

## **ARTICULATIONS: Theorising in Practice**

Performance-Lecture

Title: **Performing 'the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming'**.

(cf Phelan, 1997, 17).

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To create something in a specific way is not in itself a pathway to knowledge. Nevertheless, for the artist-researcher, the process of creation allows insight into the performative nature of materials and their subsequent meaning-making. To this end, practices of performative writing (Pollock, 1998), or performance autoethnography (Denzin, 2003), offer opportunities to understand articulation as a further creative practice; one that is able to investigate itself through and beyond its meaning-making. This performance-lecture will explore my practice research in the materiality of notation within the field of contemporary and experimental music composition, broadly conceived, by using examples of processes and practice from my own creative practice research. At the same time, it aims to reflexively examine the methodology of practice research in music composition and creation, considering creative practice both as its means of investigation and mode of presentation and communication. Here, the performance-lecture is explored as a form of 'writing out' (Igweonu, et al, 2011), as a method in itself, and as an interrogation of method/ology within practice research. Drawing on Knorr Cetina's (2001) concept of 'objectual practice', it critically engages with the academic context by rendering it as inherently performative as is the articulation of artistic research and its related experiences. My aim is to make explicit methods for and of doing and knowing, that are situated in my embodied position as a researcher, composer, performer and improviser, but also to use those same positions to interrogate and question the pathways to knowledge within them. Beyond this, the political connotations of the practice of performative writing are also explored in the way that it, 'expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge' (Pelias, 2005, 417), throwing into question not only what disciplines contain or describe, but the way that knowledge is accessed and communicated within them.

## Introduction

This performance lecture has 5 layers that you are invited to experience in a non-linear manner. The method of their presentation is itself derived from the practices I use in my creative work.

The first layer is an explanation of the performance lecture format and its role in articulating research outcomes.

The second layer is a reflection on the nature of writing in practice research.

The third layer describes my research practices in the areas of experimental music notation.

The fourth layer is an audio-visual presentation of my composition, *the whale* (2020).

The fifth and final layer is a sound and concrete poem, derived from the written statements that make up this performance lecture.

This performance lecture is itself a composition, as well as a creative explanation of my research processes. It is part of my continuing commitment to exploring nonlinear presentations of research practices.

## Layer 1: Explanation of the Performance Lecture Format

In music, many researchers are familiar with the performance lecture format via the composer John Cage. In his lecture on composition as process, Cage begins to address communication in music composition in the following way, relevant to the theme of articulations:

What if I ask thirty-two questions?  
What if I stop asking now and then?  
Will that make things clear?  
Is communication something made clear?  
What is communication?  
Music, what does it communicate?  
Is what's clear to me clear to you?  
Is music just sounds?  
Then what does it communicate?  
Is a truck passing by music?  
If I can see it, do I have to hear it too?  
If I don't hear it, does it still communicate? ('Composition as Process', 1973, p41)

Cage renders the act of speaking – of retelling – one of performing. Moreover, he highlights the inherently performative aspects of this practice in the textual and notational layout of his lectures in print as much as he does in his speaking of them.

This is relevant to my aim here as writing and speaking about my practice research are essential aspects of my role as a researcher. Writing as notation and speaking as performance are also essential aspects of my practice. In the UK, we operate a definition of research through the Research Excellence Framework—that it is a process of investigation, leading to new insights, effectively shared—that emphasises communication (through the term, 'effectively shared'). This means that as a practice researcher one makes a commitment not only to create knowledge in one's practice but to sustain that knowledge and share it with others.

The performance lecture format offers an opportunity to do this not only as writing, but as a method of showing and demonstrating. This is, therefore, a form of performative autoethnography, described by Denzin as a discourse that 'simultaneously writes and criticises performances', and that 'shifts attention from the narrative I to the performative I, contesting the means given to voice, presence, experience and subjectivity.' (2003)

More than a creative way to express research outcomes, this could be considered a form of performative writing. For Della Pollock, performative writing is not rhetorical but a practice that 'recasts rhetoric as a constitutive aesthetic' (2004, p95). Pollock's six aspects of performative writing—that it is evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous (both 'anxiously

crossing' and 'neither willing nor able to stop moving' (ibid., pp90–91)), citational, and consequential (ibid., pp80–95)—are all brought to bear in this performance lecture.

As such, this form offers a creative challenge not only to ourselves, but to our disciplines. Ronald Pelias describes how performative writing, 'expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge' (2005, p.417). Here, I challenge the discipline of contemporary music composition to consider the boundaries of what sounds and is sounded, and the relationships of practices of sound to those of writing, speaking, doing and making.

