

Theatre of the self

women's diaries, performing the self, and developing representations of women's lives

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

Score for *theatre of the self*

30 diaries (1977-2007)

30 days (not consecutive)

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

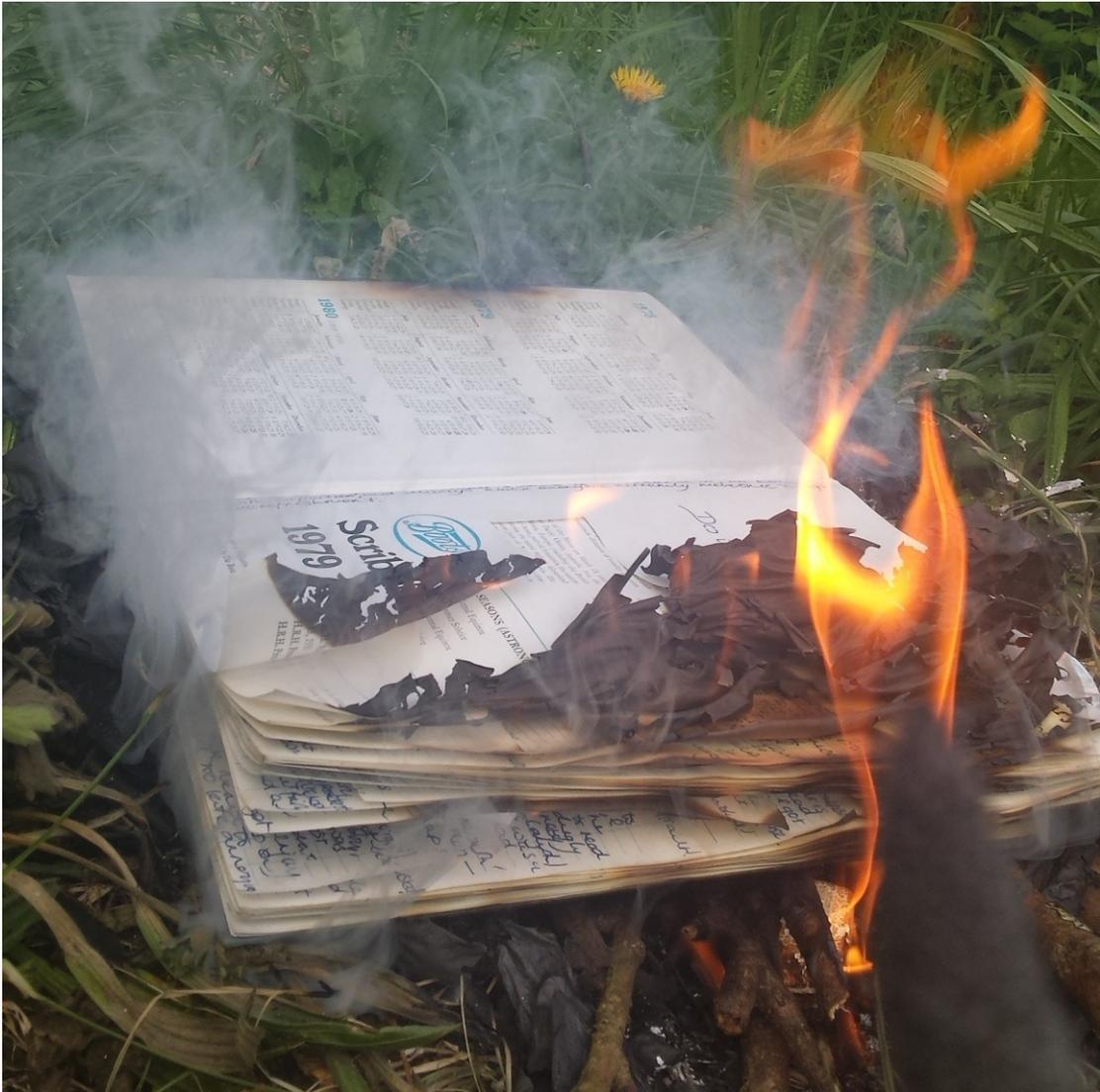
Document with one photo of reading, one photo of burning.

