

Some thoughts on performing the self, and womens' diaries

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Theatre of the Self is a project about historical reality, perceived subjectivity and selfhood. A performance of making and unmaking, the performance score was completed between 10th April - 10th July 2017.

Score for *theatre of the self*:

Date started : 30 diaries (1977-2007)

30 days (not consecutive)

Each day read a diary, save something, burn the rest.

Document with one photo of reading, one photo of burning.

The documentation was shared on social media (Instagram) on the day, giving it a similar sense of immediate recording that we believe diary writing to have.

Project Notes:

From the age of 14, I wrote almost a daily diary or journal. Initially firmly entrenched in religious belief, it records my fall from 'grace'. It also records my experiences, thoughts, and emotions, as they were then. They potentially capture a unique image of what I actually am, instead of what I think I am. Many of the memories I have forgotten or changed, as I write and re-write the story of myself, as we all do, almost daily.

In this performance project I claim the right to produce myself 'as an object in the work, (revealing) the practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection', (Foucault (1984:63) quoted in ed Du gay, Evans and Redman, *Identity a reader*, p.26). This practice of self-production illuminates the process of performativity, the creation and perception of self, a theatre that we are all daily engaged in.

We tell ourselves stories about ourselves, flexibly and fluidly telling our own truths. Would confronting 'truth' in diaries, change who I think I am? The process of the performance threw up other fictions in re-performing identity, and its constant re-creation. And destruction.

Of course burning books is a seemingly political and perhaps overly dramatic act. It made the project more emotive and provocative, to think about truth, writing and objects, and

‘what to retain, what to dump, how to hold onto what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change.’ (John Berger)

The diaries were mine to destroy (and yes ultimately I did keep snippets, and my diary from 1986 was given to my daughter, at her request, instead of burnt, but the project was more about the process of reading, re-editing than complete destruction.

The project linked broad reaching, disparate concerns in my arts practice:

- use of writing (feminist project of writing the body)
- our relationships with stuff, objects, things
- historicity, time, and memory
- representations of maternity
- fragmentation and destruction as metaphors for renewal
- performing female subjectivity
- presenting the fluidity of gendered self (selves) as a metaphysical and political act

Day one: Monday 10th April

Today I revisited my 14 year old self.

I took what I wanted. I burned the rest.

(posted with image of burning diary no. 1, from 1977)

Editing the self in this way, selecting material and memories, is part of 'knowing as recollecting'. The self is transformed via echo and feedback, resonance and echo. In *Phenomenal woman: feminist metaphysics and the patterns of identity*, Christine Battersby writes of the female, fluid self, in whose shifting complex identities,

'self-emerges [in] a relational dynamic between past, present and future'.(p.204)

Diaries are kept for many reasons, defined as writing that is first person, written at that moment, sequential, with no prescience as to the future, it is 'a social practice which actively constitutes reality', yet as Hassan argues in *Writing and Reality, a study of Modern British Diary Fiction*, the diary can never be a completely 'immediated transcription of reality since it is constructed...and is a highly coded form of signification'. (Greenwood Press, 1993, p.34)

In de-constructing and de-coding my own seemingly truthful, un-expurgated versions of myself, I am choosing to construct new realities, which are no less real, nor less 'my self'. Culture conceives of diaries as revealing the true self, 'as it spontaneously records the immediacy of the living moment ' in what Derrida calls 'pervasive metaphysics of presence '- (Derrida :1996 in Hassan, 1993), underpinning Western ways of thinking the self. The process of reading the diaries and destroying them became not just a way of dealing with stuff, (what to keep, what to destroy), and my relationship with past traumas (yes it *was* a cathartic process) *and* of intentionally revealing cultural structures and confines of gendered visibility and experience.

