

Sheffield Hallam University

Stealing Voices

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This presentation takes the form of an email exchange between Terry O'Connor of Forced Entertainment Theatre Co-operative and I.

1.

Dear Terry

Yesterday we talked about presenting some kind of dialogue between us for the conference. In anticipation, I thought I'd send you some images of my work as way to start things off.

Just click on the attached images of my drawings. All of these are pencil drawings that are size-for-size copies of the originals.

Book (Art History) is from a series of drawings taken from details of Leonardo's work found in books for a series contemplating our relationship to art history. For another recent piece I copied all of the pages from a Borges short story, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, a story that is itself about copying and authorship.

Lost in Space was taken from some material in the online NASA archive. It is a script for Nixon to speak in the event of a disaster during the Apollo 13 mission. Part of the script is to be spoken at the funeral of the astronauts. The text seems to imagine a future that didn't take place, or –maybe- a present that is volatile. The future is there in the script, looking back at us, almost oracular. What is strange is the fiction, both the fiction of history as we know it and the imagined history that didn't happen.

Let me know what you are thinking...

Love

Penny xx

1min 20 secs

2.

Dear Penny,

Cue Terry's images....

There is an original to this mail too. It started as a scrap of notes written from inside Forced Entertainment's recent performance of *Quizoola* in Norwich. For the last two hours of the six-hour performance, I'm sat at a desk watching people come and go. It's a marathon game of written questions and improvised, provisional answers. My shift at asking and answering is over, in smudged and sweaty clown make-up, still to the eye a figure in a fiction, I am free if not to move then to think and write to you.

The voices of my colleagues drift down the corridor. You know these voices well.

'Where did you learn to speak that way?' shouts Cathy to Tim

I can't hear Tim's answers; they reach me as a broken and inaudible murmur. I started to wonder, thinking about this dialogue of ours, about the way in which the active summoning of voice functions as a confirmation of friendship. Specifically, I suppose, I've been think about the way in which your voice is often in my head, as a memory sometimes, repeating something you've actually said, but at other times as a kind of landmark for a tone or position outside the bit of me I think of as me, a voice I can summon for help, or for pleasure, often in the course of thinking about work and making. We've talked about this, distinct internal voices on a spectrum; from the deliberately, leisurely, or playfully summoned.... to the unwanted auditory hallucination that has accompanied us at times of particular duress. The psyche may fragment into different voices for self-protection, but also in a more everyday register for the playful advancing of a position or trajectory, in the quivering and wavering of thought.

My work as a fellow at Roehampton is centred on the explicit teasing of relationships between conversation and practice in contemporary performance and live art. It's an area I don't seem to get away from. I have worked collaboratively, with Forced Entertainment for 25 years, The starting point for our work seems to slip out of a conversational exchange in a way that makes it no one person's intellectual property. The ethics and elusiveness of this way of working intrigue me; the inferences of this politics of art making. Not least for the way the process mirrors a kind of exchange and flow, that occurs and counts outside of art, a kind of becoming through conversation; the unfolding and revealing of the present, the wavering of being.

Maybe we could think of this dialogue as a sketch, a series of pencil lines between us, trying to capture in some urgent, unfinished way the shape of an idea; something between the transmission of voice and the transmission of drawing, breath and vocal chords, eyes and hands and pencils, all trying, all wavering, all impulse and reaction, all trying to emerge, (by way of some original object), making, in the present.

3 mins 18 secs

3.

Dear Terry

Sorry you have had such a long wait for my response.

I have spent more time looking out across the street towards your house than sitting at my laptop writing to you. This is a setting you know well. It is grey and rainy and early in the morning. I don't often see the world like this in its Sunday torpor. In the house, time seems to have a thickness, an opacity, moving slower over the day. My room is silent and lacking in

structured activity, while outside is an on-going story, plot-filled and relentless. I can hear birds and occasional voices. The voices are a cut-up of broken dialogues. A mother patiently explaining something to her child, a gang of students laughing, a man talking to his dog.

