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Heddon, D. (2006) *Personal Performance: the resistant confessions of Bobby Baker*. In: Gill, J. (ed.) *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature . Routledge, Oxon, pp. 137-153. ISBN 9780415339698

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/6489/>

Deposited on: 22 July 2009

‘Personal Performance: The Resistant Confessions of Bobby Baker’¹

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The concerns of this chapter are the relationships between confession and performance. This contribution might initially appear to sit uneasily in a collection that specifies ‘writing’ in its title, but performance, like writing, is always a ‘text’, and it is the textual instabilities of specific, live performance work that interest me here. Through examining the work of British performance artist, Bobby Baker, I propose the potential difference that the context of live performance makes to the confessional act. In live performance, the process of textual inscription and reinscription is a visibly embodied practice that is *performed*.

Performance texts, like written texts, are capable of complex engagements with the matter of experience, with the problematics of memory and its potential representation, with the intricate relationships between lived life and its telling. Weaving and layerings and shifting perspectives are common devices of the contemporary confessional performance, just as they are of the written confessional text. One difference pertains, however; in the performance text, there is an additional layer with which to play, an extra ingredient to be thrown into the mix: the live, and present, authoring body. The live presence of the confessing subject prompts a questioning of the subject of confession. Who is confessing? What is being confessed? Does the literal performance of confession render its truth-status ‘suspect’, as the *act* of confessing reveals the necessarily performative nature of all confessional acts? Such a revelation might, arguably, be more transparent in the live act that is witnessed by the spectator in shared time and space

An important property of most performance art that distinguishes it from more conventional dramatic productions is that in performance art the author and performer are typically the same. As such, the 'author-performer' potentially has far more control over the subject of representation. Translating this to the realm of autobiographical, confessional performance art, the subject has greater control over the representation of her or himself. This might also distinguish it from the gamut of currently available mass-mediated confessional opportunities. The word 'representation' is also important here. Within the frame of live *performance*, it is difficult to confuse the *represented* with any realm of the 'real'.

The histories of performance art and autobiographical, confessional performances are, from the outset, linked. During the early 1970s, women, particularly in the USA, turned to performance art as a means of attaining some control over representations of themselves. Placed within the context of the second-wave feminist movement, most particularly consciousness-raising activities, performance art (a relatively new practice, and therefore one without a dominant male genealogy) became a means by which women could both explore and represent hidden aspects of their everyday lives. Performance art enabled women to make visible that which had been forbidden, denied, or erased within the dominant art movements. Such a turn to the everyday frequently involved the confession of personal details.

The attraction of personal material within performance art has remained constant, perhaps unsurprising given the contemporary cultural appetite to both confess and consume confession. I would argue, however, that autobiographical, confessional performances often attempt to position themselves as 'resistant' acts within this flow,

with Baker's work just one example of such 'counter' activity. What is surprising, however, given this continuing (and in fact increasing) performance practice, is the dearth of critical analysis that accompanies it. Commentary, where it does exist, is often little more than unsubstantiated generalisation:

The dangers in autobiographical art are legion: solipsisms that interest an audience of one.

(Weisberg (1980) 1997: 107)

Performance art is famously resistant to dealing with the outside world; its politics, when present at all, not only spring from autobiographical impulses but remain limited by them. Constricted themes, narrow skills, and inflated, needy egos plague this kind of theater.

(Munk (1988) 1997, 135)

The temptation of autobiography is to shrink the complex social and historical determinants of personal history into a singular and singularly unproblematized wrapper of identity. This impoverished site is vulnerable to the imputation that a politics whose only sure referent is the self is hardly a politics at all [...]

(Larsen, 1995, 31)

[...] It is as often an ego show as a revelation; the virus of the "I – Did – It – My – Way/I – Gotta – Be – Me" strain afflicts the larger number of such acts, particularly in the performance art area which presents amateurish staging techniques and mini-personalities as often as original methods and subjects.

(Howell, 1979/80, 158)

Solo performance is, of course a field rife with self-indulgence and incipient monumental egotism, and I have sat through as many shows demonstrating this as anyone – typically performed by frustrated and mediocre New York actors trying to jump-start their me-machines with sitcom-shallow autobiographical monologues.

(Kalb 2000:14)

Against the backdrop of such ‘critique’, Bobby Baker’s fears, admitted in her performance *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience*, appear to be justified:

I got very worried because I read a review in *The Guardian*, of course, about the Edinburgh Festival. There was some heavy criticism about all these shows by aspiring artists which smacked of the confessional box, and I blushed. This is just what I was about to do.

