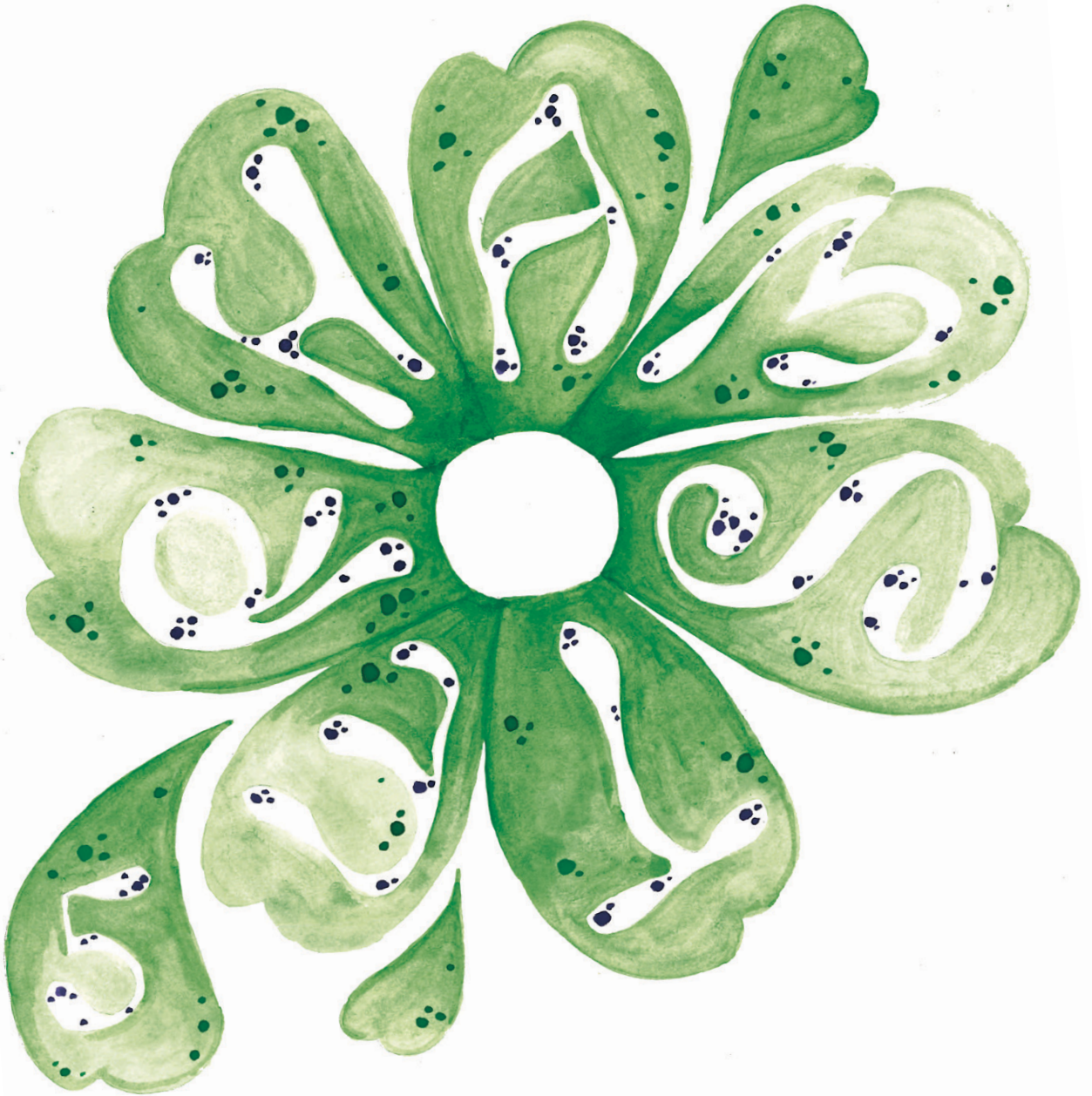


December
2019

Issue
5

HAMSTER



Caitlin Clarke
Brooke Stamp
Charlotte Filipov
Vanessa Crofskey
Jennifer Katherine Shields

Gemma Banks
Robin Murphy
Kayla Marshall
Lynley Edmeades
Pūkauri Productions

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Issue 5

December 2019

The Physics Room

Ōtautahi, Aotearoa

ISSN 2538-0087 (Print)

ISSN 2538-0095 (Online)

HAMSTER is an experimental serial publication supporting critical writing and creative approaches to cultural production in Aotearoa.

