

Sit with me for a moment and remember

Michael Pinchbeck (Read by Nicki Hobday)

A bench with a plaque reading Sit with me for a moment and remember is placed in a public space. It is both a dedication to a loved one and an invitation to a stranger. You are invited to sit on the bench to listen to a recording that reflects on what it means to sit for a moment and remember.

I am sorry I can't be with you there today but I've asked Nicki Hobday to read these words for me. For *Owning Your Walrus*, I want to reflect on my recent one-to-one performance, *Sit with me for a moment and remember*. This was a site-specific piece I presented in Derby, Leicester, Manchester, Nottingham and Sheffield between 2012-2015, supported by Hatch, Hazard, In Good Company and Wrought Festival. A meditation on memory, remembering, loneliness and loss, the piece enacted an encounter with an absent friend or loved one.

Framed as installation, the piece was designed as an encounter for one audience member at a time in a public place, a market square, a busy thoroughfare. The audience member is invited to put on a pair of headphones and listen to an audio recording about what it means to sit for a moment and remember. At a certain point in this audio recording they are invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. When they open their eyes a performer sits next to them, turns to them and smiles. After the narrative takes the audience member on a journey through a busy city and how we remember, they are again invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. At this point, the performer reaches out, touches the hand of the audience member, and then disappears. When the audience member opens their eyes they are alone again.

The bench piece was performed in two iterations, one with Nicki Hobday as the performer, and one with myself, each time the voice was different but the text was the same, each time the performer becomes both a stranger and a ghost, a living presence and a fleeting memory of someone or something the audience member has lost. The audience member is invited to read the plaque on the bench out loud to themselves, as both incantation and dedication.

I wonder if we could all say this together now. After me.

Sit with me for a moment and remember.

I wonder if we could all close our eyes for 10 seconds. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Think about the last time you sat still. Think about the last time you remembered. If you want to, think about someone or something you lost. Remember them. Now open your eyes.

Now looking at loneliness through the lens of one-to-one performance and the process of making Practice as Research itself, I want to relate the experience of performing the bench piece as I will now call it to the writing on absence by Peggy Phelan and Jacques Derrida. Derrida considers how we might perform absence and in doing so, evoke memories of presences. He wrote that 'Theatre is born of its own disappearance'.¹ In the bench piece, the appearance and disappearance of the performer, Nicki Hobday or myself, enacted a moment of present absence, a loved one is found then lost, a sense of loneliness is replaced with a sense of togetherness and then returned to loneliness again. This provocation continues my research interests into Staging Loss and performing absence, which recently surfaced in a symposium at the University of Lincoln called *Staging Loss: Performance as Commemoration*.

The bench piece speaks too about commemoration and how we remember as individuals and as a nation. I write this on Remembrance Day when we traditionally stand and reflect for two minutes to remember the fallen. Again, sometimes this silence is disrupted and our stillness and moment of reflection becomes incongruous. I remember standing for the two-minute silence in a crowded university café when no one else seemed to know what time it was, or indeed was unmoved by it. As the text says in the bench piece after two minutes:

And when we take time to remember. It is because this city tells us to. A two minute silence to remember. A two minute silence to mourn. A two minute silence to think about someone or something we lost. A two minute silence to look at the sky and wonder why. A two minute silence to look at our shoes and feel ashamed. A two minute silence that makes us want to cry. A two minute silence that makes us want to stop the clocks. A two minute silence that makes us want to stop...

Phelan writes about how 'Performance marks the body itself as loss'.² But what does she mean by this? How might the ephemeral nature of a live act somehow speak of our own mortality, the unstoppable and irrevocable passage of time. As Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in *Le Pont Mirabeau* (1912), describing himself standing on a bridge looking down at the River Seine, 'Les Jours S'En Vent, Je D'Emeure', roughly translated as 'The days fly by, I stay here'.³ Sitting on the bench with a stranger, and perhaps more so, waiting around the corner to appear when they close their eyes, I became ever more conscious of the incongruity of someone being still in an act of contemplation, as the city moved all around them. They had become an accidental statue, an impromptu mannequin challenge, a private act in a public. Their choice to resist the flow of people, like the flow of the River Seine, or the flow of time, was rewarded by a personal one-to-one encounter with a stranger, that only they could understand. Their experience of the piece was different to any other audience member's as each person to sit on the bench is invited to remember someone only they knew.

