Whitehaven. The BBC's radio offices in Whitehaven were, at that time, the only station in the county that hadn't 'upgraded' from analogue audio recording to digital. In retrospect this was the saving grace of my 'experience' and what fascinated me was not the performance of recording live interviews on location, or re-reading the news, but moving large reels of audio tape around the studio, cutting and splicing the tape, and physically manipulating the recorded sound of voices by moving the tape reels with my hands, gently rotating the reels back and forth to find the right location to cut. In this small act I was able to control the speed, and therefore the pitch of the voice, to hear microscopic speech sounds, the way a word ends sharply or is stretched, a pop of a consonant, a tail or hiss of esses. When I got home that day, I explained to my twin brother what I had done at 'work' and vocally imitated the slowed down speech of the reels in a pitch

deeper than my own. What continues to interest me then is the capacity for the voice to create diverse sounds. I realise now that these relatively small events in my adolescence had significant impacts on my creative and artistic explorations of vocal performance, and in many ways, my entire practice over the last ten years.

My practice exists across and between performance art and poetry, intersecting with photography, sculpture, video and audio work. This trans-disciplinarity facilitates an approach to making, thinking, and presenting artistic practice that is not easily defined and opens new channels of innovation.

When I first began attending, presenting my work at, and curating performance art events, from 2007 onwards, I was fortunate to witness the work of artists I had studied and been influenced by. These included Black Market International, Jamie McMurry, Alastair MacLennan, Victoria Gray, Hugh O'Donnell, Sandra Johnston, Poppy Jackson, Mark Greenwood and Anne Seagrave. These performances were action-oriented, often included performing tasks over extended duration. These tasks produced a type of physicality that I had not witnessed in other kinds of performance and presented relationships with objects that changed the way I approached my own performances. This manifested in my use of objects as a way of defining an aesthetic vocabulary that enabled an ongoing developmental process, using and re-using the same objects in different ways in each performance. I realized that I wanted to make similar work to my peers, work that emphasised my body in relation to the space of the performance and to objects. Yet, I also wanted to develop a practice that was distinct and that explored new processes. Importantly, I wanted to be able to make work building-on the practices of my peers but that integrated my

experiments with writing, language and vocal sound, something that none of the works I witnessed had done. My interest in action-oriented performance art was only one part of my practice and I found it difficult to explore writing, poetry, and language-based artwork within my performances. The difficulty of synthesizing these distinct areas of my own practice led me to focus on language as a task within performance, explored through 'live writing' and 'writing with the voice'.

This article uses performance descriptions to engage in what Donna Haraway terms the 'view from a body':

> I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (Haraway 1988: 589)

Positioning this writing at 'ground level' I am seeking to articulate knowledge that is 'anchored in practice' (Conquergood 2002: 146). Within this writing I have been able to construct a view of my performances from ground level and describe the techniques, methods and sensory experiences of making, writing and performing live. Additionally, I have weaved autobiographical passages that provide insight into personal experiences that have influenced my creative work, revealed themselves through live performance, and are an integral part of my poetics. I use the term practice-led in direct relation to the use of the term by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean in their book *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2014). Smith and Dean use practice-led research to mean *both* the work of art 'as a form of research' and to the creation of art work as 'generating research insights'

(2014: 7). The performance texts in this article are supported by some photographic documentation but ultimately propose the idea of 'writing as documentation'. This idea was the subject of dance and performance artist Fiona Wright's practice-based PhD and develops 'self-reflexive strategies as a move beyond critical evaluation and towards individual and particularised writing' (Wright et al 2011: 172). My writing in this article forms a thorough account of the decision-making processes of performance and the braiding of theory, practice and lived experience present in creative and artistic processes.