The Editorial Group is Jamie Hanton, Hamish Petersen, and Michelle Wang with support from Keren Oertly Ryan. The opinions expressed in HAMSTER are not necessarily those held by The Physics Room Trust or the Editorial Group.

HAMSTER 5 can also be found online, or as an audiobook online and in our gallery whare pukapuka. Head to www.physicsroom.org.nz for more information.

Design by Jane Maloney, M/K Press.

Printed by Allied Press, Ōtepoti.

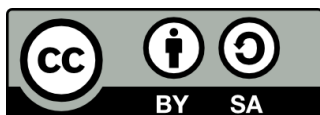
Cover Illustration by Caitlin Clarke.

The Physics Room operates within the takiwā of Ngāi Tūāhuriri.

The Editorial Group would like to thank all of the Residents and Writers in Issue 5. We greatly appreciate the assistance of The Arts Centre Te Matatiki Toi Ora in accommodating our residency programme for Issue 5. Thank you to everyone who has given their participation, feedback, criticism, and thoughts in and on previous issues. The HAMSTER Editorial Group can be reached at hamster@physicsroom.org.nz.

The Physics Room is a contemporary art space dedicated to developing and promoting contemporary art and critical discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Physics Room is a charitable trust governed by a Board of Trustees.

HAMSTER 5 is made possible through support from:



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Cooked stones.

mishearings & hauntings,

It's late October and I'm listening to Lynley read their text for this issue from the .wav file they sent through over the weekend. It's around a quarter to 9am, so the streets are still a focused, organised hustle, and the office is yet to be fully populated. The cloud cover keeps the peace for now, before we are all mixed up in one-another's priorities, CCs, and to-dos.

I've read their text many times by now, but I hear Lynley in my headphones telling me how 'N' left the waiting room out the front of the emergency department to cool off; in the rain 'N' is cooking stones. A black-handled saucepan appears in my head, lined with grey riverstones: hot, hissing, steaming.

It's a week earlier and we are together in the afternoon, bathing in warm light through gabled windows. Brooke is a Rancher cracking bullwhips, a Therapist on the floor, a Teacher, Martha Graham, Trisha Brown, and their former dancing selves. These pasts haunt Brooke in gestures, and are announced to the room as apparitions fleeing between their teeth. We had spent the whole weekend talking about the only person we both knew, eating, and slipping-in between disciplines. I'm saying we never really danced for each-other till now. All the while, the friends I had knotted into Brooke's harness had been excavating the space between them, and channelling a step sequence.

anxieties & utterances,

I hit reply. I tap the glowing icon. Vanessa reads my mind as I toss up whether I should watch their Instagram story before replying to their email. The dust of their visit has settled and we email back and forth about the shape of a draft. Should it be long? An essay, reflection, dare-i-say poetry, or screenshots? Delivery expectation. Set. Reset.

Being in-relation produces something of value; it writes into existence relationships—certain agreed upon terms of engagement, boundaries, and support that are both unseen and valuable—and it writes them into our memories of one-another. Why put it in a Google Doc if we did it all weekend?

I copy + paste Robin's address into my G-Chat window, type out a message to them, "Ready to call when you are! Talk soon." The bar on the window lights up green and I accept. I see Robin's face, and smile. It's barely three months since we released the last magazine. I can still picture the spreadsheet full of names, pending orange boxes,

and alarming reds. Seeing Robin glitch onto my screen—seeing their face—reminds me what it means to be recognised as a loving, caring, struggling, moral body, and capable of making a concrete contribution to a material community.¹ We talk about autoimmune disorders like long-lost primary school friends. I walk through that memory now, like Robin teaches us to, and I feel less like an art factory or a word-machine.

implications, sensations, divinations.

