

Are You Ready for a Wet Live-In? (Or, the How of Ms. Howe)

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Abstract

In this paper I will touch upon what it means to be conditioned by discourse, the murderous aspects of science, language lessons for animals, and the bodies that always seem to be left out of the equation. The erasure of the body has a long history. We are heavily influenced, as Katherine Hayles writes, by the cultural perception that information and materiality are conceptually distinct, and the dichotomies it sustains sit deep within our language and thinking.

We tend not to see the doings, the care taken and given, the *how*. The matter in hand usually unfolds while we are busy looking elsewhere – for the story, the information, or the so-called content. I work with participatory performances, and in an attempt to map out some of the multisensory processes at play when composing situated experiences such as these, I've been using the terms “morphe” and “oraliture”.

Keywords: communication, multisensory, orality, performativity, situated experiences, visual arts

The Illusion of Immateriality

In June 2013, I finally got the opportunity to dig into the Special Collections Department of Stanford University Libraries, and the personal archive of a man who for some reason have haunted me for many years. I call him Dr. L. and he will continue to haunt this paper. But I'll start in a different end.

In a culture where literacy is given a higher status than orality, performances are seen as ephemeral. However, from my perspective performances are concrete, knowledge activating and reality producing events, but it's a knowledge and reality production that challenges many hierarchies of modernity, especially the domination of visuality and textuality. Therefore, I would like to focus on *voice*, and an *oral engagement* with the world.

Now, let's start to drift.

Shaping the Voice

Dr. L. started his scientific career by killing the objects of study in search for intelligent life. When he saw the brain of his object, he said: "Oh boy! This is it." The first five objects were given numbers:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5

They quickly died because of fundamental technical mistakes before the team even got to work on them.

6

On number 6 they reached the reward system in the brain with the help of needles, hammers and electrodes. It took an entire day. Number 6 died of an epileptic fit.

7

Number 7 was a wining kid. The first scientific results consisted of recorded calls for help and despair.

8

Number 8 clearly seemed to imitate them and make humanoid sounds. They felt the unnerving presence of *Someone*, who was on the other side of a transparent barrier, which up to that point they hadn't even seen. *Someone* was disabled after several days of experimentation.

9, 10

Number 9 and 10 were the first ones to receive names: Lizzy and Baby. Lizzie died because they dropped her on the floor. Her last words were "This is a trick", or it might have been "It's six o'clock". Baby died after a few weeks of self-starvation. They got five new research objects:

11, 12, 13, 14, 15

They needed to be domesticated first through a procedure that Dr. L. compared with education, brainwash, or psychotherapy. But punishment didn't work; the team discovered other ways to communicate with the objects of study. The best way to proceed was through playfulness and rewards. Dr. L. made a note that this was something that trainers had told them for many years, his research entered a new phase. They moved to St. Thomas in the Caribbean and set up a new laboratory for inter-species communication. In order to prevent the researchers from over-interpreting the articulations made by the research objects, Dr. L. set up a strict system for language training that consisted of nonsense syllables:

ev äm oov oim at ak ro oir va äk

Elvar, number eleven, was very impatient with their slow and laborious methods. Dr. L. notes: "We are dealing with a species that is primarily acoustically oriented. We are primarily visually oriented." Dr. L. realized that what he really needed was an ideal "mother" who could give "tender loving care". Her name was Margaret Howe and her mission was to practice a "Human

mother-child teaching-learning model”. The research objects quickly improved their ability to learn humanoid sounds.