I was just thinking that these games of dialogue you and I play when we write back and forth are also an oddly fragmented narrative, more like clues in a word puzzle, than anything complete. Language itself is made artificial, uncertain. As if we are trying to account for acts that words have never described and never will. So this dialogue can only be an offering, a way to reflect and refract ideas, rather than an explanation. Easy for me to conjure your voice in response to this – throaty and very deep, a little exotic, always as if you have just disentangled yourself from some fascinating situation. But writing, writing fixes things in ways that undermine the melodies of speech.

I wanted to talk to you about the performance of drawing-as-echo because I guess it parallels your own experience of voicing texts. I wonder if when we use text it is as a form almost like a musical score that has no being of its own until we shape it?

I am slightly ashamed of my practice of echoing. My clandestine commitment, the rigidity of the method of drawing, the insistent repetitive labour. It feels like cheating and seems to me to occupy the place where a more natural creativity should be, something innate and instinctive, something more honest. I imagine, secretly, a kind of abandon waiting within the confines of the discipline, imagine myself untethered in great vistas of self-expression. This has yet to happen. All that has happened is that ever-increasing layers of minutiae and process have been revealed that have tightened the knots even further.

In my studio I have stacks upon stacks of drawings, transcripts really, of manuscripts, book pages, maps and diagrams. Often the texts are from obsolete textbooks offering the outlines of theories or technologies that are now redundant. Sometimes the original point of reference no longer exists or the design is incompatible with contemporary material. Yet I think of them as the opposite of waste, of redundancy. I want them to last forever.)

Hand starts here 7.55

When I draw from an appropriated source – it may be copying a book page or drawing from an image, my mind is filled with a kind of featureless lucidity. It has taken a while for me to understand that the communication comes through my hands. I know I mustn't think, that my brain must be emptied, that I must only act. It is pure present tense. And when I look down I have already covered an area of paper. The thinking makes me falter,

so I empty my mind and return to my hands. There are awful moments when I feel I am inching along a precipice, heading towards disaster. If I think too hard, over I go, falling down through the complexity and into the untidy room, where there is stillness and silence and daylight pours on to the drawing.

Love penny.

8.45 mins

4.

Dear Penny,

I could claim that my absence was deliberate, a theatrical ploy to shine a bright circle of attention on the voice of the reader; that the fact of your speaking for me has focused the relationship between the text and the reader's voice with greater urgency.

But it was by chance that you are left alone here, Penny. A double booking. Here in Fribourg with Forced Entertainment's Void Story, my voice will be

pitched up to sound like a child's
down to sound like a man's ...
layered with echo for the voice of a ghost,
and reverb for the voice of a fortune teller,
thin with treble for the voice of an old lady,
bass heavy for the voice of a security guard.

further treatments via the sound desk for
the voice of a doctor
the voice of a porn star
the voice of a Christian telephone salesperson
the voice of a woman who won't shut up.

As you read the words in front of you, your voice will be naked by comparison. You may have some basic amplification, but you won't have much technology to hide behind. Your decisions under and around the text will be the live part of this presentation.

Barthes calls reading an act of love:

'Reading loves the work, maintains with it a rapport of desire. To read is to desire the work, is to want to be the work'..

I'm not so sure about originality. I feel more pulled towards the marginal, the incidental and compromised. The work I want to be, is far outside of me. (I remember Cindy Sherman saying that she chose for her self-portraits those shots where she did not recognise herself).

In my work, you might think that improvising, with its implication of 'making stuff up' is an opportunity for those 'great vistas of self-expression' you describe. Actually, through all these years, our improvisational games have been perfected for sliding in and out of different selves, for stretching our voices to anything that falls into mind.

Graham Greene wrote that it is a writer's duty to match himself to all human experience, even those he hasn't lived through.

This is our improvisational present tense, our empty-headed walk along the precipice you describe; a filling up with borrowed voices, borrowed sayings, less giving voice to something original than trying on another voice for size.