(Baker: 1988)²

Given the historical link between women and autobiographical, confessional performance, it might not be too cynical to suggest that such critical responses belie deeper prejudices. Irene Gammel, considering the ‘danger’ of confessional forms for women, writes that

the female voice relating personal experience, like the sinner’s and the patient’s, belongs not to the realm of abstract and official *langue* but to *parole*,

to familiar and intimate speech, and is thus characterized by a low degree of formality and authority, as it is perceived as ephemeral or trivial. Even when entering a more authorized form, [...] the confessional mode is dismissed as “raw,” “narcissistic,” and “unformed.” [...] A history of confessional readings has created the perception of women obsessively confessing their secrets, reinforcing stereotypes of the female psyche as fragmented and, what is perhaps even worse, as “needy.”

(Gammel 1999: 4)

The confession is considered a ‘feminized space’, and in a social world in which the ‘feminine’ continues to signify negatively, it is accordingly routinely devalued. The confessional performance, then, carries within it multiple risks for the female performer. It also, however, carries within it potential. If, as Foucault suggests, the confessional is a technique through which ‘truth’ is both produced and maintained, then the very operation of the confessional mode affords the opportunity for counter-discursive stories, the forging of other truths, other possible lives. As avenues for confession have multiplied, is it possible that so too have the stories that are being confessed? Equally, is it not also possible to play with the mode of confession, acknowledging its role in the construction of truth? ‘Truth telling’ is the very condition upon which the confession rests. As Jessie Givner states, ‘the very etymological traces of the word confession (confessus, meaning “incontrovertible, certain, beyond doubt”) suggest that absolute truth is the basis of the ritual’ (Givner 1999: 126). But where is the ‘truth’ of confession inscribed other than in a convincing performance? And what if the confession were performed differently? Rather than assuming or subscribing to the ‘truth’ that confession reveals, one might deliberately

use the confession to challenge that foundational assumption, making what Irene Gammel terms ‘confessional interventions’ (see Gammel1999). As I aim to show, Bobby Baker strategically deploys multiple interventions as she exploits the confessional apparatus.

Bobby Baker has been creating and touring performance and installation works internationally for over twenty-five years. Her pieces share two important features – to varying degrees they all incorporate household products (often food) as artistic material, and they all focus on aspects of the quotidian.³ Though Baker trained in fine art at St. Martin’s College of Art, she found herself unable to communicate her ideas through paint, ‘because it had been appropriated in other ways by other voices, particularly the male voice’ (Baker 2001). Baker instead found her own language in food (Tushingham 1994), and in 1972 she made her first cake – a carved and iced baseball bat: ‘When I thought of carrying it into college, as a sculpture, sitting on my grandmother’s cake plate, it was as if the heavens opened and light fell on it – it was so funny and rebellious’ (Warner1998: 74).

Her turn to live performance was equally borne out of frustration. Baker had used food as sculptural material, and had on occasion placed herself within such sculptures, as an object, but ‘it became obvious that I couldn’t get across the range of ideas that I had connected with the pieces that I had made’ (Oddey 1999: 268). Baker’s ‘ideas’ came from her own interests or experience. As a young artist she made the decision that she would ‘examine things from the inside out’ (Tushingham 1994: 31), having an intuitive sense that ‘rather than stepping outside and presenting a third person view of life, I would work from myself’ (Baker 2001). This subjective engagement led

Baker to focus on the details of her everyday life – the daily events, rituals, and actions that are so often unacknowledged. For Baker, even the minutiae of daily existence have their place within the social world, and as such matter. Only ‘by examining the small and personal and day to day does [one] get a chance to change things. Unless you address those details you can have no wider change’ (ibid.). While all of Baker’s work comes from this consciously subjective perspective, some of it is more directly confessional than others in its revelation of aspects from her own life, including the two pieces of work discussed here, *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* (1988) and *Box Story* (2001).

In 1976, at the same time that Baker made her first public art work, *An Edible Family in a Mobile Home*, Foucault pronounced that Western man had ‘become a confessing animal’ (Foucault 1990: 59). If we were already confessing animals in the 1970s, Foucault’s statement begs us to consider what we are now. The number of confessional spaces available for occupancy in the mass media, and the sheer quantity of confessions elicited, is phenomenal. The embracing of opportunities enabled by digital technology, including weblogs, webpages and live webcams, reveals that our fascination with confession is far from abating.

Jon Dovey, in his survey of various instances of ‘first person’ media, by which he is predominantly referring to television, offers the conclusion that the proliferation of publicly mediated individual, subjective experiences operates as a ‘new regime of truth’ (Dovey 2000: 25). The subjective experience becomes the ‘guarantor of knowledge’ (23), and the offering up of intimate detail ‘has come to signify authenticity’ (ibid). Dovey reads these mass-mediated confessional instances as

moments of production of 'normative identities' and 'coherent subjects'. In the docusoap, for example, characters are fixed in time – they do not change or develop, nor do they display contradictions or ambiguities. As Dovey comments, 'they are cast for a particular set of two-dimensional qualities', with the confessional moments themselves determined by 'the overarching narrative drive' (152). Anything that would contradict, or unsettle the 'character representation' remains unshown (150). The world in such docusoaps is accepted as it is given and there is no notion of reality as 'social, contested, constructed' (ibid).