To read their words and know how they felt. To sit in a room and know you're seen. To achieve recognition in the folds of a conversation and the turns of an interaction. I feel like I've snuck into the cinema even though Jen has invited me to this dinner party. I had to pull the leaf out to extend the tables. Demand will not be sated. Everyone wants to get out of the gender industrial complex before it eats them alive. But how do you ask kindly for the salt, and to start the conversation, when it might drown you?

To feel the horses gallop in slow motion, like how we slump down the couch on a hot, platonic night. Gemma FaceTimes me from a Sydney public park and I remember their sci-fi projections from University, and again in the gallery when I started interning at The Physics Room. I never knew them as a writer, even though their installations involved long stories in green text. Drafts come through and I read stanzas with music in my head—sentimental country ballads, dub riddim, quiet death metal, spiritual jazz—these are feelings I know from before.

To sense guidance, to walk into your arms in the dark, sense your shadow, to guess, offer, show up, and stick around. A friend and artist once told me that they trusted me to share (parts of) their story because I was a close friend of their friends. This made our interactions and their consequences intrinsically linked to the people who brought us together: trust accountable to a community. When Pūkauri Productions first came into the gallery to look at rehearsal spaces, the process of carrying on the relations from the crosshatched friends, whānau, and ancestors who brought us here spilled over into what we did in that fleshy space. Braids left loose at the end.

I want to account for the relationships that I have experienced in the process of telling the stories in this issue. It feels yucky to talk about myself in the middle of all this, but to not enunciate my pākehā,

1. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), quoted in Lucia Farinati & Claudia Firth, *The Force of Listening*, (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2017), 147.

immigrant and cis male-passing self in the editorial position is to ignore the site of decision-making. So I've tried to make decisions that deepen my accountability to the writers we've published. We invited three contributors to come to Ōtautahi as weekend residents to make work that required being in the same room as others (and therefore me), and tried to see the four writers face to face wherever possible: to edit, to pitch, to question, to confirm.

To call people into a shared and enfleshed materiality makes the risk of trust, faith, honesty, commitment, recognition, labour, resources, power, and precarity more readily perceivable. What is at stake is realised by the decisions you and I make in the attention between our faces.

The moments of recognition between us are what provided the space to write what we needed to. Writing happened in the spaces between our bodies and faces in time that might be called non-productive. But Robin, Jennifer, Lynley, Gemma, Kim, Sheree, Fualili, Brooke, Charlie, Kayla, and Vanessa have all shown me how valuable the time after the proposal but before anyone starts typing is—when we talk, fidget, think, ummmm, joke, eat, and play together; when we first reside beside each other. Being together is risky—I mishear you, you disagree with me—and that produces something between us. I want to call that writing.

Lemons

I've started feeling the baby move. It first happened at Mitre 10. We were looking for a new broom. I thought my phone was vibrating. *You didn't bring your phone*, said N. Our baby was vibrating.

I have an app called Flo. Every week it sends me an update to tell me what size the baby is. This week it is as big as a Napa cabbage. I've never bought a Napa cabbage before, never even picked one up in a supermarket, so this information means very little to me. Flo tells me that I may be experiencing some difficulty sleeping due to the increased pressure on my bladder and an inability to find a comfortable spot. *But don't worry*, it says, *the baby will be out in eight weeks*. I quickly close the app and open something else. Boris Johnson has declared his commitment to a no-deal Brexit. I read three articles about it, so that I don't have to think about how there are only eight weeks left, about how I don't even know if I want this.

I haven't slept for two days. I haven't slept for two days because I can't lie down. I can't lie down because my right shoulder is doing something very weird and very painful. I try watching a movie. I have to do it standing up. I haul out all the spare blankets to ward off the cold and, when the movie is over, I have a forty-minute shower. Then I watch another movie. I ignore the tightness in my pelvis because all my attention is on my shoulder, in an endless loop of why is this happening, why is it so sore, can I take that codeine I found in the bathroom, I'll Google it, no I can't take it, how often can I take paracetamol, how much paracetamol is considered dangerous, why is this happening? When N wakes up, he takes me to the doctor. The doctor gives me a script of Norflex, a muscle relaxant, and the names of some apps for calmness and relaxation. I swallow two pills and wait. When nothing happens, I cry and panic and pace some more. N calls the midwife. *Take her to ED*, she says.