16

Number 16, Pam, was outstanding. But the research methods were far from satisfactory. Margaret Howe thus developed a completely new experiment. During 2,5 months Margaret Howe was to live together with Peter Dolphin. She had tried to find the most equal solution for co-existence between the human being and the dolphin being: a flooded house with plenty of fish. The study could begin. Every aspect of their life together was documented. But after a while a crucial question emerged: Who is teaching whom?
After number 16, five dolphins committed suicide:

17, 18, 19, 20, 21

The remaining three were released into the open sea

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As an artistic researcher I often feel like the dolphins, Margaret Howe and Dr. L, all at once. Dr. John C. Lilly got interested in dolphins when he realized that they have large and complex brains. Funded by CIA and the military he started his attempts to penetrate the mind of this alien creature. In order to study if the research object was an intelligent life form, the researchers fixed it in a cradle on dry land and prevented it from using its body. Intelligence was indicated when the object showed it could imitate the language of the researchers – the dolphin thus had to pronounce English words by using its blowhole. Eventually the researchers realized that there were other ways to communicate which were more fruitful, but that meant that they had to crawl down into the pool and engage other communicative skills. Typically, these skills were associated with motherhood and the female. During this transition, between 1955-1969, Dr. Lilly’s research moved from natural science, through social science, to the humanities, before it fell out of science altogether. The journey forced him to confront that which had been erased in his own theories, the embodied mind of the other. Or rather, Howe confronted it for him, while he focused on digging deeper into the province of his own mind, escaping his corporeality with the help of LSD and sensory deprivation in a floating tank of his own design. That is why he continues to haunt me, I realize, because he represents the dominant cultural perceptions that shape our thinking and doing – our *voice* – and which continues the long tradition of erasing the body no matter how radical or alternative the ideas otherwise might be. But if we take a closer look at what Howe actually does when she performs her wet live-in with the acoustically oriented Peter Dolphin, it becomes clear that she has composed a situation where communication and language isn’t forced into a predefined format, but is allowed to emerge through an ongoing engagement; thus she draws our attention to aspects such as orality, performativity and criticality.

Please, Mind the Gap

“Language has been granted too much power”, writes theoretical physicist Karen Barad and she reminds us that already ”Nietzsche warned against the mistaken tendency to take grammar too

seriously: allowing linguistic structure to shape or determine our understanding of the world”. Yet, that still seems to be the case – why would we otherwise have to invent a term such as performativity? Barad writes: ”Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (...) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. (...) The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (...) to matters of practices/doings/actions.” I associate this shift with a re-evaluation of orality.

The written and printed word has had a huge impact on our Western society, and multisensory forms of expression that were previously right at the center of our culture have successively since the Middle Ages been delegated to a more restricted and subservient role as literacy and textual modes of thinking gained ground. The terms “orality” and “literacy” should here not be confused with speech, and the ability to read and write; they represent modes of perceiving, doing, and thinking. Orality relies on the human in action to convey thought. It holds a place close to everyday life, and requires a situational sensitivity. Following Walter J. Ong, orality could – very generally – be said to cultivate contextual, concrete, relational, and participatory abilities, while literacy fosters analytical thinking, abstract classifications, sequential reasoning, and logic.

In a highly literate society the perceptions connected with orality tend to be considered subordinate. The division and hierarchy between these sensibilities have created a gap that we constantly try to bridge, for example between embodied and analytical knowledge, practice-led and abstract reasoning, subjectivity and objectivity, etc. It’s as if we cannot think without dualisms such as these. In my view, art operates in, and with this gap. The gap provides resonance. This is where I situate my practice.

I use the orality-literacy contrast in an attempt to open up a reflexive space where many of the dichotomies we find ourselves trapped within evaporate, and where a *poetics of oscillation* can take shape. This space is of course not an empty void where we swing back and forth between opposites, but a heavily populated and messy terrain that demands that we have to “go visiting”, as Hannah Arendt put it, i.e. to keep several perspectives open at the same time. Oscillation implies trembling, indeterminacy, and constant movement between states and positions. The art I’m interested in discussing is thus not the “other” of reason, objectivity, or analysis. Rather it can be described as a practice that feeds orality back into literacy, and vice versa, as a method of criticality.