I am also thinking of these texts as my own testimony, that I am finding ways to bear witness to my own trans-disciplinary practice. I am influenced here by thinking with and through poetry, the act of performing a poem aloud for an audience is one that the poet Muriel Rukeyser argues transforms audiences into witnesses:

> I suggest the old word "witness," which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self. (1996: 175)

This change is the poem in action, which for Rukeyser, is a meeting place where 'false barriers go down' (1996: 20) generating an event of exchange and activation. In my own performances I have been drawn to using my voice to cultivate this change, to strive towards action and transformation. I use performance to explore

the relationship between my body and the space of the performance and consider 'site' in performance art as doubled; to include both the artist's body and the performance space.[1]

Initially I have used my vocal-body as a way to construct a space for the performance and to foster a vocal and sonic attention for both myself and the audience. For example, in an early formative work from 2008 I made a short three-minute performance entitled 'Plant' (August 2008) at Elevator Gallery, London. The space of the performance was crowded with audience members and so there was a restricted physical space within the room to perform. I began to shout instructions to the audience in order to clear space. I then shouted the title of the performance 'Plant', I said it twice, 'Plant! Plant!' playing on my declaration as both a noun and a verb. I subsequently began all my performances by shouting the title of the work: 'Flag', 'Spit', 'Dirt', 'Over', 'Hard', 'Poor', 'Dead' and 'Bad Bad'. Shouting became a task within my performances. In 2010 I attended a workshop with German performance artist, and member of Black Market International, Jürgen Fritz.[2] This workshop was important as it developed my formative practice in performance art alongside other practitioners. During a discussion with the workshop participants I was surprised by Fritz's statement that it was 'very difficult' for performance artists to

[1] Sound poet and performance artist Bartolome Ferrando describes this as being both subject and object in performance, and regarding objects within the space of performance. He suggests that if there is a piece of paper in the 'room' of the performance 'try to feel like this piece of paper' (Ferrando no date). This relates to Jürgen Fritz's method of sensing 'impression': 'Everything in the space, objects, people and the area as whole impresses me physically, leaves marks on my body. It is a physical translation of the word "body impression"' (Fritz in Torrens 2014: 223).

[2] New Territories Winterschool, Glasgow 2009. Performance art workshops provide unique opportunities to practice performance art within the relative safety of an explorative, pedagogic environment. This is important because performance art is rarely taught as part of a traditional art school or fine art / performance education. As Fritz argues 'the core of performance art, where form becomes art, cannot be taught. That may be true of all art forms, but in performance art, both the materials as well as the medium of artistic debate are in a great degree identical with the person of the artist' (Fritz in Torrens 2014: 219).

speak or use their voice in their live work. In many respects Fritz's declaration, which I disagree with, has fuelled my desire to use my voice in performance and in all of my live works following this workshop. I have subsequently experimented with vocal tasks as the primary material of the performance and a way of exploring a *writing with the voice*. I use the voice as a transformational entity, capable of affecting change in a given situation. For the last decade my practice has explored the vocal-body in performance art. In doing so I have presented work at poetry events and performance festivals, often over extended durations of between three and nine hours. The following texts navigate a constellation of mouths, and with them voices, and with those voices sounds that manifest as events, events that rupture or are ruptural in the accumulation of or meeting with a kind of otherness. A cultivation of which I pursue in my ongoing exploration of the body across performance and poetry.

Four Performance Descriptions

Nape (2013)

Performed at Performance Space, London. Eight hours in duration.
Objects: six domestic doors, chalk, tape recorder, rucksack, stool, rope, children's shoes, beer, slate, stones

> Walking in the dark, oddly enough can reveal new knowledge about a familiar place. (Shepherd 1977 [1996]: 34)

> To place one's body at the centre of writing's work indicates a methodical and pragmatic interest in forms of awareness which are not primarily, or solely, linguistic, nor it follows, poetic. (Bergvall 2003)

Nape provides insight to the formative development of my use of language as tasks in performance, namely 'live writing' and pre-recorded vocal texts.

