

Sit with me for a moment and remember – Presentation at TaPRA Gallery 2017

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A bench with a plaque reading Sit with me for a moment and remember is placed in a gallery and an encounter takes place. 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 want to talk about a piece of work I am exhibiting here at the TaPRA Gallery. It has evolved over the last 10 years from an installation to a performance to an installation again. It started life when I saw a bench in a park in Nottingham with the simple dedication – *Sit with me for a moment and remember*. It was a sunny day and the birds were singing. I thought this was the most beautiful invitation and because there was no name it felt like an invitation open to anyone. In 2008, I was invited to take an installation to a biennale in Italy. I bought a bench and asked an engraver on a Nottingham market stall to engrave a plaque with the same dedication – *Sit with me for a moment and remember*. He said he had done it before. The piece evolved into a one-to-one performance I presented for five years to over 500 people, the bench has a history and a journey and those people are now part of it. In 2012, it was shortlisted for the Cultural Olympiad, I wanted to install 2012 benches across the East Midlands with the same inscription to create a temporary community of memory, to invite a two-minute silence at 20:12 each day of the year. Some of the photos in this slideshow are from that proposal and show that potential community.

Framed as a one-to-one performance, the piece was originally designed as an encounter for one audience member at a time in a public place, a market square, a busy thoroughfare. The audience member was invited to put on a pair of headphones and listen to the audio. At a certain point in this audio they were invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. When they opened their eyes a performer sat next to them, turned to them and smiled. After the narrative took the audience member on a journey through a busy city and how we remember, they were again invited to close their eyes for 10 seconds. At this point, the performer reached out, held the hand of the audience member, and then disappeared. When the audience member opened their eyes, they were alone again. The piece was performed in two iterations, one by Nicki Hobday and one by me, each time the voice was different but the text

was the same, each time we became both a stranger and a ghost, a living presence and a fleeting memory of someone the audience may have lost. The audience was invited to read the plaque on the bench aloud to themselves as both an incantation and dedication.

Let's say this aloud. Sit with me for a moment and remember. Let's close our eyes and count to 10. 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. Think about someone or something you lost. Now open your eyes.

A meditation on memory and loss, the piece enacts an encounter with an absent friend or loved one. It invites a moment of reflection in an otherwise busy world and asks the visitor to sit and remember someone or something. The text in the audio recording you can hear in the gallery, spoken by my friends, parents and children, becomes a mediated presence and evokes a fleeting memory of someone you may have lost. Looking at the piece through the lens of performance and Practice as Research itself, I will relate the work to writing on absence by Peggy Phelan, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Ranciere. I consider how it performs absence and, in doing so, evokes memories of presence, through the voices of my absent protagonists.

This installation continues my ongoing research interests into 'staging loss' and performing absence that recently surfaced in a symposium co-convened with Andrew Westerside at the University of Lincoln, *Staging Loss: Performance as Commemoration* and will inform a forthcoming book of the same name. It continues a thread of working with my family on previous performances. In all cases, as absent protagonists, their voices evoke the 'aesthetic (of) the invisible'.¹ My colleague at the University of Lincoln, Sreenath Nair coins this phrase to describe the ontology of performance and its (dis)appearance in order to problematise the dichotomy of presence and absence. As Phelan writes, 'performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance'.² This iteration saw me stage it as an installation for the first time and record it as a dialogue instead of a monologue. A dialogue between two children. A conversation between brother and sister. A conversation happening on the bench, either side of where the visitor sits, as if the children are sitting there too. They ask the visitor to close their eyes and imagine them. It feels like a new conversation has started here. A conversation about memory, family and loss. A conversation that informs much of my work to date.

When I asked my daughter what she thought of hearing her voice in the piece she said 'It was like listening to the past'. When my son saw the installation with an ipod Velcro-ed to the bench he crawled underneath and tried to take it off. As Baudrillard said, 'The child's first relation to its toy is: how can I break it?'. Tim Etchells, Director of Forced Entertainment, writes of their performance work: 'we have this similar sort of relationship to theatre.' I asked my son why he did this and he said 'Because I was bored I wanted to play on your ipod'. I asked him whether he thought it was an artwork and he said 'I don't know'. I asked him to describe what it was, specifically, 'Was it a performance?' He said: 'It was a waste of time'. What became clear was the inherently unpredictable dramaturgy and 'toy-breaking' potential of working with children. I asked the children if they would like to be involved and they said yes.

