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IN A CLEARING

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Abstract

This paper explores how my site-responsive and performance-based art practice embodies and re-inflects aspects of Hannah Arendt, Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero's philosophical writings. At a juncture between philosophy and art I discuss my working methodology and how this seeks to embody a form of practice-based ecological thinking.

The idea of a performative political arena is discussed in relation to Irigaray's writings on air; she speaks of "the clearing" — "the place of entry into presence" (Irigaray, 1999, p.1). This clearing embodies "the condition of possibility, the resource, the groundless ground" (p. 5); here subjects flow into each other in non-appropriative relational interplay. Through discussion of my performance *its song* — an ambulatory reading of fragments of Irigaray's writing set in dialogue with danced movement - I elucidate orchestrations of body, text and architecture in relation to Irigaray's clearing.

Cavarero's writing on the uniqueness of each voice and her reference to Levinas' distinction between "the saying" and "the said" is used to explore how the specificity of live performance — its ephemerality and situatedness — can bring to the fore and "recuperate 'the very significance of signification'" (Cavarero, 2005, p. 29); discussing this in relation to *[these roarers]*: a durational participatory performance made in collaboration with Bernice Donszelmann and Lucy Gunning on Whitstable beach, that drew together movement, the rhythm and fragility of speech with the rhythm and mutability of the coastal borderline.

I use Arendt's concepts of natality and plurality to explore a politics of participatory space and collective embodiment. Arendt's idea of "the gap between past and future" (Arendt, 2006, p. 12) is important here, as for her the present moment is a gap in which we can become "challengers" (p. 4) thinking and acting anew. My performance *TO LIVE* (currently in development) that enacts interplay between dancers, an oboist and gestures of protest is discussed in relation to this.

Keywords: Performance, Architecture, Feminism, Embodiment, Space, Politics

IN A CLEARING

At a juncture between philosophy and art this paper discusses my site-responsive installational and performance-based art practice's embodiment of aspects of Luce Irigaray, Adriana Cavarero and Hannah Arendt's philosophical writings. Such live work can be said to enact a complex fusion of life as it unfolds and a meta space of presentation and representation: a structure that is pivotal to the three works by me discussed here.

Architectures in Air (Brixton Tate Library, 2023) was a site-responsive curatorial project realised in collaboration with artist Bernice Donszelmann. In the library's flexible multi-use room, a collaborative architectural intervention acted as a frame for curated events and ongoing library activities (see Figure 1). A spatial arena was demarcated by painting the existing banks of low-level heating pipes blue. Thus encircled, the "void" of the room's body of air was given status as a condition of possibility. Through this gesture our curatorial focus on air was aligned to the more holistic attitude of Eastern philosophical traditions in which "Vacuum is all potent because all containing" (Okakura, 1956, p. 45).

Figure 1

"Frame/Tilt"—a site-responsive architectural painting, Brixton Tate Library 2023 (Bernice Donszelmann and Helen Robertson).



My performance *its song* (see Figure 2), worked with interplay between an ambient live reading of fragments of Luce Irigaray's *The Forgetting of Air* (1999) and a danced choreography that embodied ideas of breath and architectural voids.

Figure 2

"its song", performance view Brixton Tate Library 2023 (Helen Robertson with Antoinette Brooks-Daw)



In Irigaray's text, air is seen to resist appropriation, as it exists within us and beyond, allows movement, sustains us and is something we share. Her book enacts a dialogical form, as if in conversation with Heidegger — "to take away from him this solid ground" (Irigaray, 1999, p. 2) — her response expounding a notion of "a clearing"; "the place of entry into presence" (p. 3). This concept of a clearing is "Of air."; an embodiment of "the condition of possibility, the resource, the groundless ground" engendering a radical space of reciprocity and resonance (p. 5). Here, intersubjectivity is part of a flow that cannot be separated out into fixed subject positions.

From their mouth are breathed sounds that mean to say nothing — that are just the inspiration that will strike the other with feelings and thoughts overflowing these sounds.
A versicle for the most part inaudible to that which they forefeel in the wind. (p.178)

Here, Irigaray articulates a space of embodied sensory relation, a space of *becoming* where edges dissolve. In this space processes of signification, that is to say, the specificity of the situational, live, ever-shifting interplay between bodies and place — that constructs signifieds — becomes more important than, or dissolves, what is said. Through this, language's desire to fix and contain falls apart, leading us towards embodied states that

connect to forms of understanding that are non-verbal. In resonance with this, *its song* worked with interplay between breath and bodily movement: the reader and dancer circling the room, each other and the audience; each element interdependent as well as free.