I used six domestic doors as enlarged pages and surfaces on which to write. These doors were altered and presented as sculptural material, painted with black chalkboard paint and written onto with chalk. Using white chalk meant that the texts appeared as a negative 'page', an inversion of how we conventionally read text. The durational action of writing with my eyes closed onto these black surfaces brought together my interest in automatic writing and the practice of writing as a body-based activity. Here, time altered the materiality of writing. Often the density of the chalk played an illusory trick where black appeared to be overlaid onto a white surface. This was multiplied by the overwriting that occurred throughout the task. It looked like writing was being revealed: a confusion of background and foreground. Illegible densities that were once linguistic. I wore a home-made balaclava that covered my head entirely except for my right ear. This 'listening balaclava' (as I called it) concentrated my attention on sound and inhibited my ability to see and therefore to write visibly coherent language. The materiality of chalk also aided the removal of my ability to write legibly, the chalk jumped and skipped with friction across the surface of the door, smudging and dusting the written texts' inconsistent thicknesses and densities. Writing without being able to see was a deliberate attempt to shift my

attention away from the words being produced and focus on the activity of writing. This meant that I often wrote over things previously written or wrote in angles and curves. Writing appeared as letter-like shapes, similar to short-hand. In places the text emerged like drawing and when writing was superimposed onto other writing it became dense and visually noisy. Interference. During this writing activity my attention was internal. In a similar way to automatic writing, I allowed my writing hand to produce marks and found that whilst I was writing coherent sentences — descriptions of things and memories — when I removed the listening balaclava the surface of the door surprised me. The things I had written were not visible. The sentences and memories that occurred in my mind were consciously transcribed but transformed by the mechanics of the task. I moved from writing one thing to writing something else quickly, transient, fleeting and barely remembered after the task. What happened between thinking and writing? Why does not looking at what I am doing remove coherence, legibility and direct communication? The writing communicates differently because it is asemic: it is writing-like but not enough to be readable. The gesture of writing without looking and the continual disintegrating of chalk produces a distanced translation. Blending the subject and the object. Stories about dust. Inconsistent saccades and chalk breaks.

In *Nape* I used a pre-recorded text of six-hours in length. The text was a collection of words, written by me but reorganised through a JavaScript generator I constructed for the task. The generator employed a chance-based syntax whereby three words were placed together at random from the pool of source words. The words related to the ideas inherent in the performance as it was being prepared:

EIGHTY SLATE FOOTHOLD

ROPE BLANK CABLE

KEY OPACITY RED

VENTOLIN BAG BOTANICS

NECK LEGS DAUGHTER

SAND WILD GLASS

CRIPPLED CLIPPED ADOPTED

HAIR SHARPEN STAIRS

STANDING SCRAP SURFACE

CLIFF GOAT DISCARD

BENIGN TAPED ADOPTED

POST BUDDHIST SOAP

DIFFICULTY CRANE STAIRS

WOOL CLIPPED LINGMELL

ROPE FICTION ASHTRAY

DELAY DENIM LEANING

FALL WITHIN SUFFOCATE

MYSTERIOUS FLUORESCENT DRIGG

SURVIVAL YOU SPHERIC

INSIDER ACUPUNCTURE GLASS

OPEN BLANK SHOWER

Prior to the performance I recorded these texts onto cassette tapes by reading them aloud, thirty-minutes of text recorded onto each side of six cassettes. This meant that recording them took the same length of time as they would be played. This facilitated

a timed-structure to the performance allowing me to shift tasks at the end of each side of the cassette. The texts were scoring the performance in real-time, even though they were pre-recorded. The layering of a private performance (pre-recorded voice) onto a public performance (live writing), hearing my own voice, emanating from a rucksack on my back, in rhythms of three. After writing onto one of the doors I attached it to ropes and winched it high into the space above. The gallery was a converted warehouse and the ceilings were high. I suspended the door from a load-bearing beam in the ceiling so that the bottom of the door was at the height of my neck. I stood beneath it, taking the weight of the door onto the nape of my neck. A line is formed on my neck from the edge of the door. The wood was smooth and the edges eroded and slightly round with age. I stood beneath the door for thirty minutes whilst the tape recorder played the pre-recorded generator text aloud. Words seemed to explain my position and resonated in the vast gallery: CRIPPLING / SURVIVAL / WOOD / SLAP / ALONE / BLISTERING / UPSIDE / SEALING / DIFFICULTY / LOWER / STOOD / NECK / SHAVED / ASCEND / COVERING / NAPE / PILLAR / HUGE / FALL / CAREFUL / SURFACE / BENEATH / PORTAL / OBSTACLE.