They took their time over reading the text and, after a short period of rehearsal, we pressed record. Birds sing in the background. There are moments when they hesitate or misread a word, or change the text to something they would rather say, or interrupt each other, or hit each other. The text is broken like Baudrillard's toy and their inherent child-ness comes into play. The text is rewritten, more theirs than mine, more child-like, more honest, more real, more them, less theatrical. It is unprofessional and imperfect, amateur in the sense that it is performed out of love and, like Etchells describes, 'the work invokes this idea of a rather shabby situation where theatre is finished, broken and you're picking it up and prodding it to see what can remain, what can be done with this'.³ As David Williams, writes: 'Let its seams, stitchings, flaws be visible - it is provisional, contingent, in process, ravelled and unravelling, human, imperfect, a made thing still being made'⁴. We decided to leave these moments in and 'let its flaws be visible' or to 'dialectise the visible' to quote academic, Mischa Twitchin.⁵

The bench piece, like memory itself, is a made thing still being made. Derrida considers how we might perform absence and, in doing so, evoke memories of presence. He writes 'Theatre is born of its own disappearance'.⁶ In the bench piece, the appearance and disappearance of the performer enacts a moment of present absence: a loved one is found then lost; loneliness is replaced with togetherness and then returned to loneliness again. The bench piece speaks of commemoration and how we remember both as individuals and as a nation. Traditionally on Remembrance Sunday, we stand and reflect for two minutes to remember the fallen.

In recent times, we have stood to remember tragic events more often. Sometimes this silence is disrupted by the everyday and our stillness and moment of reflection can become more incongruous. Birds sing in the background. As the text says in the bench piece:

*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 we lost. A two-minute silence to look at the sky and wonder why. A two-minute silence that makes us want to cry. A two-minute silence that makes us want to stop the clocks...*⁷

Phelan writes about how 'Performance marks the body itself as loss'.⁸ She asks how the ephemeral nature of a live act might 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'.⁹ Sitting on the bench with a stranger, and perhaps more so, waiting around the corner to appear when they closed 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, of them stopping like Apollinaire on Le Pont Mirabeau or Auden's clocks. They became an accidental statue, an impromptu mannequin challenge, a private act in public, their act of remembrance was a made thing still being made.

Their choice to resist the flow of people, like the flow of the River Seine, or the flow of time itself, was rewarded by a personal one-to-one encounter with a stranger. Their experience of the piece was different to others as each person to sit on the bench was invited to remember someone only they knew. As Matthew Goulish says, 'Some words speak of events, other words, events make us speak'.¹⁰ I have come to take this as an instruction for making performance that only I can make, about stories only I can tell. It articulates an artist's impulse to make a piece of work about an event. The bench piece, or more specifically, the text, 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 the temporal traumas in my own history, what Auerbach describes as '... within the flowing stream of historical life'.¹¹

As Philip Larkin wrote of his poems, the children are coming, the parents are going.¹² And here I am sitting on a bench, or standing on a 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'.¹³ After the piece, 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 attached to the underside of the bench. A wire that allows the audience member to sit wherever they want on the bench. This is a deliberate strategy: to give the audience member a comfort zone in which they can be on their own. The technology allows us to be 'alone together' as described by Sherry Turkle in her recent book of the same name.¹⁴ As Jacques Ranciere wrote (after Mallarme): 'Apart we are together, together we are apart'.¹⁵ The bench piece sits on this axis between togetherness and apartness, belonging and longing, love and loss.

Writer and art critic, Wayne Burrows, who saw the original incarnation of the piece wrote this in response: 'It's a curious experience, emotionally engaging, and given undeniable power by the physical contact – fleeting as it may be – involved in its performance. The piece 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'.¹⁶ In conclusion, with this work, I want to initiate debate about sharing our personal stories, about what different voices can evoke and the materiality of memory. The next step would be to record the text with other voices, older voices, younger voices, voices with different accents, speaking different languages, to continue the conversation. Working with my family has enacted a new register for my work and beta-tested new ways of making. Put simply, it enabled me to 'open my eyes' and re-embrace acts of remembrance. It has explored the axis of both 'making strange' and 'making familiar' the ritual of remembering a loved one.

It has enabled me to explore how people can perform the text without acting it, their child-ness, their 'not knowing-ness' creates a space where it feels more real.

And birds sing...

Now please all close your eyes. And count with me to 10. And as you do so hold the hand of the person next to you. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Now please open your eyes. Thank you.

¹ Sreenath Nair, *Taste: The Aesthetics of (the) Invisible*, IFTR, Stockholm (13-17 June 2016).

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge: 1993), p. 148.

³ Peter Billingham, *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatists: Edgar, Etchells, Greig, Gupta and Ravenhill* (London: Methuen Drama, 2007), pp. 169-170.

⁴ David Williams, 'Geographies of Requiredness: Notes on the Dramaturg in Collaborative Devising*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20.2, p. 201.

⁵ Mischa Twitchen, 'Missing 'people'', TaPRA 2017, Salford (30 August – 1 September 2017).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 223.

⁷ Pinchbeck, Michael, *Sit with me for a moment and remember*, dir. by Michael Pinchbeck (Manchester: Hazard Festival 2012).

⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge: 1993), p. 148.

⁹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alcools. Le Livre de Poche*, 2014.

¹⁰ Matthew Goulish, *39 Microlectures in Proximity of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 152.

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 75.

¹² Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

¹³ Stephen Bottoms, 'Authorizing the Audience: The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch', *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), 65-76.

¹⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. (USA: Basic Books, 2011).

¹⁵ Jacques Ranciere (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso, 59.

¹⁶ Wayne Burrows (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).