As Matthew Goulish says, 'Some words speak of events, other words, events make us speak'.⁴ I have wrestled with this sentence for some time and have come to take it as an instruction for making performance that only I can make, about stories only I can tell. It articulates an artist's need to make a piece of work about an event. The bench piece, or more specifically, the text within it, are the words events made me speak. Those events are not known to the audience or referred to in the piece, but they include the loss of a brother, the loss of a son and the loss of generations all around me that have made me consider my own place in history. Standing on the bridge looking down at the river. For the bench piece, where the experience is authored or 'authorized by the audience' (to quote Steve Bottoms) to some extent, perhaps Goulish's quote could be rephrased to say 'Some words speak of loss, other words, loss makes us speak'.⁵ It is interesting that after the piece, where possible, I have been able to meet audience members and they tell me about how they remembered loss, whose loss they remembered, why they remembered this loss. Often, these are personal memories that they are sharing with a stranger. Often these are emotional encounters and the piece perhaps unlocks memories and stories that would otherwise not be readily shared.

It is important to note the technology used in the performance. A pair of headphones that cocoon the audience member in the piece. An i-pod held by an invigilator who stands to the side of the bench. A wire that allows the invigilator to step back out of the frame. This is a deliberate strategy. To give the audience member a comfort zone in which they can be on their own. The technology allowing us to be 'alone together' as described by Sherry Turkle.⁶ As a footnote, and in the spirit of inter-disciplinarity, I want to describe an interesting tangent the project took. For the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, I was one of the five shortlisted artists from the East Midlands region. I proposed a large-scale version of the bench piece entitled *Sit with us for a moment and remember*, I suggested that 2012 wooden benches with the eponymous plaque would be sited around the region at 2012 locations suggested by members of the public. At various times, during the run up to the London Olympics, the benches would be populated by the public for two minutes of personal remembrance conducted region-wide. As part of my pitch, I travelled the East Midlands with this bench, from Nottinghamshire pit-tops to the Peak District, from the Belgrave Road in Leicester outside curry houses to the Promenade in Skegness outside amusement arcades. I asked members of the public who or what they would remember if the project was a chosen. I took photos of them sitting on the bench and showed these in my presentation. These are the photos I am showing to you now. The project was not taken forward and was deemed by the panel to be too quiet, they said they were looking for explosions. I told them remembrance is not like that. They asked where the art was. I told them it was conceptual. They asked if I could site many benches in the same place and stage a play on them. I said no. They were worried what the press would say. And chose a 25 foot knitted lion instead.

The press did pick up on the bench piece proposal and they did wonder where the art was. The Independent likened it to Antony Gormley's plinth project. ArtArtArt magazine said that it marked a worrying trend for artists abdicating responsibility for their artwork. But what if the responsibility for the artwork was not abdicated but rather handed over to the audience? What if we could create a community out of our memory? What if we could share a moment of loneliness with another? How does absence become presence, loss become less?

Writer and art critic, Wayne Burrows, who saw the original incarnation of the piece wrote this in response: 'We are taken into a mental space where remembrance is encouraged, loss acknowledged and – near the end – asked to close our eyes and lay our own hand on the bench, as the woman beside us does. We imagine a someone – a loss personal to ourselves – and suddenly feel a touch on our own hand. When we open our eyes, the woman is gone, the bench empty. It's a curious experience, emotionally engaging, and given undeniable power by the physical contact – fleeting as it may be – involved in its performance. *Sit With Me For A Moment And Remember* carries very private reflections into a public space, and for all its intimacy offers a strangely contradictory experience, almost daring us to expose, through our response to the piece, something of our inner lives to the many strangers around us, even while keeping everything but the touch itself perfectly hidden'.⁷

In conclusion, I wonder if this is what loneliness is. A strangely contradictory experience. And what making work about loneliness does. It is almost daring us to expose something of our inner lives to the many strangers around us, even while keeping everything but the touch itself perfectly hidden. Isn't this what performance is? Daring us to expose something of our inner lives to many strangers. Daring us to close our eyes. Daring us to hold hands.

I am sorry I can't be with you there today.

I am somewhere else but I am thinking of you.

And I hope you are thinking of me too.

Now put your hand out on your knee.

Now close your eyes.

And count with me to 10.

And as you do so reach out to hold the hand of the person sitting next to you.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...

Now open your eyes.

*Thank you.*⁸

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- ¹ Derrida, Jacques. "The theater of cruelty and the closure of representation." *Theater* 9.3 (1978): 6-19.
- ² Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. Routledge, 2003.
- ³ Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Alcools*. Le Livre de Poche, 2014.
- ⁴ Goulish, Matthew. 39 *Microlectures in Proximity of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 152.
- ⁵ Bottoms, Stephen. 'Authorizing the Audience: The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch', *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), 65-76.
- ⁶ Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. (USA: Basic Books, 2011).
- ⁷ Burrows, Wayne (2012). 'The Performances: Hatch at Hazard Festival (Part Two)', *Hatch: Back* [online] <https://hatchnottingham.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/the-performances-hatch-at-hazard-festival-part-two/> (accessed 3 January 2017).
- ⁸ Pinchbeck, Michael (2012). *Sit with me for a moment and remember* (Hazard Festival, Manchester 2012).