Scaw (2014)

Performed at Experimentica 14, Chapter Arts Center, Cardiff. Nine hours in duration. Objects: six domestic doors, chalk, four survival bags, stones, slate, teeth, children's shoes, t-shirts, tape recorder, balaclava, climbing hammer, raincoat, hooks

> [h]e turns to the night cries out to it from the window to slow down or existence is the circle is the space is rhythmic swinging harpoon that

> brushes the lips bronze gestures darkroom a stain left by the water
> framed frozen hypocritical face dust hypnosis see but see how
> negation modifies the text with possible words with impossible words
> (Spatola 1971 [2008]: 117)

Five hours into the performance and the room was suddenly empty of audience members. How strange to be alone but to continue. The day had become dusk and the room had darkened. I chanted the word 'whiskey' from the window of the performance space out into the street beyond—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey—the gallery sits amongst residential streets, itself a former school and squat. My voice is as loud as I can make it, but clear, I push the words from my gut, resounding like a secular bell from the window—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey—I see bodies below me looking up towards the window, children join in for a couple of shouts. I feel the cold November evening on my face and hands on the sill, my eyes are half open—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey—Whiskey— every four Whiskeys I take a breath, and then every five, six, seven. How many Whiskeys until I take a breath? My voice sounds like I have had whiskey. After thirty minutes I begin to cry. The words have mutated into—Yes OK—Yes OK— Yes OK— Yes OK—another ten minutes, maybe not that long, it has become a question—You OK?—You OK?—You OK?—You OK?—a question for the street or for myself? I could be shouting for help. I turn away from the window and face the room. It has become completely dark outside since I began this action of chanting and the two small bulbs that are lighting the space are brighter than earlier and orange. I walk slowly towards the centre of the room and the words shift to—Yesterday—Yesterday—Yesterday—Yesterday—I see Hannah, the curator, and we hold eye contact whilst I continue.

She is really with me in this moment. I saw her outside when I was at the window too, but she was too far away for me to make eye contact. I raise my left hand to my ear and cup it in order to hear my own voice resounding inside the room. Yesterday—has been reduced to—Today—Today—Today—Today—and eventually into simply—Day— Day—Day—Day—it remains, recurs, reoccurs, re-sounds for an extended period of time, maybe twenty minutes, maybe a little more. I am simultaneously pushing the words out and allowing them to set their own course. Day becomes—Dad— Dad—Dad—Dad—the soft 'y' at the end of Day made for long sounds, high pitched, relaxed and extended cadence. In comparison Dad is quick and compressed. Each sounding returns to my ear almost immediately and the pace increases. The word becomes a bark, my mouth doesn't even close between repetitions, these chanted sounds leave Dad behind and return me to noises, quick sounds, short breaths, punched words, vocal fists, tongue-less, spit beard, punctuation, animal—Ad—Yad—Ha—Ap—Ra—Ad—Yad—Ad—Yad—Ha—Ap—Haa—Ak— Yar—Ad—Yad—Ha—Ap—Ra—Ad—Yad—Ad—Yad—Ha—Ap—Haa... Not knowing.