[these roarers]

[these roarers] (see Figure 3), a participatory event made in collaboration with artists Lucy Gunning and Bernice Donszelmann on Whitstable beach (Whitstable Biennale, 2018) also enacts a dialogical structure.³⁵ Across the space of a day, friends, the wider public and students read to each other from a series of curated texts, whilst also performing simple choreographed movements embodying the rhythm of voice, breath, wind and tide. Through this, excerpts of appropriated texts from different historical periods referencing sea, land, weather and human agency were brought into dialogical relation with the mutability of the coastal borderline and the contingent embodied experience of those present.

Figure 3

“*[these roarers]*”, *performance view, Whitstable Biennale, 2018 (Bernice Donszelmann, Lucy Gunning and Helen Robertson).*



An intimacy was created as participants came together in groups of three, drawing close to listen to one another’s voices amidst the sound of the elements and footfall in the shingle. At times words were lost in the wind and waves, shared air passing through the lungs of each reader dispersing to infinity. The interrelation this created was perhaps felt all the more

³⁵ Helen Robertson, Lucy Gunning, and Bernice Donszelmann, *[these roarers]* - press release (June 2, 2018), <https://www.helenrobertson.net/-these-roarers--text.html>

strongly at moments when the voice became inaudible; the immersion in rhythm — the movement of bodies, air and water — giving rise to a non-verbal synchronicity and a heightened sense of the interrelation and interdependency of bodily and wider climatic fields.

Reading aloud here created an embodied interplay in which processes of signification — that is to say, bodily movement, the sound of the voice, weather and site — became almost more important, or as important, as what was said. In *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* Cavarero (2005) discusses a lacuna in western philosophy: its failure to explore an ontology of unique specificity embodied in each individual voice, and the philosophical canon's focus on logos prioritising the signified at the expense of embodied processes of signification. With reference to Emmanuel Levinas, Cavarero speaks of a need to "recuperate 'the very significance of signification'" (p. 29). She argues that the focus on the said rather than the saying overlooks the contextual and the embodied, divorcing us from our interconnection with each other and the wider contextual ecological fields we are part of. In my view, live work is a space in which to address this problem, as the very liveness of performance and site-responsive installation — its ephemerality, and situatedness, and its staging of relational and embodied processes of signification — enact an idea of lived and transient relations, destabilising the logos within the field of liveness.

TO LIVE

In *TO LIVE* (a live performance currently in development; see Figure 4) written text is set in counterpoint to choreographies of bodily movement (danced and pedestrian) and an oboe score embodying spatial reverberations of breath. In parallel to an activation of text, two dancers enact interplay between the disciplines of ballet and contemporary dance — one embodying air and lightness, the other, earth and the grounded. An activation of breath links both and is affirmed and unsettled through the haunting reverberating oboe score. Whilst devised separately, each choreographic score — textual, danced, pedestrian and musical — will respond to the given space, the scores coming together in a semi-improvised live interplay with spatial specificity.

Working to problematise Western philosophy's foundational disjuncture between the logos and the haptic, the work's contrapuntal pedestrian choreographic element, in which sixteen A1 posters are held up at intervals, uses dialogical interplay between the written word and the corporeal. The unstable paper surface of the posters, the sensuality of their different coloured grounds and the movement of their rectangular geometries through air within the field of the performance's architectural arena embeds the text in a movement that is relational and contextual in interplay with living bodies.

Figure 4

An iteration of TO LIVE made for camera: video still of this filmed choreography Hanging in the Balance, Five Years, London 2023 (Helen Robertson, supported by CSM Research).