While we wait to be seen in ED, I walk between the chair at the back of the room and the toilet several hundred times. There is a game show playing on the television above the reception. It has one of the Spice Girls on it. She is trying to push round discs over the edge of a ledge to try to win money. The volume is muted but we all watch it because there is nothing else to look at when we get bored of our phones. I try sitting down. At one point, I lean over the chair. The receptionist puts her head out from behind the Perspex and asks N if I've gone into labour. *No, it's her shoulder*, he says. *Oh, that's okay then*, she replies. The Spice Girl fails to push the coloured disc over the edge that will bring her all the money in the world. N looks distressed. I tell him to go outside. It is raining. Through the glass doors I watch him kicking stones before coming back inside and buying some bliss balls from the vending machine in the entranceway.

In the waiting room, nurses come and go from some mysterious place behind the doors. They shuffle our folders around. Pink and blue and green and yellow plastic folders with triage notes. I hear one of them say, *shoulder pain, you've got to be kidding*. The man with gout in his foot tells me that the folders with the pink stripes are for the people who come by ambulance. They get priority, so that's why they keep shuffling things around. *You're better off paying the \$90 for the big white taxi just so you don't have to wait out here for hours*, he says.

At ED they ask me what my pain is, on a scale of one to ten. I'm still crying and say *maybe eight*, with more question than answer in my voice. I look around the waiting room. Here we all are together, I think, in our various pains. How can anyone judge their own pain scale? That man with the gout. The young girl with what may be appendicitis. If I had a different personality, maybe I'd say ten. I think that my pain is not as bad as other people's, but who am I to know. Everyone looks so miserable. At least I'm not in labour. That must be a number ten, surely.

In hospital, the baby moves all night. As if to say, I'm still here. I see another pregnant woman, but she's here to sit beside her husband's bed, while he dozes, in and out of morphine dreams perhaps. I see her looking at me and she sees me looking at her. We must be about the same. Twenty-six weeks.

A doctor comes to see me in the middle of the night. He brings a nurse who wheels a machine along beside her, and he tells me they're going to do an ultrasound on my legs. I am in the middle of a morphine cycle and so I smile and think that this man is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. When he tells me to lie back and lift up my gown so he can take a look at my upper legs, I tell him I've still got my knickers on. He says *that's good*, and smiles. I think about this a lot the next day. I tell N when he comes back to see me in the hospital, and he tells me not to worry. *He's really lovely*, says N, and besides, *doctors must hear shit like that all the time*. I stop worrying. In the hierarchy of worries this one has been knocked off the list.

They do lots of tests. After 24 hours they tell me I can go home. It's musculoskeletal, they say, and that an osteopath or a physiotherapist may be able to help me.

In the weeks following, the pain begins to ease. But like some kind of infection, it spreads down my arm. The osteopath tells me this is my nerves, and that my rotator cuff has been damaged. *You've made a right mess of this shoulder*, he says. I imagine a city after an earthquake—all that damage just below the surface. The liquefaction may be my many tears.

This is the first time I've been to an osteopath. He straps me up so I can't move my shoulders.

The next time I see him, he tells me I have to start moving. I nod and wonder why I feel like he's a little bit angry with me. Yes, I need to start moving, I agree. *Shall I go swimming or something?* No, you just need to get moving. I sit on the edge of the massage bed in my bra and jeans and he stands at his desk, drinking his coffee and watching me move my shoulder back and forth, then tells me he has to make a phone call before leaving the room. I sit and stare at myself in the mirror, swollen and protruding, while moving my shoulder back and forth in sets of ten. When he comes back, he says *that's good*. I scold myself later for feeling like I'd finally done something right.

Afterwards, I go to the supermarket and park too close to the trolley return bay. I cry when I can't fit out the door and drive home instead, thinking the bananas can wait.