When I have made a decision to perform a task it is usually led by a hunch and performed as an exploration of materials. I often perform the same task with different materials and the results are different. The live performance situation is an opportunity to learn, to discover meaning through doing. I have a very clear memory of this occurring. In *Scaw* I had a large survival bag that I filled with air. Survival bags are heavy duty polyethylene sacks used in mountaineering and outdoor emergency situations. They are fluorescent orange and large enough to lie down inside. Survival bags are intended to be used in emergency situations to keep a person warm and

visible but they can also be used to bivouac. I have been using survival bags as objects in my work as a reference to the materials of mountaineering. I held the survival bag by the opening at the top that I had gathered together so that the air could not escape. I held this enlarged fluorescent bag at the top and stood with it between my body and the wall of the gallery. I performed a task of slowly allowing the air to forcibly leave the bag by pushing my body weight against it and the wall. I performed this task three times over the space of thirty minutes. During this task I have also altered my appearance and am wearing a blue balaclava that belonged to my dad. I buried my head and body into the bag that impresses itself around me, through the bag my head touches the wall. The balaclava covers my nose and mouth. After around ten minutes of applying my body weight as pressure, the air in the bag reduces slowly and flattens itself between my body and the wall. Wrapped inside the inflated fluorescent lung I heard the bag exhaling. I became aware of my left hand as it held the top of the bag tightly, stopping the air from escaping too quickly but simultaneously allowing air to leave through the inconsistent gathers and folds of plastic.

When I am holding objects in performance I am aware that their status and function transforms. As my body becomes an object, so too do objects become bodies. I am holding the neck of this bag against the wall and have pushed the air out of it. Held the throat, heard the breath. As the task is transformed temporarily into an action I realise what I am doing. The audience witnesses this moment of internal understanding, glimpsed in the hairs on my neck rising, which in turn transmits a different form of communication. Scratching under water. Not ‘knowing’ but ‘feeling’.

When ascending the last third of the route to the summit of Castle Crag from Rosthwaite in the Lake District National Park you have to walk around the edge of a spiralling path of a spoil heap. The ancient quarry slate resounds like bone as it moves underfoot. In *Scaw* I rotate five rectangular slate pieces in my hands whilst I walk the circumference of the room. Quiet slate sounds as they rotate in my hands. In my mouth, five deciduous teeth from my child-mouth sit quietly on my tongue, gathering saliva around them, remembering a smaller version of this mouth. Teeth reside in residue. I remember seeing an image from a performance by Boris Nieslony in which he had slowly, over a period of two-hours, filled his ear with seeds, one by one.[3] He was lying on the ground underneath an enormous rock suspended by a crane. A small bowl of seeds was on the ground in front of him and as he lay on his left-hand-side he used his right arm to place seeds from the bowl into his ear. They overflowed, into his ear canal and out onto his face and neck. I wonder how many teeth I could place in my ear and how, or if, I could retrieve them. Spitting teeth. Listen to the sound of my child-mouth.

Before the performance the doors were prepared by the gallery technicians. I requested six solid wood doors. One side of the door had been cleaned and painted with black chalk-board paint. The rest of the door is untouched, some still carry cobwebs, dust and paint marks from their previous homes. Each door leant against the wall of the gallery and was used in turn during the performance. I placed a door onto the trestle leg stands and wrote onto it with chalk. I wrote with my eyes closed for one hour, slowly moving around the edge of the door throughout. During the task

[3] Nieslony (29 May 2009) Nature Study: Breathing – issue Thessaloniki, performed at the 2nd Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, Greece

writing was overwritten, word-shapes and letter-forms blend into one another. This palimpsest is dense and transforms into linguistic smoke. Once I had written onto the surface of a door with chalk for one hour I placed it against the wall. I had screwed circular metal eye-screws into the centre of the doors at the height of my forehead. These circular metal hooks are large enough to attach a climbing carabiner, the roped handle of a mountaineering hammer, and the laces of shoes, so that these objects hang from the door in the same way you might hang a coat to keep it. They are materials that transfer memories, geographies and histories into the space. This particular door has nothing attached to the hook and is intended to perform another function. I placed the door in the centre of the room and leaned it towards me at a sixty-degree angle from the floor. I placed the hook in my mouth and took the weight of the door with my lips, teeth, gum and face. My body was forced to push back, I kept myself straight but leant towards the door slightly. My lips kissed the door surface. After five minutes I felt crushed, the pressure on my mouth was too much. I intended to perform this task for at least thirty minutes but realised I could not. I placed the palms of my hands to the surface and took the weight of the door into my arms. After another five minutes I realise again that I could not continue in this position and must find another way of supporting the weight of the door. I leant forwards, taking the hook from my mouth, I unscrewed it with one hand and placed it onto my tongue. I then stood the door upright and placed it flat against my body, my hands holding the sides of the door, where the door frame would be. The hinges have been removed. The sneck too.[4]

[4] ‘Sneck’ is a Cumbrian dialect word which means both ‘nose’ and the latch of a door.