Dovey does admit that the huge variety of places in which one can now confess, combined with the different types of self-speaking that are available, makes it impossible to 'contain [such moments] within a single concept of "the confessional"' (113). It is also my opinion that context remains imperative; place and mode may make all the difference. While in the mass-media there are increased spaces in which to offer up confessions, there are 'very few spaces [...] for an autobiographical mode in which the author of the representation is also its subject' (110). It is worth remembering that in autobiographical performance art, by contrast, the author and the subject are more typically the same. As such, the 'author' potentially has far more control over the subject of representation. Moreover, such control over the construction of work is often combined with an awareness of the relationship between performance and the construction of the performed self. Given the context of the performance of autobiographical confession, one might also assume a matched 'knowingness' on the part of the spectator; seeing is not necessarily believing and witnesses of performance art are rarely asked to suspend their disbelief.

How does Bobby Baker stand up beside Dovey's confessing subjects -- those who are claimed to be in the business of shoring up coherent identities through their confessional addresses? Who is the Bobby Baker that is produced in these works, and what is her identity? Attempting to provide answers to these questions is surprisingly difficult, and that struggle is one sign of Baker's resistant mode of confession. Her unravelling identity is one means by which she resists becoming the confessing subject, even as she appears to be confessing.⁴

The various stories that Baker shares in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* and *Box Story*, are all drawn from the life of Bobby Baker, and the person who performs these stories is Bobby Baker, so in classic autobiographical form, the 'writing' subject is also the subject of the story -- subject and object are one. In *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, the subject matter of the performance, as suggested by its title, is Baker's own experience of becoming a mother. This piece was the first work Baker made following a break of eight years, during which time she had two children. In the performance, she not only metaphorically draws on her experience of mothering, but literally makes a drawing out of those, applying various foodstuffs to a Persil-white sheet, somewhat mimicking (or at least quoting) Jackson Pollock's action paintings. Over the course of the performance, the white sheet becomes transformed by the addition of fish pies, imprints of roast beef, dribbles of milk, spillages of Guinness, and a splattering of cake mix, to name just a few of Baker's 'artistic materials'.

Baker's stated embarrassment regarding the confessional nature of her performance reveals a self-reflexive mode of practice, further evidenced by her direct acknowledgement, within the piece, of its autobiographical status:

I'm afraid something else I must point out [...] is that this is slightly autobiographical. Totally autobiographical, and I mean that, and I thought that was all right because I felt I needed to get something off my – out of my system you might say.

(Baker 1988)

Her claiming of the autobiographical act has a deliberate uncertainty within it – is this performance *slightly* or *totally* autobiographical? Whilst the subject matter of the performance is drawn from Baker's own life, and Baker performs this, there is a layer of complexity missing from my rendering of the subject-object equation. Between the Baker who performs, and the stories being performed, there are at least two other Bakers: the Baker who is performed and the non-performing Baker.⁵ (The last of these Bakers will remain outside of this discussion.)

In each performance there is what is best described as a *persona*, and it is this persona that Bobby Baker, the performer, performs. In the construction of her performed 'self', Baker self-consciously observes herself, and with the security of some distance, is able, in a theatrically 'knowing' way, to make fun of what she sees (Baker 2001). Her very process, then, admits to the gap between who she is outside of performance, and who she plays: 'I step on stage, I start performing, I become something else' (ibid). Of course, the moment anyone is on stage, they arguably become something else. However, Baker also admits to 'sort of develop[ing] that persona' (ibid), or developing a style of presentation.⁶

Complicating matters, this persona is presented *as* Bobby Baker. Whose stories are these, then, that are being shared with us – Bobby Baker the performing subject’s, or Bobby Baker the performed subject’s? Who – if anyone – is confessing here? And if the Bobby Baker who offers up these stories is a persona, how referential or stable or truthful can these confessions be presumed to be? For Baker’s confessing subject to trouble the act of confession, the presence of this persona must be evident and in fact the same persona appears in all of Baker’s performances, although the ‘eruptions’ that she/Baker stages are different. This endurance of her persona, from show to show, is one of the means by which the persona becomes easily readable.