For me, reading to an audience, raises similar questions around origin and reception. The path you walk now is another way of being with words, both reception and interpretation, a temporary hosting, a thinking out and thinking through, an auditory sketch.

I think I can hear your voice as I write.... (maybe I am just seeing the way your hair fell forwards in a public lecture once).

In another symposium, I once had to read out Gertrude Stein's quip that:

'Intelligent people, although they talk as if they knew something, are really confusing, because they are, so to speak, keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking'.

Public reading contains this collision of times: a looking back to the hidden time of writing (all edit, revision, stops and starts) and the actual time of reading (a quivering illusion of unity).

In your drawing there is the same collision, the moment of retrieval from past to present.

There was something you said the other day about words fixing things. What if our assimilation, by hand or by voice renders up the unfixity of words, their temporary and partial fit, their different shaping through hand or mouth?

Love terry

13.46

5.

Dear terry,

I've been thinking about the impulse to copy the text. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it. Elaine Scarry talks about how beauty brings copies of itself into being,

giving rise to replication again and again. So a beautiful face glides into the line of vision and is replicated over and over in Leonardo's sketchbooks, and he does the same thing with a rose or a violet or a tree. Wittgenstein speaks not only of beautiful visual events prompting the hand, but also about music prompting a ghostly sub-anatomical event in his teeth and gums. Like biting down on foil.

I have spent a lot of time in archives, both actual and virtual ones. It's an odd, lonely activity as much of the time you are talking to ghosts. The best moments are of discovery, when you come across a scribble or scrap of marginalia, the trace of something was never meant for you to see that seems to bring you closer to the ordinary humanity of the author.

The drawing is a representation – strictly speaking it has no authenticity. If this isn't a contradiction - it may also be that our sense of the value of the original text increases in relation to the value of the time I invest in copying it. That the source material seems more significant, more textured, richer through repetition and close scrutiny. I am drawn to particular source material quite intuitively. It is an act of veneration or love and maybe also a kind of submission. It seems to revolve around the disclosure or desire for something that I can only get close to in this way. There is an intimacy, an intense proximity that is somehow clinical, like a doctor's examination of something private.

My drawings focus on the detail of typeface, binding, marks and marginalia. Often I copy something that I can perhaps understand aesthetically but not technically, such as Francis Crick's draft texts.

All of the drawings are precise size for size pencil-drawn copies of the real thing. I like the frozen traces of marks and scars in the paper. It is a meditation on the life of the artefact, a dialogue between stationary and transient time. For me this is a way of contemplating time, loss and retrieval.

When we last talked I asked you if you think the voice a manifestation of the soul? Or a soul? I have considered this when I fake someone's handwriting or drawing style. There is something of soul-sucking about it. Tim Etchells and I talked about the soul delay of jetlag, how distance travel often means that you leave your soul behind like a piece of lost luggage. But I don't really think I have a soul.

17.28

6.

Dear Penny,

Since we talked about soul, I saw a piece by Bruce Nauman in Berlin, *Room with my Soul left out, Room that does not Care*. Perhaps you know it. I felt that something in the word 'soul', even now, could do a job no other word could do, to suggest the abysmal absence of the room. But, like you, I'd find it hard to use this word about any part of myself.

In place of the soul-sucking model of copying you describe, I like the phrase Wordsworth used to describe poetry:

Emotion recollected in tranquillity.

A return, a recollection, from another time and place; in this model for copying, the outer shape of some emotion or event is drawn in tranquility and held aloft, as invitation perhaps.

About disruption: the voice has its own marks and marginalia, its traces and marks and scars, the human slips and stutters, half-utterances that mark private paths of thinking/not thinking behind the act, the event of comprehension, the event of teeth and gums and breath and fear and emotion. The voice has history.

Where did you learn to speak like that?

My voice was tuned away from its previous shapes and sounds in elocution lessons from the age of 9. Sometimes, when tired, I hear my home accent in my voice. I think of friends who've told me about their parents' reversion to the patois of childhood as their engagement with the world shuts down, speaking to people no longer in the room, in a patois that has mostly died in the world, but remains stored in the private, anarchic archive of memory.