Ong’s distinctions are not unproblematic though, and my aim is not to reproduce the dichotomies, rather to make visible the different optics operating at the far ends of a spectrum. My interest lays in the space in-between, in a state of embodiment where it becomes frustratingly clear that our knowledge and our experience cannot be merged into a unified whole. I suggest that this state of embodiment and suspense carries a “stereoscopic” potential that holds both immersion and critical distance, which embraces manifold options, and creates a multitude of relations between them instead of seeking closure. The presence of voice could be said to activate an oral engagement with the world, but it is a messy business to try to sort out what this entails. Therefore it has a tendency to escape us, and it’s readily edited out of any description of *what has actually taken place*, for the sake of being clear and distinct. We constantly navigate using both literate and oral coordinates – we are always and already oscillating – but when we try to

structure our knowledge, create an overview, and describe or devise a method, the oral components tend to be edited out, or categorized as being tacit.

I work with performance installations where constructed situations are combined with sound compositions, and where the storytelling repeatedly is interrupted by instructions. This format could be described as a set-up, or apparatus, where performative and narrative strategies are used with emphasis on auditive and environmental aspects rather than textual. How the apparatus is finally aesthetically articulated is a direct consequence of the chosen themes in each work; the themes are played out and activated in space, so to speak. I use the performance installations as investigative test sites, as a way to think in-with-and-through space and time. The position of the spectator/audience/visitor/participant is not fixed; instead you are invited to explore an experience of being situated and responsive. At the same time you are to a certain degree visually exposed, or put on display.

My view of poetics aligns itself with that of poet Édouard Glissant when he writes that every poetics “is an immediate first opening, a brief inscription in the entangled”. Poetics are doings that enable us to approach a totality, but make us question and get rid of any totalizing visions, or the walls of deductive reasoning, Glissant writes, which would otherwise attach us the illusion that we ourselves have mastered the world's chaos. A poetics that offers an immediate first opening does this through relation; poetics do not state, they speak.

Artistic practices, I suggest, offer enabling acts. Rather than wanting to untangle, they seek to handle, activate and make visible complexities.



*“Limit-Cruisers (#1 Sphere)”,
performance by Janna Holmstedt,
Weld, Stockholm, Sweden, 2014.
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Conditioned by Discourse

As artist you work with spatial relations and the production of space – be it sculptural, social, public, political, etc. But when I got the question “How do you relate to airspace in your work?” I found it stupendously difficult to answer. Space conceived of as air cannot be controlled, divided

or owned. Like breath, it's shared and in constant flux, it's neither inside nor outside. In airspace sharing is the precondition for existence. But we also say "It's like the air you breathe" when we want to point to the fact that something has become so normalized that we don't think of it as being there anymore; social conventions, a certain language-use, or unarticulated rules, which frames situations that we are part of everyday. They have become invisible to us, but they affect the way we speak, act, relate, and behave. The question gave me a new entry into my own work, and I started to question if the terms "orality" and "literacy" were fruitful to use, since they inevitably make one think of speech and text in a limited sense, instead of rendering visible the shifting material, discursive and imaginary spheres we at the same time inhabit, construct and are conditioned by.

The summer of 2014, I participated in the conference "Bakhtin as Praxis: Academic Production, Artistic Practice, Political Activism. I wrote my abstract with a firm sense that I knew Bakhtin's work – I felt deeply in tune with his thinking – but when trying to compose my contribution I realized that my knowledge on him was rusty. My first encounter with his writing had taken place over 20 years ago when I studied theatre.

According to Bakhtin the medieval carnival, with roots in Dionysian festivities of the Greeks, was a way of life and a social force with the power to transform society. All authority was inverted and ridiculed; moral and logical expectations were reversed. A sense of fearlessness and creativity ruled, laughter was used as a liberating and subversive power, and everything grotesque and ambivalent were brought forth and celebrated: the genitals, breasts, the anus, the potbelly, mouth, etc. We recognize this imagery from paintings by Hieronymus Bosch for example. The carnival thus stands out as a site of resistance and rethinking in stark contrast to the celebration of official feasts that tend to assert the existing hierarchies. While revisiting Bakhtin's writing, I realized that it wasn't intense reading that had formed my understanding of the subject, but a workshop I had attended in a specific style of performance work called bouffon, with roots in the street theatre of Medieval Europe. The bouffon experience radically changed my perceptions; it made me realize the pressure of language and what it means to be conditioned by discourse. It was as if the air we breathe suddenly had become visible and viscous.