Informing Baker’s persona is her ‘trademark’ costume, which up to *Box Story* has been a white, just-above-knee length overall, as might be worn by a cookery demonstrator or home economics teacher. The white overall might also refer to the professional ‘authority’ figure, such as a doctor or a scientist, adding to the humour of the piece. Baker is extremely ‘authoritative’ with regards to her ‘advice’ and ‘instructions’ on ‘being a good mother’. The image is largely that of ‘sensible’, ‘responsible’ and ‘professional’. (Tellingly, in *Box Story* Baker’s overall is blue, like the blue typically depicted on the Virgin Mary’s robe.) Baker also has a number of character ‘traits’ that signify her status as a character, in that they are immediately recognisable as ‘stock’ mannerisms, and taken together represent a (stereo)type – middle-class (and in the late 1990s, as she deliberately foregrounds, ‘middle-aged’), female. Such mannerisms include ‘thriftiness’, ecological awareness, domestic skill, embarrassment, self-punishment, self-deprecation, continuous apologising, and chaotic activity. The parodic display of the good housekeeper/wife in *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* is most blatantly inscribed in the repetitive manner in which

Baker cleans up after her every action, and references that fact as she does so. She repeats, for example, the refrain: 'Clear up as I go along', 'So let's just clear this up'. As she lays a protective plastic sheet on the floor, Baker advises us that:

This is to avoid mess. Extra mess. Because one discovers quite early on, as an intelligent mother, that if you think ahead, you can save yourself a lot of work.

(Baker 1988)

Appropriate to this image, Baker also repeatedly references and uses a 'damp J-cloth'. A similarly instructive gesture is the habitual avoidance of embarrassing subjects, including giving birth, breast feeding and the more euphemistic 'women's problems', all of which Baker's glides over: 'I don't want to embarrass you too much with sort of nasty details about childbirth', 'I had – women's trouble –', 'We'll move on quickly'.

Reading the signs of Baker's persona, it is evident that in her performance of herself (and she *is* a middle-class mother of two), Baker performs an exaggerated, cultural (rather than strictly personal) version. The Bobby Baker that we see performed is one whom, through repeated cultural circulation, we 'know', but who in all probability does not actually exist.

There is, admittedly, a danger in playing this role of the parodic mother/housewife, for there is no guarantee that the spectator will recognise it as parody. However, the presence of multiple layers of activity and representation in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* might minimise any threat of reinscription of Baker as a subjected mother/housewife. Whilst Baker at times does perform a passive, apologetic mother,

other 'identities' and attitudes puncture that representation. Baker can be self-deprecating and authoritative; controlled and unpredictable; respectable and outrageous; revelatory and secretive; logical and intuitive. In effect, the culturally inscribed image of the 'housewife/mother' is simultaneously undermined by that character, as one prescribed image of 'Bobby Baker' – neat, tidy, clean, calm, organised, resourceful and self-effacing – clashes with other, more challenging images. Evidently, the most disruptive aspect of *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* is Baker's inappropriate use of food. Whilst the food might signify and reference domesticity, Baker's actual use of it – throwing it around, creating a mess, rolling herself up in it, making art from it –simultaneously undercuts this. Baker's use of the food places both it and her outside of prescribed cultural contexts. As Lucy Baldwin writes:

Apparently acquiescing to the repressive stereotypes proliferated within misogynistic culture – by identifying herself as a mother/housewife and discussing shopping and cooking – [Baker] simultaneously undermines them by contravening their limits.

(Baldwyn 1996: 37)

It could of course be argued that the Baker who resists the cultural position of the passive housewife/mother is the performer, Baker, and not the housewife/mother, Baker. However, such a separation of the two Bobbys is not straightforward. For it is also the neat, tidy, clean, calm, organised, resourceful and self-effacing persona of the start of the show that then proceeds to splatter food onto the white sheet, that bursts tinned, stewed blackcurrants by dancing on them in her bare feet, that rolls herself up

into the sheet like a ‘human Swiss roll’, or as one who is ‘mummified’. This is not to deny that there are troubling moments when we might determine two Bobbys. The performed Baker may present herself as apologetic, passive, or self-deprecating, but the reality is that Baker is actually a woman with enough confidence to deliver a full-length solo show. Whilst it might appear to us that the performed Baker is chaotic and not really in control of what she is doing, Baker the performer is evidently a skilled artist. At such moments, there is an incongruity between the performer and the performed. It is these uncertainties regarding which Baker is being represented that run throughout the entire performance, and arguably they are deliberate.

The identity so far constructed in Baker’s stage work appears far removed from Dovey’s first person mediated identity, and as such seems something of a rhetorical strategy that both works with and resists the confessional apparatus. Confronted by Bobby Baker playing Bobby Baker, I have no idea who Bobby Baker is. Moreover, it would be more accurate to refer to the *identities* constructed here, since there is no single, cohesive subject being represented. Aside from the doubling of Baker (performer and performed), there is also a multiplicity within the parodic representation, as the representations of Baker shift, and each version competes with other versions. These contradictions and ambiguities are crucially important devices in undercutting the stereotypical representation and suggesting the inherent complexity of subjectivity, of ‘being’ a person. If the confession is an apparatus through which identity is produced, Baker uses this to her advantage to construct an identity that is multiple, complex, and perhaps ultimately unknowable. As Gerry Harris writes, in relation to another of Baker’s performances, *How to Shop* (1993),

Baker performs a subjectivity which is at the same time not Bobby Baker and not not Bobby Baker, both a hyperbolic, theatrical character and the “real thing,” an ideological construct and a situated historical object, both entirely socially constructed and unique.