Today I receive two parcels, one postcard, and a large brown paper bag, full of pre-cooked meals. One parcel, from my mother, has eight lemons, two bars of chocolate, a bar of fancy soap, and a pottle of vitamin C. The other, a gift from my aunt, is an outfit for a newborn and a DVD of my cousin's funeral that I couldn't go to. I write a eulogy for my sister to read, a letter from our unborn child. I am already putting words in their mouth.

I make an appointment with a Chinese herbalist, recommended to me by a friend. When I tell him about my shoulder and that I'm 31 weeks pregnant, he says, *no problem, we fix you with no medicine*. I don't tell him I've been taking codeine for the last 24 days, and that I've also just gone back on antidepressants.

I go to see another osteopath. This one is younger and a bit cheaper. I like how he pulls my arm into his chubby tummy and holds it in its soft pillow. I like his big ginger beard and his kind eyes. He doesn't ask me to take my top off.

I remember going to visit a friend of mine when she was almost eight months pregnant. She had swollen ankles and insisted on wearing skin-coloured ballet flats. There was no telling where her feet began. Only several days after I saw her, she was admitted to hospital with preeclampsia and went into labour very soon afterwards. I remember thinking *I won't do it like that*.

One day I am sitting on the bed reading. I start to feel sick and then like I need to shit. I go to stand up and then I faint. When I come to, I sit on the edge of the bed and wonder if I'm dying. *I think this is it: I've fucked it up so bad I'm going into labour nine weeks early.* I try and do some deep breathing.

I call the midwife. She sounds like she has a cold, and I ask her if she is okay. She tells me she has just woken up. It is 3:20pm. *A wee baby came in the night*, she says. That could be my baby, I think. She tells me it might be my low blood pressure that made me faint and that standing up is the worst thing I can do in that situation, which makes me feel silly. She tells me not to worry, that it won't be affecting the baby. I can feel the tears coming so I thank her three times before hanging up. I call N at work and cry. Then I have a bath and cry some more. Then I get out of the bath and Google "fainting while pregnant." The baby kicks.

Because of my shoulder and my depression, I stop working. I didn't think it would be like this. I thought I would just keep going until the end. I even imagined being mid-lecture when my waters broke, and I found myself Googling things like "how will I know when my waters break" and "how much 'water' actually comes out."

Another parcel arrives. This one has lemons and vitamin C, but also contains some children's books. When I call my mother to say thank you, I feel guilty that I can't be bothered listening to the fifteen-minute story about how she found the books. When I get off the phone, I feel frustrated and then I feel guilty about that too.

Because I can't sit at the desk or a table, I do everything from the bed. There are large piles of books and papers on the floor and on the dresser in the bedroom. The bed used to be a sacred space, just for sleeping, resting, making love. The house feels messy and everything feels unfinished. I have to excuse myself many times from commitments, always ending my emails with *under normal circumstances* and *if it were just me I had to think about*. I'm pretty sure I'm still only thinking about me in all of this, but I don't say that.

In her book *Mothers*, Rachel Zucker tells a story about how she can't stop crying months after a friend has died. Her therapist tells her, "it's good that you're crying." I misread this as, "you are good at crying." I am good at crying.

We go to a first birthday party. I feel nauseous and sit on a bean bag

that later I won't be able to get out of without help, stuffing my face with a bagel and watching other people's kids roll around on the ground like miniature versions of their not very interesting parents. On the way home, I say to N, *I don't want any of that. It's like life just stops*, he says. He looks over at me as we're driving through South Dunedin and I realise that I'm making a weird noise in my throat. *Are you okay?* he asks. The gurgle in the back of my throat turns into uncontrollable weeping.

My GP makes me an appointment with the Plunket mental health nurse. Her name is Joy and she looks a bit like my mum. She offers me a cup of tea and then when she asks how I am, I start to cry. She puts the tissues in front of me. *What's your worst fear*, she asks. *That I won't like it*, I say. She gives me several pamphlets about mindfulness, writes down some names of apps and tells me to think about things like: five minute walks around the garden, diaphragmatic breathing, and support networks. I want to leave but I don't have anywhere to go. Her tissues are really soft.