The instructions were quite simple: take on a bouffon personality, roam around in a gang of five, imitate, distort, be obscene and rude, mock everything and everyone – especially politics, morality, religion, gender, economy, science, and other institutions of power. As bouffons you are outcasts, crippled, poor, grotesque, ugly. You represent elements of your society "in an amplified, distorted, exaggerated way, therefore provoking laughter – or outrage", as director Giovanni Fusetti explains. But, an obstacle was inserted in the exercise; we had to perform in the presence of a "King". Thus we were licensed fools similar to the court jester, who is licensed to speak truth to power, but only to a certain degree. When the "King" snapped his fingers, the mockery had gone too far and we had to brown-nose instead. But too much flattery can become boring, or even threatening – especially if you are clever in adopting the speech-genre of the elite – thus the "King" would soon snap his fingers again. Ideally, snapping shouldn't even be necessary, as bouffons you are antennas and shape shifters. Bouffons don't choose sides; they seek out the borders, trespass and then quickly change direction again before the situation gets completely out of hand. Performed in the streets, the audience becomes the "King", who is entertained, mocked, flattered and provoked, and thus acts as both victim and border patrol at the same time. A skilled bouffon quickly reveals the limits of what can be said and done, where,

when, and in what way. It demands street smarts, an instant power analysis, and a contextual and relational understanding. It's in fact a very efficient way to map the current state of affairs. To me the exercise revealed several things, e.g. the power of the situation, the shrinking space of the carnivalesque in modern society, but also the liminal space between institutional critique and the institutionalization of critique. Furthermore, the hypersensitivity and constant readiness (snap!) to shift between personalities and speech-genres created a hypnotic effect. Not in the sense of being manipulated, rather a stereoscopic view was developed where two different mindsets were activated at the same time. You were immersed and distanced; stupid and sharp; acutely aware of what the power system demanded of you, while ruthlessly abusing it. You were a slave, yet completely free. You became a limit-cruiser. For me, being 20-years-old at the time, it was a transformative, self-altering experience – a knowledge becoming – and it started a process of unlearning in me, which is still ongoing.

This experience, and the characteristically oral knowledge inherent in it, cannot be broken down into entities; it can best be grasped as a totality, where timing, rhythm, and rupture are core features. This implies aspects such as judgment, effectiveness, control, skill, pulse, pattern, progression, disagreement, and estrangement. The working material of the bouffon could be said to be airspace, and the power relations it entails. The bouffons have a way of saying and doing that make visible performative aspects of a particular situation, which are otherwise concealed by conventions and authority. My initial intent to focus on voice, and an oral engagement with the world then suggests paying close attention to airspace, and what a particular situation communicates through matters of practices/doings/actions, in spite of what it is said to represent.

Morphe and Knowledge Becomings

Poet Anne Carson said in a radio interview once that “each idea [has] a certain shape, [and when] I found the word morphe it was to me just the right word for that, unlike “shape” in English which falls a bit short, morphe in Greek means the plastic contours that an idea has inside all your senses when you grasp it for the first time, the first moment, and it always seemed to me that a work should play out that same contour in its form”. The word morphe immediately resonated with me too and it reminded me of the short text “Imaginary” by Glissant, where he writes: “Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized.” This is a massive critique of how a Western, literate culture in general have considered thinking to be an isolated activity taking place inside of a single mind (that “dimensionless place”). According to Glissant, thinking is a chaotic and transformative journey closely related to risk, it is a “knowledge becoming”, and he continues: “One cannot stop it to access it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor even, in standing still, boast about.”

The knowledge derived from such a process, I think, needs to stay true to that insight; it needs to be activated rather than transmitted, and it relies just as much on the manner of facts as the matter of facts.