It became very much part of

'a call to claim time and rehearse whatever is necessary for [my] own sense of history, community and body' (Catherine Grant: (Oxford art Journal 39:3, 2017, p. 375)

In *Towards a Performative Politics of Time in the Work of Monica Ross*, Alexandra M. Kokoli, draws our attention to both mourning and melancholia

as generative opportunities for remembrance and new departures. It was very sad to re-visit parts of my past, and there was something truly melancholic about watching the diaries slowly turning to ash (I resisted collecting it and displaying in vials like Susan Hiller), yet also something strangely triumphant. It is potentially a new departure for me to stop obsessing about the past (or try, as my daughter has told me to do). The destruction of my diaries un-tethered me, from a need to see my history in sequential order, (a reference Mieke Bal's notion of 'preposterous history'), and gave me the potential to liberate myself from old ties of guilt, and as they say "move on".

Yet it was not intended to be merely cathartic, the process of, the performance of 'unmaking,' becomes a metaphor for 'making'; holding possibilities for transformational selves, multiplying possibilities for the self and complex female identities. It is part of an artistic endeavour to find visual and conceptual means to break stereotypes of mothers and women, and to find, represent and hold ideas about the

'unfinalizable process by which a person becomes for the first time that which he is' (Della Pollock 1999, quoted in Battersby's article 'Representational strategies and the culture of birth', *Women a cultural review* winter 2006/7 vol 17, no 3).

In my diaries, I found excerpts of what Hassan (1993) calls 'interpolated' or 'discursive' writing. Writing about reading previous diary writing, I wrote,

"My diaries read like historio-graphic meta-fiction. They made moments real moments I had entirely forgotten, passages in my history and my children's that were lost. Historicity is the changing of history as read in the moment. The present contaminates the past.

I found the experience of reading my histories and thought, recorded with questionable veracity and detail at the time, questionably selected at a later date, cathartic and revealing. The difficulties, and joys of three small children, and later of distance and physical change, only part of the work. I remember the diary entry, and there were a few of these...'what a lovely day we had.....,

ending with 'a day I will never forget'. I had already forgotten. I am fascinated by what we remember, what we choose to remember, and the psychological repercussions for Western Society in these selections when it comes to mother-child relationships.”

Such thoughts have been echoed in other artistic projects over the years, most literally in *Loss*, where diary texts about my children were made into sculptures of their clothing, where the text was intentionally undecipherable. I wrote:

‘In *Loss* the selection of signs and signifiers is arbitrary, as is the possibility of reading what is ‘lost’ as the excerpts are blurred and buried by latex. It is un-interpretable. The past cannot be duly represented. Attempt to capture ‘reality’ is subverted, yet something is strangely preserved; tenderness, desire and a kind of *presentism*, which is not nostalgia’.



Much of my work focuses on the role of maternity for women and how it might be represented, finding ways in which the anomalies of motherhood can be expressed aesthetically through performance, sculpture and painting. Doing this without undue monstrosity or schmaltz, remains a challenge. I hope always to find ways I might express visually, things that I sometimes feel I get close to in words:

April 20th 2006: ‘My work is me. How I survive, and to smile to greet another day. How I come to terms. How my experiences of self and more-than-self

(motherhood) can be soothed by acceptance of ambivalence in everything; the beauty and strange ugliness that is experience’.

Reading and destroying the day to-day diaries of religion, motherhood, and destructive relationships over 30 years was a very personal project, I have a greater sense of self (relief that past is over and now is actually better). It has transformed how I write and record. I no longer worry about what is left behind.

And the project will continue in other ways. *Theatre of the Self* has many potential final outcomes. Maybe it is just it is this writing. Maybe another performance or installation in which time lapse and interval might be used to affect further discursive interplays between ‘history’ and ‘reality’. Aesthetic presentations of work that feature womens’ diaries, and the ways in which women can represent themselves, as a political and theoretical act of survival:

‘The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for woman far more than a chapter in cultural history;it is an act of survival.

Adrienne Rich

Addendum:Last diary entry June 12th 2017

ON WHY I HAVE STOPPED WRITING A DIARY: I have stopped writing a diary (in the same way), because I am happy (not miserable); I have a sense of self (which I explore in other ways); I don’t feel the need to record everything I do (for no-one). If I write I want it to be beautiful, not just immediate; I’m running out of time to bloody read through all my diaries again, and I realise I don't want to bequest my nonsense to anyone.