Zucker says she always wanted to be a mother. I don't recognise that feeling. I have had arguments with others who have had the decision taken away from them, in age or in illness, somehow convinced that they were more fortunate than me, for they didn't have to actually *decide*. The absurdity and arrogance of this embarrasses me so much, I almost shudder when I think about it now.

When I lie in the bath, I can see small ripples forming on the surface when the baby moves. In the silence of my empty house on a Monday afternoon, lying in tepid bathwater, I apologise to this little being for not being able to grow them properly. For already being a fuck up.

I meet a friend for dinner who I haven't seen for a while. *Look at you*, he says. People can say this kind of thing now: my body is a talking point. He makes sure I have a comfy chair to sit in and checks what I can eat before he orders for us both. After dinner he says, *can I ask you a personal question?* When I consent, he asks me if I'm scared. He is almost sixty and childless. I feel so relieved that someone has finally asked. Yes, I say. *I'm terrified*.

When I get home, more lemons have arrived.

Tūpono

a play by Kim Garrett,
music by Sheree Waitoa.



Serendipity.

Chance.

Tūpono: “to come upon accidentally ... happen by chance ... chance upon.”

Do things happen by chance, or do things happen for a reason? Does life present us with golden opportunities, or is it our job to “make it happen”? Are we alone in this life, or are there forces greater than us that watch, guide, and protect us during our journey? Are there signs to help guide us, and even if there were, would we see them? I know what I believe.

I am a storyteller, and to share our story into, through, and beyond the residency weekend offered by The Physics Room I will use a **beginning**, a **middle**, and an **end**. This story will tell of the relationships that brought us together, and the relationships we created. The performance we envisioned, and the process it took to embody that vision effectively, creatively, and authentically. The responses and feedback to the work and process, and the constructive criticism and steps we as a company hope to take moving forward.

I believe trust and authentic action are required in writing, devising, building relationships, and embodying concepts through performance. I believe people are brought together for a reason. Music is a powerful force that can manipulate energies. A picture is worth a thousand words, and we are not alone. I believe love finds a way to heal. Our story, *Tūpono*, encompasses themes like this and in a lot of ways reflects our own journey as a company.

Tūpono, is a story involving two individuals at their lowest and darkest times, and the forces that surround them, guide, and protect them. Meeting unexpectedly—or were they guided?—they discover a connection so instant, baffling, illogical, strong, and spiritual. The connection is empowering and yet ... they are powerless to control it. Serendipity, fate, or divine intervention? They mirror each other, reflecting masses of talent, deep pain, hurt, hope, courage, strength, intuition, beauty, and love. Through vulnerability, sharing their stories and songs, they find safety, trust, respect, and admiration in each other. A side-effect of letting someone in, even though one feels broken and ugly, is the pay-it-forward ripple-effect. Through encouraging the other to see their worth, they each find their own. Together they find their voice, they find their creativity, they find the strength and courage to shine their lights, they find their connection to a higher power ... and they find love. Love for each other, and the most important love of all, self-love.

A moment's deviation from the beginning of our story to introduce ...

THE CHARACTERS:

Keren Oertly-Ryan. The catalyst to this divine opportunity. A trusted and respected colleague, and more importantly, an admired and loved friend.

Pūkauri Productions. The protagonists. A company with a desire to connect, communicate, and create.

The Physics Room and Hamish Petersen. The courageous organisation challenging and supporting creatives to be vulnerable, to share their truth, and to expose their process; to show a behind the scenes, a how-to, and the multiple facets of writing, devising, and creating.

The Arts Centre. Who entrusted us with the environment for the writing and creation of *Tūpono*.

John Russell. The student seeking a creative collaboration for his own development as a writer and creative. The man with a project, a camera, a head full of fantastic ideas, and a generosity of spirit. Our photo credits go to him, and our thanks for the secret weapon he brought along: his whānau.

The Russell whānau. Creators of a positive and loving whānau support system. A system which encouraged community, faith, and trust. Were they guided to us because we needed them? I like to think so.



THE BEGINNING: Angitu—The opportunity.