Wet Live-In

I look at Margaret Howe in her flooded house, and her attempt to live on equal terms with a dolphin for 75 days. I see a performance. Howe has thought through every single detail in the

complex co-existence and composed an experimental format that allows her to express her intuition and knowledge and at the same time critically examine it. She is thinking in-with-and-through space, and she inhabits different positions in the situation (as companion, host, observer, observed, teacher, student, etc.) none of which can be separated from the other. And I think of the need for the experiential dimension to co-exist with the analysis, a condition the cultural theorist Irit Rogoff terms criticality: to live through and see through at the same time, to be embedded as well as critically conscious. In Rogoff 's words, criticality is a state of embodiment “from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary.” As I see it, this state of being “not complimentary” causes a trembling, an oscillation. It is also, as Rogoff points out, a state of profound frustration.

Howe's life in the water-filled apartment is frustrating. Peter is frustrated. Howe is following a daily schedule of maintenance, language training, cooking, cleaning, writing reports and diaries, recording and filing sound, satisfying the dolphins needs and her own. Intense communication is going on, but it seems to occur despite the language training rather than because of it, since the dolphin resist any disciplining attempts.

I see Lilly observe his “assistance” from a distance. I see the traditional hierarchy that establishes the difference between Man, Woman, and Animal. I see the larger system she operates within, the experimental situation in hand, and the individuals co-existing in it. And I'm thinking: Who is teaching whom?

“Limit-Cruisers (#1 Sphere)”, a Performance for Listeners and Observers

In the performance “Limit-Cruisers (#1 Sphere)”, you are asked to climb into an air-filled sphere. A pleasant voice tells you to relax and informs you that the oxygen will last ten minutes. The light goes off; a countdown begins. You suddenly find yourself in a situation where you are forced to exist in a here and now that is running towards a definite end. Meanwhile, three observers can follow the process from outside.





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No, that's not what happened. You had to take your shoes off and realized that your feet were sour. A heavy plastic skin envelops you and air blows in through a black vacuum hose. You are caught in your own scent. Your two companions have started to move around in their bubbles, which are half-inflated now. They look like birds in their nests, fretting about. You suddenly think of sadomasochism.



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Film stills: Fredrik Wählstedt.

No, this is what really happened: Dazed and bemused you get back home and in the phone you try to tell your mother what you've just experienced. "There were six of us in the audience and three at a time crawled into big, plastic balls. The opening was sealed with a zipper. Then the light went off". In the other end of the line it becomes silent. You try to explain that inside the giant bubbles you look like fetuses, astronauts, single-celled organisms illuminated through a microscope; that the situation created a space where claustrophobia wasn't opposed to freedom. You heard a voice outside, counting down: *Ten, nine, eight*. Soon you will run out of oxygen. Another voice near you says: *You are falling into life. But never really reaching it.*

Hello, mom, are you still there?





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Film stills: Fredrik Wåhlstedt.

Oraliture: Composing a Situated Experience

All through the 60-minute performance the participants are guided by disembodied voices reminiscent of airplanes, relaxation exercises, commercials, and the like. The voices present themselves as authorities, but it remains unclear who are in control of the situation. The almost ritualistic procedure – where you enter the space, take off your shoes, leave keys and phones in plastic trays, sit down on chairs, or are locked into bubbles – creates an intimate but artificial environment; familiar yet strange; personal and trustworthy, but eerie and manipulative at the same time. The repetitive muzak adds to the ambivalence. Sometimes you are encouraged to sink into a meditative flow, sometimes you feel completely battered by the information overload and the clichés thrown at you. The structural set-up of the performance is an integral part of the narrative, and as participant you are forced to inhabit certain positions in order to access the work. But you can choose to be active or passive, refuse to follow the instructions or act them out as in an intricate game. The participants thus find themselves situated within a context that is not framed as an absolute truth or stable reality, but rather as a system that unfolds through a specific network where meanings are constructed.