(Harris 1999: 137)

For Harris, this ‘doubled’ positioning results in a ‘hiatus in iterability’ – a moment of unintelligibility or unreadability (of both the performance and the performer), producing a moment and space of agency for Baker. Such ‘unreadability’ necessarily affects the status and effect of this supposed confession.

Alongside her constructed persona, Baker employs other strategies that may use the confessional apparatus differently. Her work self-consciously acknowledges the contemporary appetite for consuming others’ lives, through what might be referred to as modes of refusal. First, to what, precisely, is Baker confessing? Dealing with the everyday, her confessions are also of the quotidian – for example, she reveals that after giving birth (and in fact she reveals very little *about* giving birth: ‘moving swiftly along’) her own mother provides her with nourishment, in the form of fish pies. In many ways, then, Baker’s so-called confessions confess very little, or very little that is deeply personal.⁷ This is a clever strategy. Her performances appear to offer insights into her personal, private life, and yet, in fact, such offers are withheld. Those moments which might be more revealing, more painful, more private, are rushed over, denied, as she moves us quickly along to the next section – away from childbirth, illness, depression. In this sense, Baker frustrates our desire to know, to own, her life. Similarly, Baker denies the spectator final consumption by holding

something back, keeping her own secrets. The final food material that Baker uses to complete her action painting is white flour, sifted over the entire sheet, effectively 'blotting' out all the imprints, or graphic testimonies, that she has previously made. The referent of this white flour is only hinted at.

There is one more thing which I find it very difficult to talk about but it is important and that's an element of my life, of life, that is sort of like a, sort of peaceful and happy, and it's sort of symbolized by white light.

(Baker 1988)

Tim Etchells captures the feeling well when he reflects that Baker 'builds up to this moment where you feel she's going to "tell you everything" and then she refuses [...] and I'm left wondering what it was that she might have said' (Etchells 1999: 79). I too am left wondering. Thinking. But I am also engaged in my own acts of 'making things up'. Baker's 'secrets' are not only moments of refusal, moments of 'privacy in public' (ibid); they also perform spaces in which I, in the role of spectator -- even confessor -- can bring myself into (the) 'play' as I fill in her gaps with my own stories.⁸

It is moments such as these that stage interventions into the 'confessional mode'. Just as the blur between the real Bobby Baker and her performed self makes it impossible to ever 'know' Baker, or know who is the subject of the confession (perhaps then disrupting Phillippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical contract' (Lejeune 1989: 5)), her strategy of keeping secrets similarly acknowledges and refuses the voyeuristic gaze. In 'her' place, we see ourselves. Again, then, who is confessing here? On the one

hand, it would seem that Baker uses the confession, but at the same time she refuses to confess appropriately, strategically encoding 'significant distances, disruptions, and warnings' (Gammell 1999: 11).

Whilst we may not be certain who the subject of confession is in *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, we are in no doubt as to what the subject of confession is. Baker's confessed experiences of motherhood do not so much 'show' or produce a coherent representation of 'the mother/Baker', or even of 'mothering', as reveal the discursive forces that have resulted in certain experiences – not least the experience of transforming (or having to transform) the everyday materials of the domestic sphere into objects of aesthetic beauty. The questions that surface during Baker's acts of confession (confessions of anger, of depression, of coping mechanisms) are why these experiences should be experienced *in this way* and what alternative experiences might it be possible to imagine, to will? Her acts of self-revelation become, in actuality, acts of social-revelation. In contrast to Dovey's conclusions regarding mass mediated first person narratives, in Baker's work the world is not just given. Instead, it is a world that we are demanded to engage with, and to witness. Baker's 'social confession' is made possible by her confessing to her inability to live up to cultural expectations. As Sidonie Smith writes of the female autobiographer,

writing her experiential history of the body, the autobiographical subject engages in a process of critical self-consciousness through which she comes to an awareness of the relationship of her specific body to the cultural 'body' and to the body politic.

(Smith 1993: 131)

Baker's recent performance, *Box Story* (2001), invites a more explicit reckoning with confession, sited as it originally was in her own local Church in London. This embracing of religious iconography is not a new departure. In *Kitchen Show*, Baker confessed to a daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer. In *How to Shop*, she takes John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a sur-text, though her own 'quest' is tied to "shopping for life" or "shopping for enlightenment" (Harris 1999: 113).

In her illuminating essay on Baker, Marina Warner claims that the 'principles and disciplines' of Baker's Christian faith remain 'intrinsic to her pieces' (Warner 1998: 79). One principle of this Protestant faith, writ in the resurrection of Christ, is the demand 'that sacrifice take place before rebirth and renewal can happen' (ibid). For Warner, Baker 'uses the idea of suffering and humiliation as a resource' (ibid). Baker's very public suffering and humiliation perhaps can be linked to the pre-oral confession of sins, by way of the act of *exomologēsis*, 'recognition of fact', which is linked to penance. As Foucault writes, penance was 'not nominal but dramatic. [...] Symbolic, ritual, and theatrical' (Foucault 1988: 43 – 44). The exhibition of sin is the punishment, as well as an act of self-revelation: 'To prove suffering, to show shame, to make visible humility and exhibit modesty – these are the main features of punishment' (ibid, 42).

