

## Postcards to Performance

*(about time)*

*time. land. & a hand to smooth over* – Carlyle Reedy

Until the day my hands touched the torn edges of the exhibition catalogue *About Time: Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists*, I'd mainly been in love with America – that is 1970s American, feminist performance art. Carolee and Hannah, not Tina and Carlyle. Carlyle is technically American, but she was working in Britain, like the majority of the artists showing in the ICA exhibition, which later toured the country. The show gathered 21 works from an open submission competition, with each work dramatising the durational quality of women's video and performance art to political and feminist effect. For the most part, the artists used their own bodies as material, staging a performance of self that made them the subject *and* object of the work in a playful cannibalisation of authorship. It was a tantalising but tricky exhibitionism, wherein the artists flirted with their own visibility.

The political weight of this work is also found in its resistance to material reproduction; instead, with its ephemeral bodies of disappearance, and its documentary fragments that only slice the performed moment into a discontinuous part of the whole, *about time* art wanders free.

Kathy O'Dell: *The history of performance art is one that flickers, one that causes the historian to shuttle back and forth between that which is seen and that which has to be imagined – between the visible and the invisible.*

The front cover of the catalogue is printed in the documentary grain of the monochrome, with the repeating female heads of Catherine Elwes's 1978 videotape *Cate and Shauna Play Quietly* providing the illustration. That much is visible. The women are standing in profile, dark lips locked tight, and as the heads accrue and multiply, they also begin to fade, with the girl at the vanishing point just a ghostly shadow.

The epistolary archive that I write here stems from that ghost of a girl: she will double and triple and dance in numbers, as I add pages and bodies to this book. From touching this exhibition document in a library, I am looking to touch this text anew, with loving hands that write with pleasure, desiring that which is invisible, can no longer be seen or touched. From the bodies of this book, I also add Annabel, Marie and Helen, in a text of timely agitation.

Carol Mavor: *“Performance” names my own refusal to give into transitivity and the pleasure that I take in the intransitivity of actual photographs, in the nature of photography itself, and in the construction of my own writing.*

It is ‘about time’ these ghosts are re-membered, in a text that performs their disappearance. I have stolen the title of the 1980 ICA exhibition for *this*: my fresh, fragmented archive of women artists who made work *about time*, through loose narratives set in and around the sea, the land, body and language. These material substances are mediated and transformed in the measured beat of each film, or the passing time of performance, as they are reprocessed in the lasting, thing-like trace of the live. The writing I use to perform this passing will run fast and loose with time, history and words, from third person to first to second: it is not a document, but a drama, an embodied sheet of echoed voices, re-stitched through Sappho-like, scattered sentences, visual fragments and part objects.

## 1. THE WAVES

Dear Annabel. You were one of the only women in the London Film-maker’s Co-op, and now you are the only girl on the beach, pushing the tide away. *Sweeping the Sea, 1975*. As I finger through the thin transparent folds of your artist book *Escaping Notice*, the material quality of the performance art document is as intangible as the lost event. Evading touch, and total vision. The bleached sky becomes a whitewashed sea in the photograph to which I am witness. I wish I could have witnessed it *for real*, but instead it’s the reality of the fragment that I desire in afterwords.

(Maggie Nelson: *the fragment as fetish, as catastrophe, as leftover, as sample or citation, as memory.*)

This is the only way that I can be there with you; to cancel out the time that keeps our bodies separate. Three faint photographs of you sweeping the sea distils a performance of ephemeral gesture into neat compartments, with the repetitious action of brushing pebbles in water, feeling strangely vital and pointless at once.

In this performance made for the page of an artist book, Annabel Nicolson staged an embodied encounter with a thing she once said: *It is what happens to things when they are not being looked at that puzzles me.* The sometimes slow, sometimes rapid roll of the waves is the happening that occurs unnoticed, its tidemarks swept away, moved, and then erased, before inevitably returning, by an artist called Annabel dressed in a ghostly white floor-length dress.

Annabel doesn't call herself Annabel, though: in the third person text narration, the artist prefers a strange and mysterious 'She'. *She* writes: *On a grey day in July she was seen sweeping the sea. No one noticed for a while and when they did they wondered how long she had been there. Her sweeping was slow and careful. She seemed calm with no force to match her tide.* The gentle flow of Annabel's live sweeping is shaken by her attempts to fix it in writing, as the elusive creature disappears, out of sight, to emerge as a character in a story, transformed. I am writing to the both of you, two performers.

Also writing to the Annabel of *Looking for Seals, Cornwall, 1976*, in which the artist searches for seals upon fog covered clifftops, with stone walls like *collapsing bookcases*. *It would've been better if we hadn't been looking for seals*, she writes of the futile endeavour in the aftermath, once she has withdrawn from the site in an act of material refusal.

