

Excerpt from an article by Eleanor Clare, published in Grafter's Quarterly Issue II, 'Indexing Abstraction', Dec 2014.

Unholy Passage

I have come to the understanding that there is never truly a direct translation of any word. There is always a mysterious and fluid gap where meaning cannot be mapped and cultural experience cannot be traced, much as the ocean separates one land from another, and the tides constantly alter the surface of the earth. And so it was. I felt as though I could be lost, but this feeling was not a given truth. It was like being subject to an internal blindness, where parts of the whole story had been blotted out.¹

I have often been frustrated by the sense of lack that I perceive when viewing or listening to recordings of live work, either of my own performance, or re-viewing another's. It is rare that a mechanical recording of a single event can capture the frisson of tension, even urgency, felt in the body during live performance. Undoubtedly other things of value come to the fore, but the peculiarity of this kind of suspense seems diminished. One may posit this frisson, tension or urgency as a temporal line of communication between performer and audience, artwork and spectator, in the moment of direct experience of the piece. This is not to declare that all live work, all direct experience of artwork, as opposed to its documentation is exciting. There is tension in boredom as much as in excitement. It is rather to mark awareness of the physical and mental states which occur in duration, and which prove elusive to recover retrospectively.

The wish to re-capture and re-ignite a subjective experience of the work could be seen as an inwards drive: to enter in; to be immersed. The desire, perhaps, is to arrive at a state of gestation: to be carried within, whilst being open to perceptions of heightened awareness. A babe in the womb is suspended in fluid which transmits sensory data through its delicate skin; every part of the body is receptive. This pregnant condition, allowing for the receiving and unravelling of information through the body, is desirable. It is an act of transference: between one body and another, one place and somewhere else, past and present, reality and fiction. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin ascribes to the camera the virtue of deeply penetrating reality.² In my experience of art documentation as described above, the screen becomes impenetrable. Hounded by this lack of ability to penetrate, I become aware of a gap. It becomes the shadowy abyss of the unknown, a hollow area dividing the event as it occurred to my posthumous perception of it. In live performance, this is often due the constraints of filming in one take. It is unlike the film set, where isolated shots can be repeated many times and from varying angles until the whole is suggested. 'Here the camera intervenes with its different aids, its plunging and soaring, its stretching and condensing of the process, its close ups and its distance shots. Only the camera can show us the optical unconscious, as it is only through psychoanalysis that we learn of the compulsive unconscious.'³ On this journey inwards, we come to the well of the unconscious, the natural repository of all that is distant from the reaches of the conscious mind.

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Every evening, I could not wait to go to bed, and before I would fall asleep, return to him. When he smiled, 'the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant

distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun.⁴ It is not too far-fetched to admit that I felt the first flushes of love for this man whose countenance I conflated with my own boyfriend. Each night I willingly transported myself into his company, carried away with pleasure whilst snugly enwrapped in my bedding. It was with a sense of mourning that I accepted it was time to let him go. I had been entirely invested in his fortunes. His experiences had become my experiences. I followed him silently through his days, sometimes so closely that I knew what he was thinking, and sometimes with the privilege of hearing other people's thoughts about him, of which he was unaware. My heart surged with his heart, and his disappointments were my disappointments. As any lover would, I wished him only happiness. In part, I fancied myself as the Bathsheba Evans to Hardy's Gabriel Oak. I imagined myself existing with them, if not actually as them. Throughout the book, the characters often bore an uncanny resemblance in one way or another to those closest to me. I felt a constant slippage between reality and fiction, my desire to be immersed in, and even a part of Hardy's world.

Reading in bed, I am coddled in a warm, cosy duvet and supported by a foamy mattress. A bedside lamp casts soft shadows across the room. It is awkward to hold the book (arms and hands being the only limbs required to work actively). I try my best to ignore this, wriggling around to find the least physically demanding position. This, it may be surmised, is a situation ripe for gestation. The reduction of demand on the body, wrapped and padded in this fashion, allows for suspension of disbelief in the mind. This phenomenon, in particular of conflating oneself with a fictional other, 'only occurs when people are able, in a sense, to forget about themselves and their own self concept and self-identity while reading.'⁵ Is it that the closer we come to simulating a womb like experience, as though suspended in amniotic fluid, the more we are open to merging identity? During gestation, our whole being is dependent upon our mother's. We are immersed in the universe of her body, inside her and of her. Concepts of difference and separation are irrelevant. While reading, the brain responds to narrative. Not only the amygdala, processing feeling and emotion, but also the motor cortex, responsible for physical movement, act as though our bodies really were enacting what is described in writing. 'The neural changes that we found associated with physical sensation and movement systems suggest that reading a novel can transport you into the body of the protagonist.'⁶ Curled up under the covers, reading a novel beside the warm glow of the lamp, we may find ourselves floating in this liminal state, in-between and through bodies.

To give oneself over to something, or to return to a foetal state, may suggest a relapse of power. To be immersed, to enter in and be receptive, one must maintain close attention to the text. The brain reacts with a signal to action at every word. We have a certain power here. We are actors. Our brains activate the text. It could not live without us. To extend a quote from T.S. Eliot, used in a similar context by Antonio Damasio,⁷

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, *but you are the music*
*While the music lasts.*⁸

If we are to allow ourselves to be *moved* or *acted upon*, we become complicit. The moment the brain receives a sensation, it begins the process of translating it to language, ‘the simplest form in which the wordless knowledge emerges mentally is the feeling of knowing – the feeling of what happens when an organism is engaged with the processing of an object – and only thereafter can inferences and interpretations begin to occur regarding the feeling of knowing.’⁹ To know, it seems we must enter in.

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¹ Response to work by Ingrid Bjørnseth, 2014; <http://cargocollective.com/IngridBjornseth>

² Benjamin, W. (2008) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, p.24

³ *Ibid.*, p.30

⁴ Hardy, T. (1994) *Far From The Madding Crowd*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, p.13

⁵ Kauffman, G. “*Losing Yourself*” in a Fictional Character Can Affect Your Real Life, available from <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/exptaking.htm> [accessed 12.11.2014]

⁶ Berns, G. *Does reading actually change the brain?* available from <http://www.futurity.org/reading-novels-leaves-shadow-activity-brain/> [accessed 12.11.2014]

⁷ Damasio, A. (2000) *The Feeling of What Happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. London: Heinemann p.172

⁸ Eliot, T.S. *The Dry Salvages* available from <http://www.artofeurope.com/eliot/eli4.htm> [accessed 12.11.2014; my italics, denoting the excerpt used by Damasio]

⁹ Damasio, A. (2000) *The Feeling of What Happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. London: Heinemann p.26