Warner also reveals that Baker's father was a Methodist, and that the performer herself went to a Methodist school; also, on 'her mother's side there are "strings of vicars"' (Warner 1998: 79). Though Baker is not herself a practising Methodist, there are nonetheless reverberations between *Box Story* and certain aspects of Methodism.

For Methodists, as for Puritans, ‘man’ is born in original sin (and presumably one needs this sin in order to attain everlasting peace through forgiveness), but faith in Christ assures salvation. The experience of this new found faith results in the ‘birth’ of a new person. As one ‘reborn’ Methodist woman significantly reported, ‘I found myself quite another’ (Abelove 1999: 89).

Whilst Methodism is open to anyone, Abelove comments that historically ‘once admitted, members were expected to make some kind of *public relation* of their spiritual experiences at least once a week’ (Abelove 1999: 94, emphasis mine). Such self-expression might include self-criticism and self-scrutiny. At meetings, turns were taken to describe experiences and feelings, hopes, successes, and failures. An account from 1833 of one of these meetings is notable in relation to its evident theatricality. Writing of the way in which one speaker would present his experience in the form of a prayer, the writer records that, ‘when he got his heart warm, he would continue his prayer for 15 or 20 minutes; and thereby prevented others from *exercising their talents*’ (cited in Abelove 1999: 105, emphasis mine). This explicit theatricality appears to have been recognised by the Methodists themselves since they sometimes, rented empty theatres as preaching houses. Though these buildings were used as a matter of necessity (they were available), the fact that these theatres provided the appropriate environmental conditions for ‘preaching’ is nevertheless notable. (See Abelove 1999: 106).

Methodist practice of self-scrutiny and public revelation – or confession – sits firmly within the Christian tradition. As Foucault notes,

Christianity is not only a salvation religion, it's a confessional religion. [...] Christianity requires another form of truth obligation different from faith. Each person has the duty to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself. The truth obligations of faith and the self are linked together. This link permits a purification of the soul impossible without self-knowledge.

(Foucault 1988: 40)

Of course, this search for and disclosure of 'self', publicly or privately, carries with it an assumption of sin or guilt, accompanied accordingly by shame. Without guilt and shame, there is no contrition, and without contrition, there can be no forgiveness or absolution. Another shared feature of the confession, irrespective of its institutional location, is that it is generally considered to unburden, to cleanse, to release or lighten. As Peter Brooks writes, 'from Saint Augustine onwards, writers of personal confessions have claimed the need to expose their state of sin and error in order [to] regain the path of righteousness' (Peter Brooks 2000: 72 – 73). This purported 'effect' of confession can be found in the realm of the contemporary legal confession.

In this context, Brooks notes that 'Confession of misdeeds has become part of the everyday pedagogy of Western societies, normally with the understanding that recalcitrance in confession will aggravate punishment, while full confession will both cleanse the soul and provide possible mitigation of sanctions' (ibid, 45). Brooks also suggests that whilst it is generally thought that confession admits guilt, in actual fact it

might be the very act of confessing that produces guilt in the confessant (to use the religious term), rather than any action – or referent – outside of the confession. The confession, then, performs guilt. Thinking about Baker’s literal performance, I want to propose that the confession might also contain within it the possibility of performing innocence. Just as Baker uses the confessional apparatus to construct multiple identities, and to make uncertain the ‘truth’ status of both ‘herself’ and her stories, might Baker use the confession as a way to acknowledge that feelings of guilt are sometimes unfounded? Further, I will argue that it is the opportunity afforded by confession to create stories that has a liberating effect, rather than any admission of sin.

Box Story begins with Baker entering her church carrying an enormous cardboard box that she then empties at the altar. From this large box fall ten smaller boxes, including a box of cornflakes, a box of matches, a packet of washing powder and a tin of mustard powder. As in *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience*, Baker’s artistic materials are ‘domestic’ and ‘familiar’. During the performance, Baker will create a world in 10 actions, telling a story and then using the contents from each of the smaller boxes as illustration. As she tips the contents directly onto the floor, Baker builds up a graphic image of a world – the planet Earth – beset by disasters of global proportion (the Methodist’s apocalypse perhaps).

Each of Baker’s confessions documents a sorry tale, for which Baker claims agency. The final story is of Baker trying to do a good turn for the benefit of her son, who is upset. They are in her car, and in an endeavour to cheer him up, she attempts to play a cassette tape. Momentarily distracted, she inadvertently causes three cars, including

her own, to crash. At this point in her life story Baker claims responsibility for everything.