Tina Keane deserves a scratched postcard, too, when considering the temporal drip of the waves in performance art. Her *Shadow of a Journey, 1976-80* (transferred to 16mm from Super 8) tells the story of the perilous departure of Gaelic speaking Scots across the Atlantic Ocean, and it is a story told in the abstract, undulating grain of shadows making marks on the water. The unpredictable flicker of light and dark upon the canvas of the sea is the source of her storytelling, the marks of a memory.

Tina caught these shadowy flickers on a boat trip to the Isle of Harris, a journey I am due to make in 2 weeks, notepad in hand.

## 2. WILD THINGS

Marie, in *Field Working Paper XXIV*, you scribbled notes on your journey, turned those fragments into a book the size of a postcard, and now I am scribbling postcard notes to you.

I think of you crawling through the landscape, a girl in a wood, an embodied encounter, on one day in June 1975. You caught the fleeting things, often forgotten or unseen, in sketched out words, a verbal, chromatic kind of drawing: *Glittering green light in the wood*. I picture your apple-shaped knees grazing the knotted trunks of the trees in Wistmans Wood with each skip and each step: with each pencilled note.

But the book is disembodied and empty of you, just the splayed hands of naked trees in faint black and white images. As you walked through the wood as an ephemeral gesture of bodily imprint, you stayed true to the transience of this movement like a woodland creature, calling up the senses in the postscript postcard: *From the wood comes the sound of a cuckoo. Very hot and bright with little cloud and deep blue sky*. You disappeared into the shadowy undergrowth with the snap ending of the performance, a short-lived journey.

(Or perhaps you were never there to start with.)

## 3. BODIES IN SHADOW

Tina Keane is a shadow woman, too. She used it as the title of her work from 1977, in which she played with her daughter in a performance of the game hopscotch. Girls together, this was feminist play and play as feminism, from the artist who once said that the role of women in performance was *more important in the development of feminist art than in any other media or area because it really cuts through*.

Cuts through and cuts deep: it wounds me with the fragmented edges of the torn photograph, the cut of the paper.

From here, my writing bleeds.

Each square contained text from a poem about the bonds between mother and daughter, and the passage of time, as seen through the visual metaphor of touching shadows. Close, yet strangely indistinct. Similar imagery is used in her *Shadow of a Journey*, with its two generations of women talking to one other through the unstable flicker of voice and shadow, refusing to rest still, like my writing you, as I make your shadowed presence known.

I try to imagine Tina reading this poem aloud, the mother outside of the grid: *The shadow of my daughter becomes the shadow of my life / As I will become the shadow of hers / as my mother / grandmother and great grandmother ...*

Tina, I write to you so that the embodied narration you once gave can find another body, so others can hear the scattered traces of your voice, across the play of time.

In gazing at cut-up photographs of chalked out squares: I dwell in yours and Emily's shadows, the immaterial marks of your corporeal presence. I find your shape in them as I dream what must have happened, of how you moved. The photographs look strangely static, so I write from the fleeting marks of dance captured in the lock of the image. I can hear Emily's laughter, the patter of her heel against the wooden floorboards. You are nowhere to be seen, but I can feel your presence all the same, in the fuzzy allusion of your silhouette behind the screen, or the grey refraction of your shadow. Present for the most of transient of moments, then gone, sent to the archive. I fill up your loss with writing.

As I do for Helen Chadwick, lost twice over – in performance, and in life, when she disappeared from the stage in 1976, and then *for real* in March 1996. As Tina would do two years later in her video performance *She*, with its playful re-enactment of shop windowed consumption, in *Domestic Sanitation, 1976* Helen made a strange carnival out of beauty rituals, and clothes made from latex and pubic hair. While in her earliest works she fashioned together female body parts from soft materials, in this work she built

prosthetics onto bodies, *enfleshed*. She was so young, still a student at Brighton Polytechnic University. I imagine your youthful skin, as soft as a sponge.

Can the silent relic of an image speak the optimism of youth? I feel a responsibility to try, to avoid writing her death first.

Della Pollock: *to write performance is not in and of itself to betray it. Rather, it seems to me, the betrayal consists in not writing it...*

Gazing at the photographic part objects of the ephemeral performance is the only way I can heal the time gone, by giving the documents an alternate kind of time, the time of the text.