The story begins with a call to apply for a weekend residency with The Physics Room. A call to, “workshop our story”. The seed of a story, which had been shared during a chance conversation, at a random get-together. **I believe we are presented with opportunities.** On offer: a **space** where thought can become action and the time to connect, communicate, and create. **I believe it’s our job to take up opportunities and “make it happen”.** Pūkauri Productions applied, and were accepted, for the weekend residency. Challenge accepted. Now to deliver, now to collaborate. First contact: The Physics Room, and Hamish.

The one who can get anything done, with a smile, and some good old ingenuity. Hamish was first and last point of contact once we were offered the residency. They led us every step of the way, helping us find the right space within The Arts Centre for our workshop: The Maker Workshop. Welcoming us and the other residents, playing tour guide, chef, and procurement officer. Supporting with ideas, helping set up the space and troubleshoot, and taking on the roles of stage manager, production manager, front of house, usher, operator, tech, marketing, and friend.

THE MIDDLE: Whakaaro—The process from our perspective.

“The art of performance, that builds relationships and bridges gaps, is one of the most rewarding feelings. Bringing whānau together, for even a moment in time, is what we share through the collaboration of arts and performance. This residency provided Pūkauri Productions with an opportunity to discover how we deliver content in a theatrical environment. Offering us a space to celebrate the love for: sound that makes you move, words that stimulate thought, and connection through emotional association—using dance to allow the viewer to interpret as they will. All forms of communication were explored during this residency: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Providing Pūkauri Productions the platform and space to collaborate. We love to connect, create, and communicate.”

– Sheree Waitoa.

It was our decision to have a live musician feeding into the play, creating the atmosphere, and supporting with songs. We were lucky enough to have the songwriter as our live muso. Sheree generated live soundscapes using traditional Māori and non-traditional instruments, and she sang and accompanied her songs for the performance. From the audience response, I discovered we created an enhanced experience of, and a stronger connection to, the emotional and spiritual journey of the whakaari. This reinforces for me the importance of the live musician; their job requires them to breathe with the piece and almost imperceptibly shift the atmosphere. They read not only the performers and the differing energies of each performance, but the audience too. They improvise within the structure of the story to allow it to unfold more deeply for the audience.

“Absolutely loved this experience of working with two awesome and talented wāhine. This was a massive learning and trusting experience for me. This whakaari (play) pushed me out of my comfort zone and for the first time I danced in front of an audience. What I learned from this play was the importance of trusting in yourself and others.”

– Fualili Toa'i Aumua-Jahnke.

With themes of loss, self-worth, the healing power of music, spirituality, and love, we chose to use shadow dancers to represent divine masculine and feminine energies and to build a spiritual world that watches, guides, and protects those in the realm of the living. We explored realistic and abstract forms of movement and imagery to create a spiritual realm. We combined Māori performing arts and physical movement or dance. Though our equipment was limited, and our space meant limited hours for working with shadow, we saw huge potential for a shadow world and shadow dancers. This will definitely be a part of the final product.

“Fear and doubt, confidence and trust. These contradictory energies shifted constantly within me during this process, they are still here as I attempt to write this article; my fear of not being an academic, yet writing for a publication ... which will be filled with extraordinarily talented people ... articulating and communicating with aptitude and talent ... my imagination runs away with me. I am intimidated and insecure but choose to feel the fear and do it anyway. Keep pushing myself out of my comfort zone to see what I can find. I find when you collaborate with the right people, for the right reasons, and all involved are willing to work hard, you can achieve a great deal in a very short amount of time. This experience was essential for me as a creative, and it was a pleasure. It has deepened my respect and admiration for my colleague’s talents, it has reinforced my own trust in my ideas and creativity, and it has shown me we have the beginnings of something special. Our story touched people’s hearts, it made them think of spirituality and what that means to them. It made them laugh, they left wanting Sheree’s songs on their playlist, and they left seeing the full story in their heads. I couldn’t ask for more.”

– Kim Garrett.



THE END: Huangā—Findings.