I consciously create tensions between different modes of perceiving and interpreting the situation in hand: between fact and fiction; free will and manipulation; observer and listener; between a semantic and situational meaning; the immersive and distanced, representation and performativity, etc. I seek to engage the participants in an active reading, not merely present an image that represents a view. The components I work with is the concrete situation in hand and its materiality, together with conventions, expectations, relations, positions, speech-genres, addressivity, duration and sociality. When I found the word “oraliture” it seemed to capture this multimodal way of composing and handling situated experiences. According to Glissant, the Haitians invented the term and it connotes both the written and the oral arts. In my use disrupted temporalities, a performative dynamics, self-reflexivity, and the mixing of genres characterize it.

Learning as Unlearning

I seek that which initiates or provokes a process of “unlearning”, that messes with the message seekers in us. We tend not to see the doings, the care taken and given, the how (of Margaret Howe for example). The matter in hand usually unfolds while we are busy looking elsewhere – for the story, the information, or the so-called content.

In the artistic process, an idea seeks to stay true to its morphé. The idea is not a concept and can therefore not simply be explained, but it can be unfolded, developed and revealed by using the senses it engaged when you grasped it for the first time. It’s a totality. Thus, artistic compositions

do not deliver messages, they speak. They speak in-with-and-through the “language-ness” that the composition generates during the time it takes place. This requires a way of seeing, listening and reading that isn’t satisfied with what things are said to represent (by convention, habit, routine, or authority) but that embraces the speech that emerges from the phrases, images, gestures, events, or objects occurring in a given situation.

Artistic practices, as I see it, seek to address totalities, not systematize, fix, or reduce them. This implies a critical approach to language, where language can neither be taken for granted or seen as something given, and ultimately an ethics, which is aired and performed as a poetics. The artistic work embodies a poetics, and offers both an immediate first opening and an enabling “grip”. It goes without saying that this approach to complex communicative situations cannot be squeezed into a limited infology.

To talk about morphe, the materiality of meaning making, and thinking in terms of performance, is surprisingly enough not far from Niels Bohr’s approach to physics. According to Barad, Bohr claims that “theoretical concepts (...) are not ideational in character but rather are specific physical arrangements”. Thus, they are modeled in time and space and performed. Barad calls Bohr’s philosophy-physics “a protoperformative account of scientific practices”. Following her line of thinking further “the primary semantic units are not “words”, but material-discursive practices through which boundaries are constituted”. I’m attracted by these formulations because this is how I understand much art and art performances. Thinking is in this view not done with word in a “dimensionless place” but is rather to be seen as a movement where a multisensous morphe is unfolded in time and space. Thinking could then be understood as the transportation of material-discursive, multisensous complexities.

Many visual art practices have since the 1960s substantially moved away from the concept of the art object into the realm of the social. If art then is seen as mediation rather than as a medium, what communicative modes, or forms of mediation, might be proposed that offer resistance to a mass media logic and its effects on how we interpret human behavior and interaction? Following artist Martha Rosler, I seek to discuss art not as “consisting of static, knowable objects or events” but as “a set of coded possibilities that are – only and always – instituted within a specific set of circumstances.” The audience is then necessarily situated within this set of circumstances, not outside of it. The notion of reflexivity and the role of the observer can no longer be denied within scientific practices, but we are still routinely asked to ignore the apparatuses presented to us in our everyday life and work, whether we are asked to fill in a simple form, or implement new routines. The so-called format is generally not considered significant. In many cases we don’t even see it, but a performative approach makes the apparatuses visible. The artistic choice of working with situations rather than with producing objects could then be viewed as an insistence on paying attention to affects, and the material, concrete, and embodied experiences of everyday life, while making the media we are immersed in visible and tangible. Can we cause the bubbles to burst, at least temporarily? I do not claim that art can solve all our contemporary dilemmas, but artistic practices have the power to resensitize us to other modes of being, thinking, and doing when dominant cultural conceptions, and forms of expression create an increasingly homogenous culture.

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