It's all my fault. Everything is all my fault.

This claiming of ultimate blame resonates with the 'performance' of Catholic confession: 'Through my fault, through my most grievous fault'.⁹ Within the context of Baker's vision of cataclysmic disasters and her sense of guilt in relation to these, *Box Story* importantly alludes to the myth of Pandora. Pandora, disobeying specific instruction, opened a box, thereby releasing its contents into the world, including diseases, sorrows, vices and crimes. Before this time, no-one on earth had even experienced pain. Pandora, like Eve then, (and, it would seem, like Bobby), is to blame for everything. It is all her/their fault (if the pervasive cultural myths are to be believed and internalised).

After claiming ultimate responsibility, Baker sweeps up her stories, depositing them back into the large box. She then climbs into the box after them, but with cunning use of a hand saw, cuts out holes in the box for her head, arms and legs, so that she can stand up in it, wearing the box in a way that resembles a crucifixion. Baker appears to rise again from the coffin-like box. In accordance with general notions of the confession, it does indeed seem as if by admitting her guilt, she has now achieved redemption, or absolution, and that her act of confessing appears to afford her some liberation, or re-birth. There is little about this that is 'resistant'.

But what of her confessions? Again, these are largely confessions of the everyday, and more importantly, they are confessions of the accidental, the mistake: the breaking of inherited heirlooms, the bad haircut, the over indulgence in sugar resulting in rotting teeth. The event which leads Baker to the final claiming of blame – that everything is all her fault – arises because she was simply attempting to cheer up her son. ‘Judging’ the stories that Baker has shared (and as spectators our role here is arguably that of confessor) it is apparent that she has nothing to feel guilty about, that she is not to blame, that things do just happen, and that it is no-one’s fault (particularly in the case of her father’s drowning during a family holiday, when she was 15). Could Baker’s ‘rising up’ be her transcending unfounded guilt (a guilt women too often unconsciously carry)?¹⁰ In respect of the content of her confessions, and in contradiction to her final statement, it is possible that Baker uses the confession as a ‘quest for innocence’ (Peter Brooks 2000: 165), and that *Box Story* performs this innocence, rather than guilt.

In the closing moments of the performance, still wearing the large cardboard box, Baker dances out of the space taking her swept-up confessions with her. As in *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience*, in *Box Story*, Baker, in spite of it all, has come through. But what needs to be remembered here is that the confessions that Baker shares are both carefully moulded, and then told and retold, first in rehearsal and then in performance. Though there is similarity here to the deliberate crafting of the written confession, and its desired effect, the fact that Baker’s confessions are live (and ephemeral), renders them always available to be re-enacted, enabling a continual rewriting, or revising, of the confession.¹¹ (For example, Baker has been confessing in *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* for some fifteen years, and over 200 times.) The

‘unburdening’ that is supposedly enabled by confession might have less to do with admitting guilt (and being absolved), than with the opportunity that confession provides to craft a tale – to deliberately select, order, edit, and perform. In confessional performance, the act of telling is most often an act of retelling, and it might be this that pulls Baker through at the end.

Of course, the belief that equates ‘confession’ with ‘well-being’ is found in non-religious contexts, such as psychoanalysis and other forms of counselling. In his seminar, ‘Technologies of the Self’, Foucault traces such ‘technologies’ in ‘pagan and early Christian practice’ (Foucault 1988: 17). In both instances, Foucault contends that the focus was not on ‘knowing oneself’, but ‘taking care of yourself’. Such ‘taking care of oneself’, within a Pagan context, might include ‘writing activity’ (27), guidance by a master, silence, retreating into oneself, examination and review of conscience (based on ‘stock taking’ rather than on judgement and/or punishment). What is fundamental for Foucault is that the Pagans’ activities were pragmatic, focused on finding appropriate methods for self-care, whereas he perceives psychoanalysis as appropriating (ancient) methods in order to unearth some ‘truth’ about the self (which will then lead to ‘well being’).

Baker, although admitting that her views may be unpopular, has stated that she sees ‘the making of art ultimately as therapy [...]’. Not wishing to pathologize art making, she clarifies

that it’s just the process that people adopt to *respond to life*. [...] An element of what I’m doing is sort of like going to a therapist, but I choose an audience.

(Baker 2001; emphasis mine).