*A lady smokes. She is wearing a calico dress with bows and fringe ties. Is she a hairdresser or a beautician? One other girl is dressed in pink, with big red nipples, and platforms on her feet. The girl in the chair is wearing white, and is ready for her consultation. The half-woman-half-bed looks angry, as she peels herself away from the springs.*

*In another image, black and white this time, a woman dressed in a black satin slip gazes into a mirror, her lacy accessories hanging on rails to choose from. Bras, gloves, stockings. Delicious fabrics to eat. Is this part of the performance or is she just getting ready? Like the photograph as a trace of the performance, her body is in shadow, a flicker of the past. I write according to this flicker, speculating, desiring, that this is the body of Helen.*

In 1989, this body wrote a poem called 'Soliloquy of the Flesh' – a prophecy and a manifesto in one, in which she wrote of *positing flesh-hood not as matter of image, but as process, a sequence of quantities of actions. Like a bout of hiccups, interactions keep making me happen, piecemeal*. Within a text of bodily image and corporeal fractures, Helen calls up the permutations of the body, and bodies of performance, as its durational lifeline, the stuff that makes it breathe.

Like Helen reading this poem aloud, this *about time* text is full of open mouths, gaps to give air to, so their flesh can speak. As Jane Blocker writes: *In thinking about the history of*

*performance art, I am really thinking about the ambivalence between aesthetics and the feminine. I am thinking about the mouth.*

## 5. LANGUAGE IN (BODY) PARTS

Carlyle Reedy's performances and poems are like Helen's fleshy soliloquys. You turned writing into an active encounter with the ephemeral hiccups of the body. The poem became as collaged and processed as the body in performance that made it happen.

Dear C, I think of your poems as performance art, inseparable from your live actions. I imagine you writing your texts with sensory immediacy, typewriter being banged upon with full throttle body force: the tappings of desire. Your writing feels as short lived and durational as the performances, as fleeting moments and ephemeral scenes are captured according to notational fragments, such as this simile of lost time: *scuffed torn books like kids sneakers*

*used to*

*pass on freedom*

The gaps you left on the page feel like gaps in time, the forgotten moments we pass over, escaping notice. In other poems such as 'the dogwood trees', you played with the permeations of the single word *come* in an orgasmic appendix of excess and process, the writing doubling upon itself in automatic twists and folds. And in other poems you mixed French and English in a polyglottal, transient mess. A mess I adore. I want to get messy with you in language, as you do in the poem 'Sung', with its photocopied collage elements infiltrating and dirtying the cleanliness of the words. The scribbled order of 'change this now' bleeds into the background text, as the collage and the poem becomes messy and one, a transient blur. Your writing is as active and restless as the body that hovered on stage or behind it.

I heard you sometimes didn't even turn up for the show: *the elusive Carlyle Reedy*. I love people who are late, or disappear, evading the running order or schedule. In writing your part history, can I run away with you in discontinuous fragments? Can I *love* you?

I've been reading your poems in the 1979 collection published by Lo bluff books, entitled *Sculpted in this World*. This could be metaphor for your live poetry sculptures, in which language was performed to and with the body in spatial, sculptural environments. Soliloquys of flesh.

(Eileen Myles: *Is this sculpture, is this activism. Is it poetry. Oui.*)

Apt that Carlyle renamed her 1977 performance at Riverside Studios from *The Good Wind* to *A Poet's Narrative*, given its full embrace of the mouth, its live spoken words, mixed with collaged fragments and images made by the artist. Slides were also projected in a sensory merging of the visual and verbal. From Mickey Mouse to Clark Gable.

*A white sheet of cloth hangs suspended in the centre of the room, creating a kind of shelter, but also a kind of monument, a flimsy transparent pyramid. I imagine the vocal bodies lingering in the shadows behind the illuminated structure.*

In the documentary notes to this work, as it was shown in the 1978 exhibition at ACME Gallery called *London Calling* (with Tina, Annabel and Rose showing amongst the men), you describe the illumination of this *collapsible structure COMBINATION PIECE* as follows: *This illumination can take place from within / from without. Its eventstructure can vary in the phenomenal. The image though is a container, an object which can be contemplated from the outside.* I relay her notes in repetitious writing performance, a circling and iterative sheet of writing, as you also kept on using this *paper cloth* in multiple performances.

When I imagine Carlyle collaging words onto paper or fabric, or tapping out the keys on her typewriter in unpredictable sequences, I picture her hands – the corporeal extensions of her writing.

She made a video of her hands in performance in 1983. She called it *Hands*. Across long takes of the artist's fleshy equipment to feel, we are witness to a tactile and amorphous encounter with language, as she draws, writes, scrawls and notes upon different surfaces. From ink on plastic, to ink on snow. Words emerge then disappear with the trace of her hand's movement. This is tactile writing in time.

Her hands are as restless as this archive, as fidgety as the shadows that swarm it. From Carlyle's hands to Annabel's arms to Marie's knees to Tina's mouth to Helen's (bed)frame, the bodies of this archive refuse to stay still, as they make themselves visible to then teasingly escape our notice with the heartbeat of time. Documents remain, of which my hands have caressed in feeling, then writing: two senses. I cannot touch their bodies, so I seek their shadows, scratching the surface of the negative, and the surface of what is known.

Alice Butler