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

From the age of 14, I wrote almost a daily diary or journal. 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 claimed 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 am or 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.



Day one: Monday 10th April

Today I revisited my 14 year old self.

I took what I wanted. I burned the rest.

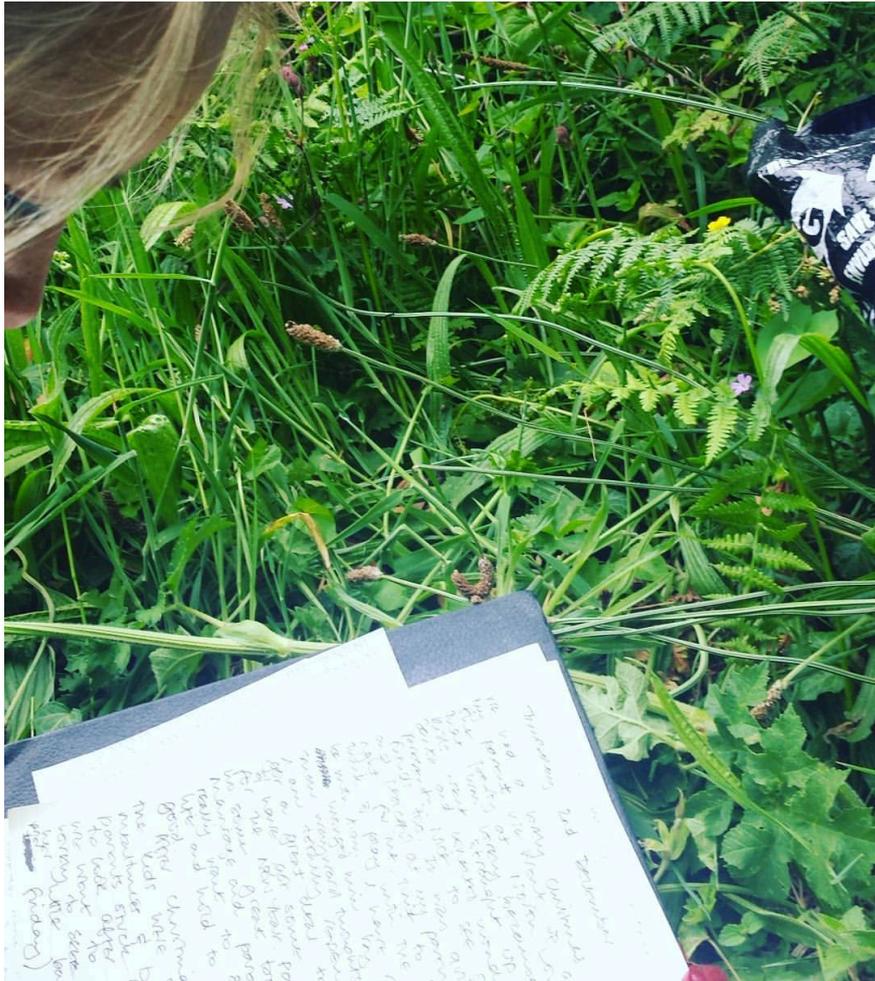
(posted with image of burning diary no. 1, from 1977)

Of course burning books is a seemingly political and perhaps overly dramatic act. It made the project an emotive and provocative way of thinking 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 project is about creation of self not destruction. It explores the ways in which women have infinite potential to fluidly re-edit and re-write the narrative structures that contain and restrict them. 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)



Diary Reading, July 2017

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'.

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 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) but 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. The destruction of my diaries un-tethered me, from a need to see my history in sequential order, 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 represent the

'unfinalizable process by which a person becomes for the first time that which [s]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).

The project is on-going and dialogically uses a variety of media including objects, films and texts linking disparate concerns in my arts practice:

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

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. I am fascinated by what we remember, what we choose to remember, and the psychological repercussions for Western Society in representing the ambivalence and contradictions of mothering. Finding ways in which the anomalies of caring roles for women can be expressed aesthetically in art without undue monstrosity or schmaltz remains a challenge and exploring our potential for change and becoming other than stereotypical representations is essential for women in surviving trauma in their lives. Performing the self and its potential as fluid and able to become other than is 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