Baker's act of confession – or perhaps *craft* of confession is more appropriate, given the evident awareness and skill with which she practices it – may be, as she states, simply the act of '*making* stories up to *make* sense of the world' (Baker 2001; emphasis mine). Such stories are intended to neither provide a truth about the world, nor about the person who tells the story. They are merely one pragmatic *response* to the actual lived, messy, experiences of life: experiences that include, in this instance, such nonrationalisable tragedies as a parent being swept out to sea and drowning. Baker's confessions are, first and last, as her title acknowledges, stories. The private confessional box is knowingly reconfigured here as a story box. Returning to that other story that continuously ghosts Baker's, it is worth remembering that what is left in Pandora's box at the end is Hope. And perhaps it is hope that Baker is, finally, offering us. I use the plural pronoun deliberately. One marked difference between the witnessed live performance and the read written text is that the former is experienced 'collectively', whereas the latter is more typically a private event. Though each spectator undoubtedly has their own individual experience, engaging with the performance in variable and unpredictable ways, the experience of spectatorship is shared. Baker has worried that her performances might be considered 'self-indulgent' (Baker 2001). However, capturing the paradoxical dialogic property adhering to this supposedly 'monologic' form, Baker reflects that the

audience actually don't come away from the show very often talking about my life [...] They actually relate to it as people, they've had that experience, or similar experiences. [...] I heard some sort of fantastic stories about people

leaving the show and then standing on the pavement for a long time telling each other stories (Baker 2001).

The environment of performance then, its dependency on its audience, on its witnesses, in shared time and space, encourages the production of other confessions, the telling of other potential 'unburdenings'.

Post-Script

And yet, and yet... The ending, my ending, to this story, is too neat. Too easy. Too convenient. For this story has not, of course, reached its conclusion. The life, and the performance, continue. So let me 'end' here by resisting an ending, and offering instead two potentially contradictory possibilities:

1. In suggesting that it is the performing of her stories that has pulled Baker through I am in danger of forgetting that she is also performing that moment of coming through. In reality, Baker may feel far from dancing out of the church. (But the show must go on.) When asked about the extent to which making autobiographical works had affected her actual life trajectory, in wondering about the degree to which the process did not only take from the life lived, but perhaps impacted on the life yet to be lived, Baker admitted to 'a sneaking suspicion that it's sent me on a trajectory spiralling towards madness in a sense' (Baker 2001). During my own act of considering confessional performance as a mode of pragmatic therapy, I am confronted by its limitations, as I learn that the body of Spalding Gray has been found in the River Hudson (March 2004). Though the cause of death remains under investigation, it is

common knowledge that Gray had attempted suicide on previous occasions. Spalding Gray, like Baker, had been publicly confessing his life since the 1980s.¹²

2. After completing this Chapter, I learn that Baker's latest project, which will premiere at the end of 2004, is called *How to Live*. According to the publicity, this project will 'challenge perceptions of mental health and the whole notion of "ordered/disordered" behaviour'. I catch myself smiling when I read that Baker is creating a 'whole new "therapy"' that is 'focused on the examination and transformation of the self' (Baker 2004).

¹. This research has been supported by the AHRB, and develops work first published in *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, 'Performing the Self', Volume 5, Issue 5, October 2002. <<http://www.media-culture.org.au/0210/Heddon/html>> Earlier versions of this chapter have also been presented at Edge Hill University Symposium on Autobiography, Exeter University Feminist Research Network, and Colloque "Confessions", Université de Provence. Thanks to all who offered useful critical responses to these earlier thoughts.

². All citations of Baker's performances are transcripts taken from documentary video recordings.

³. Performances include: *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), *Cook Dems* (1990), *Kitchen Show* (1991), *How to Shop* (1993), *Take a Peek!* (1995), *Spitting Mad*, *Table Occasions*, *Box Story* (2001).

⁴. In fact, Baker's original name was Lindsey but when she was little she wanted to be a boy, so changed it to Bobby, and her adopted name stuck. Already, then, Bobby Baker is not quite Bobby Baker. (See Warner, 1998, 83 – 84).

⁵. Of course, arguably everyone is always performing and I do not wish to here suggest here the presence of any 'essential' core.

⁶. Baker works with director Polona Baloh Brown.

⁷. Thanks to Rachel Jury for discussing this so eloquently with me.

⁸. Thanks to Elaine Aston for drawing my attention to the relationship between the spectator's stories and Baker's secrets.

⁹. I am grateful to the reviewer for pointing this out to me. Of course, confessions within the Catholic faith are now largely conducted in private. The actual institution of the oral confession dates back to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Canon 21 of Lateran IV, makes confession to one's parish priest an annual obligation. The Council of Trent introduced the "black box" only in the sixteenth century.

¹⁰. As I write this, I am reminded of how often I apologise for bad weather, for delayed trains, for events over which I have neither control nor personal responsibility.¹¹ Baker's performance scripts are unpublished. However, documentational video recordings of her performances exist. Watching a video recording of a performance from ten years previously, and comparing it with a more recent performance of the same show, does enable one to see the 'rewriting' process. This perhaps bears similarity to the confession which has been scribbled over or revised. Earlier versions remain legible.

¹² Gray's staged performances include *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, *Booze, Cars and College Girls*, *Swimming to Cambodia*, *Monster in a Box*, and *Gray's Anatomy*. The majority of these have also been published, and some are available on video and DVD.

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