

Errors of Memory, Memories of error: Slip-roads and pit-stops on The Long and Winding Road

I have called this talk *Errors of Memory, Memories of error: Slip-roads and pit-stops on The Long and Winding Road*. But it also explores the marking of time and the way in which time has marked me. My performance work is often auto-biographical and returns to themes of memory, nostalgia and loss. For this talk, I have endeavoured to distil five years of personal art history into 25 minutes. It is hard to be objective about a project that memorialises a loved one and took nearly half of my professional life to complete. I am also speaking to you today almost 20 years to the day since the loss that fueled this journey. 'Thus' as Walter Benjamin says 'The traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel'.¹ As such, this talk is presented in the first person as the Traces of my personal experience of loss cling to this story, the story of the long and winding road and the way the project has indented and shaped my practice like the indentations of handprints onto the vessel of a clay pot.

In my case, the vessel was a literal and metaphorical vehicle for the baggage of loss and the journey we take when we lose someone. This talk explores the erroring of memory implicit in auto-biographical projects as creative mistakes were embraced and a car's breakdown was retro-engineered into an act of catharsis. In 2005, live artist, Richard Dedemonici delivered a performance lecture entitled 'Embracing Failure'.² He coined the term 'embrailure' to illustrate the very notion of that embrace. As John Cage said, 'Nothing is a mistake. There is no win and no fail. There is only make'.³ As Samuel Beckett wrote, 'Fail. Fail again. Fail better'.⁴ This talk relates to the 'poetics of failure' implicit in the making of performance work. In, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011), Sarah Jane Baile, describes how the 'operations of failure have been harnessed by certain kinds of theatre practice'.⁵ She adds '... the performative effects through which representational failure is evidenced, provide a way of testing the edges of established theatre conventions and the limitations posed by the theatre event'.⁶

The Long and Winding Road was a poetic failure that tested the limits of the theatre event, in terms of both its five-year duration and its site-specificity. The project memorialised my loss in a transitory vehicle and commemorated errors that I made along the literal journey it had taken. Alongside this talk, I will show you three films documenting the project. The beginning of the journey in 2004. The one-to-one performance in the car in 2006. And the end of the journey in 2009. Thank you for joining me on the journey.

The beginning of the journey

The Long and Winding Road began on 17 May 2004 when I embarked on a journey in a graffiti covered car from Nottingham to Liverpool. The car was packed with 365 items wrapped in brown paper and string, tagged and logged. The journey lasts until 17 May 2009 when I drive the car into the River Mersey.

This is my car. This is my car history. This is the film of the journey I made on 17 May 2004 and those were the first words from the one-to-one performance in the car. Passengers were invited to fasten their seat belts and join me for a travel sweet as I shared the reason for the journey and the story of the journey so far via the rear-view mirror. This is the reason for the journey. The mementoes in the car were items that belonged to my brother who died in an accident in Liverpool on 17 May 1998. The reason for the journey is best explained in the one-to-one performance. But first I want to talk about time. The time it takes to make a journey. The time it takes to grieve. When we talk of driving we talk of time. We define distance in minutes rather than miles. We measure our speed in miles per hour. Every year we MOT, insure and tax our car and, in the olden days, the tax discs collected on the dashboard like birthday cards on the mantelpiece. However, there are no birthday cards for those we have lost and the calendar becomes riddled with holes. After six years of not knowing how to mark the date, I problematised the anniversary of my brother's death. My parents always lit a candle. I would drive a car. The car would become my candle. As Walter Benjamin says; 'The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story'.³ As Sarah Jane Bailes writes of Beckett: 'the failure to be able to express, rekindles the very desire to express'.⁴ My failure to express became a car.

In 2004, I wrote a letter to my brother, but the letter became a parcel and the parcel became a car. I packed the car with the belongings my brother left behind that still littered the house. I wrapped them in brown paper and string – like a gift, like the belongings we were given at the hospital that fell out of a brown paper envelope to identify it was him. I wanted to hide their history, to objectify their resonance - and I gave them all a registration number, like a car. I made this film of the journey to Liverpool in the hope that it might mark a beginning. In 2005, I parked the car in Nottingham on the banks of the River Trent, facing in the direction of Liverpool, and showed the film in the boot surrounded by the mementoes. The audience was invited to sit in the driver's seat and explore the baggage a loss leaves behind.