Deleuze, after Proust, urges us to 'be like a foreigner within our own language'.

Certain texts, read for an audience have folded into my memory, my language, like foreign bodies incorporated by a host.

It may be, as you say of the image, for their Beauty, or to follow Keats, their Beauty and Truth. Or it may be, as you said of the Crick work, because the texts themselves remain only partially understood, a puzzle of language still and difficult to say. The witnessing of words can leave a mark.

Earlier this year, I read for your colleague Becky Shaw in a radio version of her piece 'A: The Christmas Party'. We met to discuss how to perform it. The original form is a book, a transcription of encounters between Becky, a care worker and a woman A whose language pool had been transformed by Alzheimer's so that she could only really speak in fragments of rhyme and song, repeatedly slicing these into new formations.

Rather than rehearse this reading, we made the broadcast a first encounter for the performers, a sight-reading of the text. It took five hours. It was imperfect, a provisional act, a crash with language; like the visits to A.

Do you know of the French documentary filmmaker, Dominique Cabrera? She uses the term 'etre avec', 'being with' to describe her witnessing of subjects through a de-authorized camera. Sight-reading was our strategy for 'being with' A's words.

Maybe the words 'etre avec' are inappropriate right now, Penny, as you carry this dialogue alone?

You pointed out a photo of Wolfgang Tilman's 'Anders pulling splinter from his foot' in Saturday's Guardian. They say the original statue, Boy with Thorn, was one of the first Roman antiquities to be copied. The popular, secondary name for the statue, Il Fidele, came from an anecdote that grew around the work; the story of a shepherd boy, who had faithfully delivered his message to the Roman Senate, only stopping after its delivery, to remove a painful thorn from his foot; a heroic act of word-carrying...

I thought of you in this story.

Where did you learn to draw like that Penny?
Where did you learn to speak like that?

The labour of your pencil, the labour of your voice,
Did it go well?

Is a strand of hair fallen across your face?

Here in Fribourg we're playing in the open air, our electronically altered voices drifting up into the crisp Swiss evening
to the point of inaudibility.

See you soon,
Love
Terry.
7.

Dear Terry

You mentioned the hallucination of voices at times of distress. Do you remember the Konstantine Raudive audiotapes of Electronic Voice Phenomena, listening for the voices of the dead in radio broadcast interference? Apophenia: the spontaneous perception of connections and

meaning in seemingly unrelated things. I wonder if that's what we've just done.

It's evening now, a light rain just beginning to fall. I'm in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil.

Over the time we've been talking in this odd, disconnected way, I've been thinking about disembodied voices. How the often scream is represented in visual art, the attempt to render visually something that should be vocalised.

My father once told me about working in Russia in the 1960s, and how he always secretly wanted one of the KGB's listening devices. I was only ever able to imagine them as clockwork instruments, intricate in their way as Faberge eggs. I know now that they were often simple glass jars, that caught voices and often quite random pieces of conversation.

Elaine Scarry remarks on how often beauty is described as a 'greeting'. At the moment of entering the presence of beauty it reaches out to welcome you. In Homer's narrative this greeting is played out as Odysseus hears Nausicaa before he sees her. Her voice is green: mingling with the voices of children it is the sound of water rushing through a lush meadow or as it is described 'a meadow starred with flowers'. The greenness of the sound is emphasised when she directs him to safety through her father's meadows and blossoming orchards towards the 'welcome city'.

And thinking of Nausicca, thinking of voyages, makes me think of the Asteroid 192 Nausikaa, she gave her name to and from this my thoughts go on to space travel. The Voyager spacecraft, travelling across a solar system flowered with stars with its recorded message 'Hello from the children of the Earth'.

And now it's late and the stars are coming out. In the hot darkness of my room, I can hear the somehow liquid sounds of a party down the street near your house. When will you be back? Maybe you are here already, listening to the same voices...anyway, I'm going to close here, shut the windows and try to sleep...

With love
Pennyxx

(2.mins 5 secs)