Mean (2016)

Performed at Flare Festival, Newcastle Upon Tyne. 30min in duration.

Objects: children's shoes, whiskey, water

> How can I body forth or configure such sounds, such tongues, such languages, such muteness, such multivocality, such error?
> (O'Sullivan in Brown 2004: 90)

In *Mean* I experienced the transformation of task to action. An audience of around fifty spectators sat around the edge of the room. I stood in the centre of the room and proceeded to shout the word 'mean' aloud to initiate the performance. To begin I opened a bottle of whiskey and poured from the bottle into my mouth. I held the whiskey in my mouth for the duration of the first task, around fifteen minutes. This task involved using the leather shoes I was wearing to gently push a pair of small black leather shoes around the circumference of the space. The small shoes are children's size, roughly thirteen-year-old feet, and are joined together by their laces. I nudge them with my own feet, shuffling them slowly past audience members who have mostly sat on the floor of the gallery to watch. My feet and the children's shoes pass their feet and in the silence a rhythm of walking, stumbling and kicking is made audible. The whiskey burnt my tongue and gums. I stopped roughly in the centre of the circle of spectators and lowered myself to my knees. I opened my mouth. Transformed by saliva, the whiskey melted and slowly rolled down my left arm into a pool in my palm. My burnt mouth dried rapidly as the brown translucent mass of alcohol and things unspoken is stripped from my mouth cavity and released. When I began to speak, words followed the saliva- whisky-discharge and were projected into the gallery as mucus-cracked yells. I did not recognize my own voice; a gowling

howling resounding that emerged from my body.[5] Words sound, but their sound was characterised by all that had occurred before in the work: they had been kicked and burnt and are made audible as an invisible limb. A gigantic slow chant transformed language into action. It altered the entire space of the gallery. Activating, actualising, aching. I felt a thinning of the separation between my body and the room. Rarely have I emerged from a performance with such a feeling of hope, empowerment and compassion. I felt I had embodied and transformed language. Language had a new orientation, it had become a subject, and I, an object. I make the shadow I pursue. This thinning was the interior voice meeting the exterior voice. The action occured in the blend.

In January 2016 I attended a workshop with Spanish performance artist Bartolomé Ferrando in Belfast. We, the workshop participants, repeatedly recited strings of consonants. Ferrando explained how he had always wanted to know how to teach sound poetry and so had devised processes for approaching non- linguistic sounds in performance. These were framed as workshop tasks similar to those of Bob Cobbing. They were generative and performative: spontaneously draw onto the wall with a marker pen, quickly, without thinking, then read it aloud; unravel a ball of string across the length of the room and read it aloud; speak entire conversations in gibberish to another participant; read aloud whilst eating as many pieces of toffee as you can fit into your mouth; or marbles; learn how to say GLNGMVPRMVGTGPRT; read a found page from a book aloud whilst it is set on fire. The task of repeated calling, chanting or shouting is all consuming. The rhythm of the breath is controlled by the rhythm of the speech and can become difficult. There is a meditative quality to

[5] ‘Gowl’ is a Cumbrian dialect word which means ‘to cry’.