In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan writes 'Performance marks the body itself as loss'.¹⁰ I felt I was marked by loss but had not found the right words, the right way, or the right of way, to perform it yet. In 2006, I was commissioned by Fierce! in Birmingham to create a one-to-one performance in the car at Ikon Gallery. It was an invitation to remember and an act of repair. The narrative of the performance was the journey of auto-recovery I was making as the car was painted, dented, damaged and towed from galleries to garages. As Matthew Goulish writes, 'if you want to study a system, first look at where it fails'.¹¹

I became interested in the act of intimacy exchanged by sharing a car with someone I did not know and the transaction that takes place via the rear-view mirror. It felt the most appropriate method to share material of a personal nature. I was always aware of the baggage I carried and how I shared it. I did not describe my emotions, only details of the day my brother died. The blu tac left behind on his walls when we took down his posters or the wall chart with nothing written on it after the 17th May. An inventory of loss. The mirror issued an invitation to be intimate, to make eye contact, to engage, to receive, to relive, to help me to remember. The mirror doubled the distance between driver and passenger, performer and audience, to make the experience both intimate and detached. I was conscious of how passengers sat in the car and adjusted how I sat accordingly. One passenger spat out their travel sweet and I performed an emergency stop. Others stayed to talk about their own experience of loss. The mirror was our driving instructor. Sometimes I followed the two second rule – inviting questions by leaving pauses in the text. Creating a space for interaction via the mirror. A space where the road behind you constantly foregrounds the road ahead and the past is always present in the future. I would adjust the mirror, like a camera lens, to direct attention to the objects on the back seat. Marshall McLuhan said; 'We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future'.¹² I was *driving* backwards into the future.

Sitting in the car, my brother's mementoes created a physical and emotional trace of him. Representing him in his absence. But I was always conscious of his presence. *Two of us driving nowhere, spending someone's hard earned pay*. I often reflected on how different performances had different tones, different energies. I performed as hail rained down on the roof and had to shout as if I was screaming at the heavens. The view from the car would often enter the frame. The windscreen was our proscenium arch. Pedestrians became our performers. A couple kissing. A couple arguing. Now placed centre-stage.

I had a steering committee guiding me on the journey who acted as outside eyes. They were my dramaturgs, someone who helps to shape the performance. As Burt Cardullo writes in *What is Dramaturgy?* (1999), 'a dramaturg is to a play as a mechanic is to an automobile'.¹³ There is a road sign in New Zealand when two roads approach a junction where both have right of way. It reads 'Merge like a zip'. The project attempted to 'merge like a zip' the experience of driver and passenger via the mirror, past and present, research and practice, cultural theory and popular culture. From Marshall MacLuhan to Meatloaf because *objects in the rear-view mirror may appear closer than they are*. *The Long and Winding Road* still speaks to me about my brother's loss, about being left behind. The project began when I realised that a song I had always listened to from my point of view could be listened to from his. *Many times, I've been alone and many times I've cried. In many ways you'll never know the many ways I've tried*. It was an attempt to turn the subjective experience into an objective experience, to tell a first-person narrative about loss using the car as a metaphor. The mile-o-meter went to zero at the Cavern Club as if I was resetting my own memory – telling my story on the axis between auto-biography and auto-recovery. As Berger says, 'every story is a rescue operation'.¹⁴

Over time, I learned how to give passengers in the car the right signals through how the experience was framed, in what context and with what interpretation. I did not want to invite people into the car without them knowing about its content. This was not therapy. If anything, it was a form of anti-therapy. I was immunising myself to loss through repetition of the detail. Talking for 30 hours in total about something that had remained unmentioned in my everyday life. I was making a mantra out of a moment in my life where the landscape changed irrevocably. I resist calling the project cathartic. Catharsis means both a release of emotions and an evacuation of the bowels. But I was on a journey of auto-recovery. I would use the car as a metaphor for my own experience of loss and the language of driving to describe it. The audience were passengers. The artist was the driver. The idea was the engine. *The Long and Winding Road* was a journey with breakdowns, slip roads and pit stops. This film ends with me walking up to the door of the house where my brother died and posting the keys to the car through the letterbox six years after his death. It is both an invitation and an invocation, a beginning and an ending, both mourning and marking the journey. *The Long and Winding Road that leads to your door will never disappear, I've seen that road before*. I will now show the one-to-one performance in the car and read excerpts from an article by live artist and academic, Rachel Gomme, in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, (12, 1, 2015)¹⁵.