The posters present fragments from political philosopher Hannah Arendt's prescient writing on the destructive forces of capitalist and totalitarian ideologies, wherein "nothingness and no-bodiness threaten to destroy the world" (Arendt, 2005 p. 204), juxtaposing these with fragments of text by Cavarero (2005), whose political philosophy responds to Arendt (see Figure 5). Western philosophy's reliance on the abstract is for Cavarero (2000) a form of violence. "It is almost as though it is the attribution of universality itself that makes a monster of Man" (p. 8). In response to Arendt, Cavarero (2000) explores how recognition of the embodied uniqueness of each individual can allow for an inter-relational approach: vulnerability and interdependence being fundamental to the ethics of non-violence Cavarero expounds.

TO LIVE embodies Arendt's image of the "oases in the desert". For Arendt (2005) the "oases" were metaphorical, symbolising a space of resistance to the alienation that capitalism and totalitarian politics engender. Describing this alienation as "worldlessness" (p. 201), she saw "the oases" as vital for nurturing creative thought. "Without the intactness of these oases we would not know how to breathe, and political scientists should know this" (p. 202).

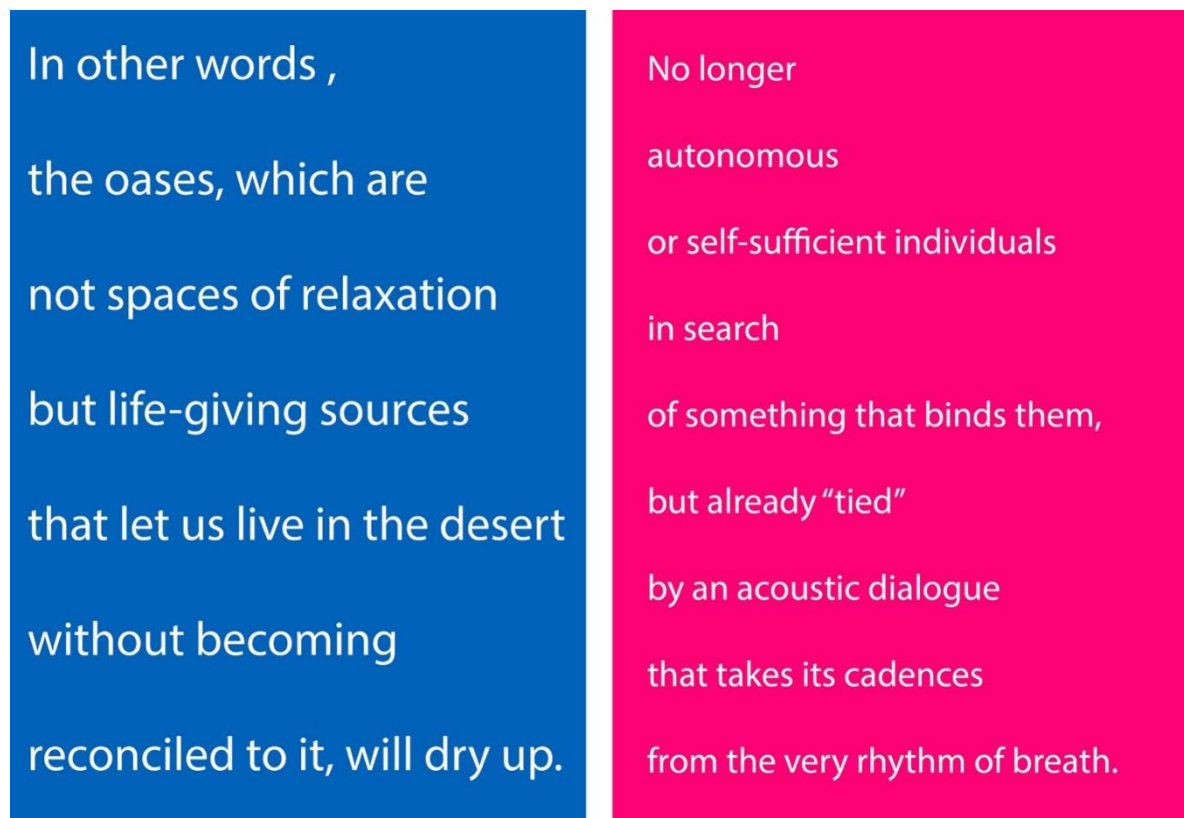
In the contemporary political context — global warming increasing exponentially, driven by the prevailing capitalist and neo-liberalist mindset — Arendt's "desert" which is now real, has new import, as does Cavarero's ethics of non-violence.