this task that, unlike non-vocal tasks, is impossible to separate from the task itself. In this sense vocal-actions are meditations; they bring a mindful awareness to the present moment. I haven't had any vocal training but instead have developed my own techniques for vocality. I am trying to speak from the nape of my neck. I externalize internal text-feels. The text-feel is hooked from as far back in my jaw, throat and neck as I can imagine and pulled and thrown out towards the corners of the room. Whiskey from the scruff. Smoke images float into my forehead vision whilst chanting. It is difficult to describe the speed of images, cinematic in their intensity. A series of pictures flatten into each other with a rapid intensity that feels like internally throwing up pictures. One of them will catch. And the speech flows as scree, so that, what I do after the chant is stained by it and what I do before the chant stains it. An invisible transference; energy and pressure. The permutation of my deep and nasal word-sound seems to transform my voice into an oscillator or drone. The tonal qualities of my vocality are para-linguistic, reminiscent of non-vocal sound like auditory drones, horns and animal barks. Pre-linguistic sounds enter too: coughs, guttural heaves, saliva gargling and notes. I am aware of influences like folk singer Louisa (formerly Louis) Killen whose acapella sea shanties in North East dialect always felt like I had heard them in a previous life; the nasal pitch shifts of Roy Harper that move in range from high to low within the same syllable of a lyric; the vocal texture of John Martyn's slow mumbling love songs that sound like his voice has been reversed and drunk. Similarly, the poetry of Andrei Tarkosky's father, Arseny Tarkovsky, that scores scenes in the 1975 film *Mirror*. His (Russian) poems accentuate Russian metre and resound like bells and drag vowels out into elongated speak-song. I can hear his voice when I say the Russian sounding word 'whiskey'. Channelling vocal influences like these, where the voice's affective qualities are

heightened, remains a continual exploration. A pair of children's smart leather shoes are tied together by their laces. Each shoe is filled with water. I removed my shirt and replaced it with two identical white t-shirts, dirty and off-white in places. One t-shirt sits uncomfortably over the other. I picked up the shoes by their heels, careful not to spill the water, and placed the joining lace over my head to the nape of my neck. The shoes hung to my collar bone until I leant forward at ninety degrees from my waist. My hands held each other behind my back and I walked forwards into the room, my eyes to the floor. Walking in this position produced a disorientation. I found myself performing this task to camera in my studio, without knowing why. When I watched the footage back I was surprised to see myself drunk. The drunk action ended after thirty painful minutes where, upon straightening my back, I drank the water from each shoe, removed the two white t-shirts and placed them next to each other on the floor.

Faults (2019)

Performed at Research Pavilion, Venice. Three hours in duration.

Objects: small white stones.

> Trust the place to form the voice (Howe 1993: 156)

For a performance entitled *Fault* (2019) on Giudecca in Venice,[6] I found an area of movement, a patch of land between the canal and residential houses that people

[6] Presented as part of *Convocation: On Expanded-Language Practices* at the Research Pavilion of the 53rd Venice Biennale. Curated and hosted by Emma Cocker, Cordula Daus and Lena Séraphin in co-operation with Alex Arteaga. More information can be found at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/614742/614743

walked through and in to get to other places, and I stood with my right pocket full of small white stones that looked like teeth.

I had collected the stones from the sea near the house I grew up in, on the West coast of Cumbria. I moved the stones, one at a time, from my right pocket with my right hand to my mouth. And then, with my left hand, from my mouth to my left pocket. A three-step task that was complicated further by speaking one of three words [Fault, Bells, Slab] at each stage of the task.

> Starting with both hands in their own pockets:
>
> Right hand locates a single stone and holds it between index finger and thumb and remove hand from pocket, speak first word, place stone in mouth and return hand to pocket.
>
> With stone in the mouth, resting on tongue, speak second word.
>
> Left hand is taken from left pocket and collects stone from the tongue, as stone is removed from mouth and placed into pocket, speak third word, keep hand in pocket.

This task provided a rhythm, performed slowly, between five and seven seconds for each stone to be moved from one pocket to the other via the mouth and for three

words to be spoken. It takes around forty-five minutes for all the stones to be transferred from one pocket to the other, at which point the task is reversed.