The journey

I reserve a slot for The Long and Winding Road by phone and arrive at my appointed time at a pedestrian precinct behind Euston Road in central London. In the middle of the precinct a graffiti-covered car is parked up. A man with a clipboard stands nearby, takes my name and asks me to wait as the previous performance has not yet finished. A few minutes later the car's passenger door opens, a woman gets out and, after a moment, I am invited to enter and sit in the front passenger seat. Michael Pinchbeck sits in the driver's seat; the rest of the car is filled to the roof with parcels of various shapes and sizes wrapped in brown paper. He opens a tin of travel sweets, offers me one, and then begins to tell me a story. It starts with a precise date, and throughout the brief narrative this date and others recur in a rhythmic cycling as he recounts the accidental death of his brother, the ensuing process of clearing his brother's flat and resolving, over some years, how to dispose of his effects, and his path up to now on the journey which will eventually take him to drive the car, full of his brother's possessions, into the River Mersey.

His tone is quiet, matter-of-fact, and this combined with the repetition of particular details – dates, his brother's address, the number of packages – generates a meditative rhythm to the narrative. He ends his story with the date on which the final event is to occur, and falls silent. The performance is clearly at an end, although a short time appears to be left for my response should I wish to make one. After a few words of exchange, I leave the car, feeling quietly moved, with a sense that I have accompanied the artist on a very small part of his journey. However, neither of us can pretend that this sharing of deeply personal material takes place on some plane abstracted from economic relations. To begin with, I have to book an appointment. I am clearly not alone in sharing an individual interaction with the performer: time slots are at a premium. I have to wait outside the car, and the next spectator is waiting when I leave, suggesting a steady stream of individuals presenting themselves for this 'unique' encounter.

Moreover, the knowledge that had I not come, someone else could have been here in my place, precludes the sense of an experience 'destined to happen'. The tightly scripted nature of the performance itself reinforces this awareness: this telling is clearly not spontaneous, nor am I privileged in being offered the sweet. In his narrative, the artist alludes directly to the repetition of the performance, highlighting the importance of re-iteration in his journey, but by the same token reinforcing my awareness that I am but one of many. Helen Paris suggests that the (imagined) spectator of her own one-to-ones might legitimately find herself asking: 'Is the intimacy [...] less intimate because it is repeated verbatim to each audience member [...]? Are [the performer's] words meaningless [...]?'¹⁶

*Less than assured of the specialness of my encounter, I find myself replaying it in an attempt to pinpoint moments of individual communication – a subtle nod of recognition, a quiet pause that might betoken some acknowledgement of my listening. In *The Long and Winding Road* I enact an embracing of personal risk but the context demarcates this otherwise risky behaviour as a performance. My confidence in the established institution that programmed this piece, and my prior knowledge of its theme and brief duration, allay my fear of finding myself alone with another in the confined space of the car, by limiting the scope for our interaction. In *The Long and Winding Road*, psychic boundaries are manifested by the gaps in the script. The performance deals with highly personal material, yet at no point does the artist make reference to his feelings about the death of his brother. There is no outpouring of grief, and the spectator is left to derive the emotional significance of his experience, and of the performance, from what is left out rather than what is included. His matter-of-fact, almost remote tone and the rhythmic repetition of dates and places establish a sense of calm rather than overwhelming emotion, creating a safe space for me to engage with my empathy with him and my own experiences of loss. This reticence is part of what makes the performance, for me, so affecting – an affect born in my empathy with what is not revealed to me. As Levinas suggests, in the face-to-face encounter ‘the other is known through sympathy, as another self, as the alter ego’.¹⁷*

*Though I feel deeply touched by the performance, I leave with the sense, not of a close interpersonal encounter, but rather of having been offered a space for personal contemplation of loss. Pinchbeck’s detachment, combined with the looming but veiled presence of his absent brother in the wrapped packages, hints at the profound unknowability of the other: As Levinas writes ‘the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery: the other’s entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity’.¹⁸ *The Long and Winding Road* represents the paradigmatic case of a performance that suggests intimacy but presents boundary and containment of risk. As I leave the car reflecting on my own experiences of grief, I offer this sensitive response to another’s loss, in a manner that echoes the artist’s reflective recollection.*