Peggy Phelan questions the nature of knowing itself, as experienced through the practice of writing, suggesting that as, '[a] statement of allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, writing pushes against the ideology of knowledge as a progressive movement forever approaching a completed end-point'. (1997, p.17).

## Layer 2: Reflections on Articulation and Writing in Practice Research

In exploring the concept of writing in practice research, theatre researcher Kene Igweonu writes:

expressive writing engages with the personal and the emotional; it enables the reflective practitioner to explore the self, own beliefs and attitudes in a process in which writing functions as a response to the process of creative enquiry [...] the physical act of reflective writing [...] takes an introspective analysis of a lived event and pins it down for closer inspection [...] the act of writing disembodies our ephemeral thoughts and captures them as tangible words on the page. (2011, p230)

In this way, writing can be seen not only as a method of sharing research knowledge but of sustaining it: both for the researcher and her audience. The process of *writing out* is one of slowing down, where description precedes analysis. This slowing down can be re-framed as a re-focusing, not on how the work was done but on what it means to do it. If the practice of practice research is thought to be an embodied practice, then so is its practice of writing out. This formulation re-frames articulation from a mode of reporting to a part of the practice of practice research itself.

Nelson describes the *clew* of the research as Ariadne's thread, 'the *thread of the researcher's thinking-doing*' (2013, pp10-11). The process of writing out not only provides this *clew* to the reader or receiver but also to the researcher herself. Creative practice, interpretation, and analysis need not be linear nor concurrent processes; yet, they may meet each other in the process of writing out.

Practice research, as all artworks and artistic practices, is a forest of signs. It is plurivocal and multi-layered. Negotiating this is not a linear process; meaning may emerge from the work over time, even for its creator.

Paul Carter writes on this that, '[i]nvention begins when what signifies exceeds its signification' (2007, p.15). Writing out is a method of making this excess, and these connections between signs, even in past or existing work.

### Layer 3: Describing my Practice Research

The creation of notation as a material practice is a central part of my practice research at present.

In this work I try to move beyond a model of the score as prescription for action or preservation of sound, to consider it as an object.

I do this through musical and embodied practices of making that situate the composer's body in the notation, dealing with gesture, space, and physical action as practices that create and determine notational practices.

All of these ways of moving and doing also allow me to situate the creation of this notation as a type of performative work and not just a method of creating instructions for a performance.

Therefore, notation is to me also a form of performative writing. It can perform a dual role. It is a creative practice through which I make new work and it is also an exploratory method through which I investigate the nature of notation in musical practice. My work with notation is an 'objectual practice', to use Knorr Cetina's (2001) term; albeit one where the object itself is always in flux: the score is always, for me, a 'partial object' (p.182), whose 'unfolding ontology' continues beyond the process of making. Knorr Cetina describes this unfolding ontology as one that 'foregrounds the temporal structure' of notation, and 'is difficult to combine with our everyday notion of an object.' (ibid.) Rather, the 'epistemic environment' of my practice and research cannot exist or be understood without this relationship. (ibid., p.187)

Notation is a political designation, since in Western musical practice it implies hierarchy in its relation to the work concept. It might also be argued that the designation *as* notation is also a performative practice: the content of 'notation' is not necessarily distinct from the content of products in other art forms.

In the piece, *the whale*, several layers of notation are encountered: a poem, images from historical manuscripts and writing practices, and audio fragments.

In this realisation of the piece, Alistair Zaldua and I responded to this score in a variety of ways, through instrumental performance, electronic manipulation of sound, and animation of the notation itself. This performance, then, extends my writing practice of notation.

#### **Layer 4: *the whale* (audio/visual work)**

#### **Layer 5: poem**

Unknowing

To create something in a specific way,  
using examples of processes and practice:  
inherently performative.

Knowledge is accessed and communicated

— *pedagogy and politics* —

an apology, an argument, an anecdote.

Experience, in a non-linear manner,

a sound; a concrete poem,

in music composition;

aspects of this practice. In the textual and notational layout,

one makes a commitment:

voice, presence, experience and subjectivity,

neither willing nor able to stop moving.

The radicality of unknowing who we are becoming.

As a response to the process of creative enquiry,

slowing down,

a forest of signs:

consider it as an object,

also an exploratory method.

Historical manuscripts and writing practices,

inherently performative,

in the textual and notational layout:

a forest,

a forest.

## Bibliography

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