The words spoken are permutated, so the first three stones are mapped to the words like this:

	Right hand / pocket	Mouth	Left hand / pocket
Stone 1	FAULT	BELLS	SLAB
Stone 2	BELLS	SLAB	FAULT
Stone 3	SLAB	FAULT	BELLS

These words were diverted and rerouted by chance and mistake during the performance so that each individual word shifted slightly to a similar sounding word over the course of three hours.

SALT FELLS BAD

FELLS BAD SALT

BAD SALT FELLS

SALT BAD FELLS

BAD FELLS SALT

FELLS SALT BAD

After three-hours the original three words unintentionally replaced:

FOLD CELLS BACK

CELLS BACK FOLD

BACK FOLD CELLS

FOLD BACK CELLS

BACK CELLS FOLD

CELLS FOLD BACK

Conclusion

The texts collected here document a selection of my performance works that use language as live-writing tasks and the vocal-body in what I call 'writing with the voice'. This written documentation shows ways of exploring and developing performance documentation from within the performance. As a kind of expanded-scoring practice I have offered new perspectives on the embodied experience of performing and the methods of experimenting with language in action-oriented performance art. These new perspectives demonstrate a braiding of theory, practice and lived experience by bearing witness to the 'complex…structuring' (Haraway 1988: 589) of performance art. This view from the body is generative, not only in the live situation of performance but also by inventing and informing the writing of these

textual descriptions. By doing so, this practice-led research emphasises the relationship between the external space of the performance and the internal world of the performer and bridges the between-space of my trans-disciplinary practice in performance and poetry. Through writing that is reflective, descriptive and creative, I have brought into focus an understanding of the performance from ground-level and made this accessible to others. In doing so a new kind of performance documentation is produced and gives insight into the decision-making practice of live performance, especially where language, sound and writing is explored as a material, embodied and task-led practice.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the feedback of Dr. Scott Thurston whose encouragement of these texts as they emerged during my doctoral studies was crucial to their (and my) development. The section of writing on *Faults* was published differently on the Futch Press blog as part of a longer piece of writing entitled *Carrying in the Mouth* (Walker 2020) and I am grateful to the support and conversations of poet and Futch editor Linda Kemp. Thank you to Emma Cocker for the invitation to Convocation in Venice. Thanks to Bean and Benjamin Sebastien at Performance Space, London; Catherine Angle and Hannah Firth at Chapter in Cardiff; and Denys Blacker for the invitation to Flare in Newcastle.

References

Bergvall, Caroline (2003), *Body & Sign*. Jacket 22, May 2003, http://jacketmagazine.com/22/berg-body.html Accessed 12 October 2021.

Brown, Andy (2004), *Binary Myths 1 & 2*. Exeter, UK: Stride.

Conquergood, Dwight (2002), 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research'. *The Drama Review,* 46:2, pp. 145-156.

Ferrando, Bartolomé. No Date. *Bartolomé Ferrando*. http://bferrando.com/arte-y-cotidianeidad-hacia-la-transformacion-de-la-vida-en-arte-bartolome-ferrando-ensayo. Accessed 12 September 2018.

Haraway, Donna (1988), Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14:3, pp. 575-599.

Howe, Susan (1993), The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Rukeyser, Muriel ([1949] 1996), *The Life of Poetry*. Massachusetts: Paris Press.

Sheppard, Nan ([1996] 1977), The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland. In *The Grampian Quartet*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Smith, Hazel & Dean, Roger (2014), *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Spatola, Adriano ([1971] 2008), *The Position of Things: Collected Poems 1961-1992*. København & Los Angeles: Green Integer.

Torrens, Valentin (2014), *How We Teach Performance Art: University Courses and Workshop Syllabus*. Denver, Colorado: Outskirts Press.

Wright, F., Ellis, S.K., & Ledger, A. (2011), The Question of Documentation: Creative Strategies in Performance Research. In Kershaw & *Nicholson Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Contact Details

Dr. Nathan Walker

York St John University, Fine Art Department, Lord Mayors Walk, York, YO31 7EX

n.walker@yorksj.ac.uk