The end of the journey

This is the film of the final journey I made with the car from Nottingham to Liverpool in 2009. After five years, 3000 miles, 365 passengers, 25 tins of travel sweets and 16 pit stops, I winched the car in and out of the River Mersey on 17 May 2009. It was exactly 11 years after my brother’s death. I had changed. The road had changed. The car had changed. Its rust was visible through the graffiti. Its tyres were becoming worn. This time, the car was on the back of the auto-recovery vehicle and I was sitting in the car

behind holding the video camera. There is an electrical car component designed to kick in after an accident called the 'Keep Alive Memory' and this was the intention of *The Long and Winding Road*. In *39 Microlectures on Performance* (2001), Matthew Goulish writes 'Some words speak of events. Other words, events make us speak'.¹⁹ With the one-to-one performance, after 365 iterations, I had finally found the words that this event made me speak, or maybe they found me. Driving is a thinking time. There is a clarity that arrives when we are engaged in making a journey looking at the road ahead. When I worked in Chester and commuted from Nottingham I used to say the A50 was my office. My grandad used to make a travel sweet last from Lincoln to Llandudno. My brother and I played word games with registration plates. On *The Long and Winding Road* time was marked by how many travel sweets were left in the tin. I played word games by weaving into the text moments on the journey. An itinerary of loss.

In May 2009, I documented the final one-to-one performance at The Bluecoat in Liverpool and the immersion in the River Mersey to mark the end of the road. It was both a baptism and a drowning. The car and its contents were then crushed. As the crushing of the car took place the mementoes were revealed again after five years. A floppy disk, a Beatles cushion, a cricket ball. Objects reclaiming their hidden identity as personal mementoes but accruing a new history, charged by the duration of the project. In June 2009, I returned to The Bluecoat with what was left of the car for a final installation entitled SORN - a statutory off-road notification. I spent three days cataloguing the remains of the car before wrapping them up again in brown paper and string and giving them each a registration number. This was an autopsy of the project and saw mementoes fused with metal, my memories literally mangled.

In March 2010, the remaining fragments of car, wrapped in brown paper and string, tagged and logged, were discarded in Michael Landy's *Art Bin* at the South London Gallery. The only criteria for acceptance into the *Art Bin*, was that the artwork had to be deemed a failure. I argued that if the project was intended to repair the damage left behind by losing my brother then it had failed. The submission was accepted. Sarah Jane Bailes writes that 'a thing's failure is inevitably summoned to the horizon by the virtue of its invention'.²⁰ Paul Virilio argues that 'all invention creates its own demise, which is to say that, invention produces an intrinsic failure whose operative mode is the accident'.²¹ He concludes that 'the accident itself is positive... because it reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive'.²²

I see *The Long and Winding Road* as a 'positive accident', an invention whose intrinsic failure to repair enabled me to reveal a creative response to a loss that had remained unprocessed. We could talk now about the project's failure. We could talk about how it was an error to drive the car so fast it blew up. We could talk about the time I over-shared about my personal life and the audience member spat out their travel sweet. We could talk about how it received a critical slating in a number of blogs hostile to Arts Council England funding such a project even though I never received funding directly and the only fee I requested was to cover the cost of touring the car. We could talk about how one blogger wrote that it was an act of 'colossal self-indulgence' and that it toured the country 'much to the indifference of passers-by' and 'the vehicle was crushed and its fragments displayed to an empty gallery'.²³ We could talk about how, when I drove the van through London to deliver the fragments to Michael Landy's *Art Bin*, I was fined £100 for entering the Congestion Zone. We could talk about traffic wardens in Buxton, vandals in Salford and blown gaskets in Tamworth. We could talk about the fact that my brother slipped and fell down some stairs. There were 13 steps. We could talk about how the project was borne of the terrible error of my brother's death and my memories of him, and that this project, commemorate this terrible error. We could talk about how as the car was winched into the water on a bright, sunny day in May, it started to rain...

There is an epilogue. When I collected the wrapped up remains of the car from The Bluecoat after the final installation I needed someone to help me load the van. I was thinking of all the people I knew who lived in Liverpool and, just for a moment, I considered ringing my brother even though his death had catalysed the project five years earlier. I thought to myself as I drove home on the A50, the original route I had taken on 17 May 2004, in a van packed with the crushed remains of the car, that time does heal and that this commemoration of his death, this repetition of my recollections of the day on which he died, now 20 years ago, had brought him back to life or kept alive his memory. I have not told you my brother's name. My brother's name is Robert. *But still you lead me back. To the long and winding road. You left me standing here. A long, long time ago. Don't leave me waiting here. Lead me to your door.*²⁴

This is my car. This is my car history. This is the end of the road. Thank you for joining me on the journey.

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