Counter to Western philosophy's preoccupation with death, Arendt's idea of "natality" allows for a transformational notion of politics wherein each new life holds the potential to

think anew. Arendt (2006) explores the notion of a “gap of time between past and future” (p. 12) in which we can become “challengers” (p. 4), each individual within the plurality having the potential to act on the world. For Arendt, existence is not essence but appearing (I see this as a form of *becoming*) — the individual “exposed” and “exposing” within a plurality; a being in relation to others that is inherently political (Cavarero, 2000, p. 21). Live performance for me enacts this gap (see Figure 6): it has the potential to bring into consciousness this political space because it plays out in real time, heightening the contextual nature of lived experience and our awareness of our relation to each other.

Figure 5

“TO LIVE”, A1 Posters (Helen Robertson). Text from *The Promise of Politics* (Arendt, 2005) and *For More Than One Voice* (Cavarero, 2025).



In other words ,
the oases, which are
not spaces of relaxation
but life-giving sources
that let us live in the desert
without becoming
reconciled to it, will dry up.

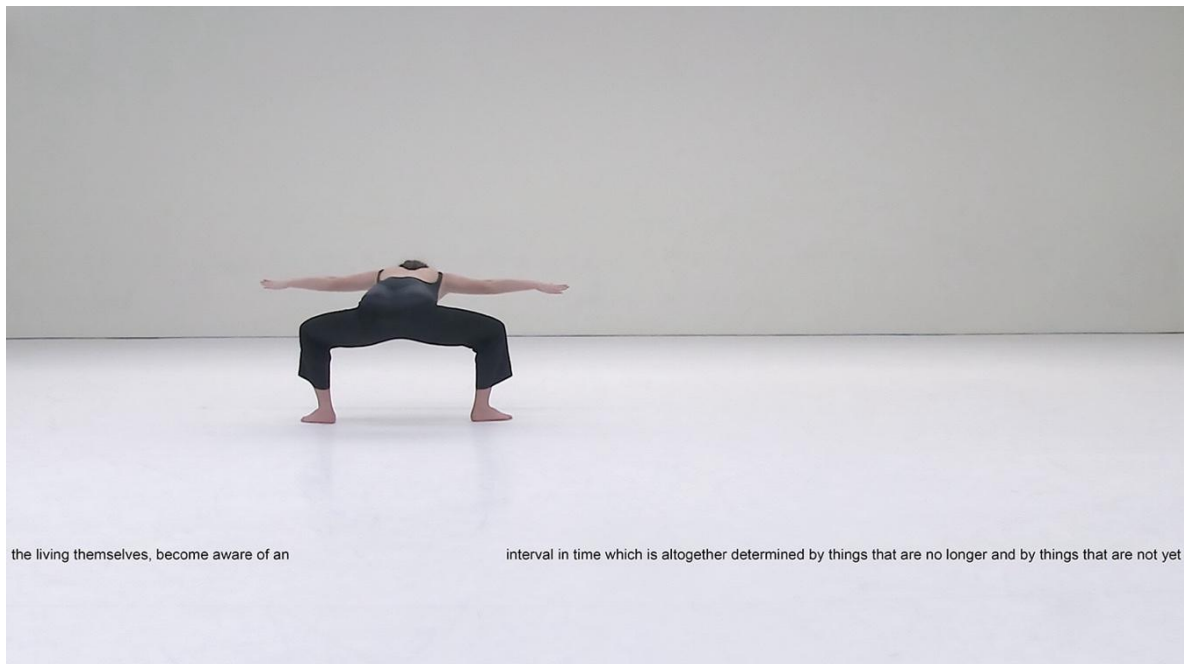
No longer
autonomous
or self-sufficient individuals
in search
of something that binds them,
but already “tied”
by an acoustic dialogue
that takes its cadences
from the very rhythm of breath.

Conclusion

By working with the sensory and the spatially embodied, each work discussed seeks to heighten the audience’s sense of participatory involvement, so they become part of the choreography — they too are *exposed* and *exposing* — the performance arena involving them in their own sense of agency and interdependence. The speculative, plural and political nature of this multi-sensory live arena thus holds potential to shift entrenched appropriative attitudes prevalent in contemporary Western culture.

Figure 6

In the gap between past and future, digital print, 2021 (Helen Robertson).

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