The Physics Room laid out an exciting brief to the public that was full of scope and great questions to stimulate creativity. We at Pūkauri Productions appreciate the time and space we had to examine and discover the processes which work for us and serve our story best. We loved the opportunity to bring together a dancer, an actor, and a musician to devise a show using each other's strengths and supporting each other's weaknesses. It felt like a step in the right direction to be a part of the expansion and diversification of people and bodies collaborating, sharing spaces, and spreading knowledge in our communities.

Doubt was felt but trust was still given and shared. A script was written. Movement was choreographed. Songs and music were developed and created. An environment was fashioned. Collaborators generously, and tirelessly, went above and beyond. A performance was shared. Feedback was exchanged. Now, the final step is this written response to the entire experience ... and so it is done.

THE END ... or maybe I should say the beginning? For this opportunity has shown us this story deserves a chance. It is our intention to present this story to New Zealand, and eventually to the world and it would be serendipitous to see you there.



First photograph by Hamish Petersen. Other photographs courtesy of John Russell.

Jennifer Katherine Shields

sometimes my layers clash with your layers

this piece is an act of processing in response to a number of topics the HAMSTER 5 brief brought up. as part of the process, an open workshop was held in which people came together to discuss questions such as, “what is bodily practice?”, “is there a non-bodily practice?”, and “what does it mean to work or create with people whose bodies are treated the same way as yours?”. during this discussion people also created collage, badges, and blackout poetry from The Physics Room’s archival material, old National Geographics, and cheap romance novels.

only those with bodies who are treated as the norm are able to “escape” bodily practice. to be clear, their practice is still bodily, but they have the luxury of not thinking about it that way, because their bodies are the default.

certain processes aim to dissociate the body from the text. academic texts are peer reviewed, made objective, attempting to excise the body. the body should be in the text at all times. we need to re-associate the body with the text.

i only have one body. things are always in process, always connected to pasts and futures.

when venn diagrams cross over, certain things get easier. working with others who have similar bodily experiences can be revolutionary, simply because of the amount of work that has already been done, because of the shared understanding between the collaborators.

reading trans fiction by trans authors changed my life. this form of collaboration between writer and reader who both have similar bodily experiences has been revolutionary. i have encountered and discovered experiences i had already had, but not acknowledged.

collaborating across identities, writing personal and intimate pieces. reading and writing as a means of collaborating across generations, across time and history, with those who are no longer here

i am interested in the notion of reading someone’s work as an act of collaboration. i think it makes sense—the writer writes, and that is the thesis. the reader approaches the work with their lived experience, and that is the antithesis. the act of reading is an act of synthesis, an act of collaboration. i believe this act has revolutionary capabilities. with this understanding, the act of sharing of any work, at any stage in the creative process, also has revolutionary capabilities.

i remember the first time i collaborated with another trans person. they edited a significant text i wrote. it was easy, i felt comfortable because we had a shared understanding, a shared politic, even though we were working in an institutional space. this connection, this collaboration, this mode of working made the director uncomfortable.

in 2014, 91 years after the term ‘transsexual’ was coined, i sit in a dark room and watch sylvia rivera take the stage at the 1973 gay pride rally in new york. i watch as the crowd boo and jeer. my heart fills with love and hope as she, speaking to me across decades, leans on the mic stand and stares back at the crowd, defiant.

i wrote this poem for the 50th anniversary of stonewall. queer history has always been important to me. watching that video of sylvia rivera changed my life and set me on a path i was always meant to follow. it really did feel like she was speaking directly to me. everything i do now, when thinking about and working with queer history, is trying to generate that feeling for others.

when i read that poem, i read parts of her speech. in those moments i want to embody sylvia as much as i can. sometimes, it is not just myself on the stage. i am no longer in 2019, but neither am i in 1973. we are somewhere in between.

in the film *it follows*, the horror is embodied in someone who is possessed by it, and they slowly and methodologically chase, at walking pace, the last person they had sex with. i feel like i’m in that movie, but the horror is capitalism, always slowly chasing me, always attempting to capture and define my identity. non-binary genders are now marketable—what was once (and still is to some extent) outside the norm is now a marketing category. i open facebook, start creating a new ad, and sigh with relief when i see i can target men, women, or all. capitalism is still alive because it finds ways to subsume the things that would kill it. thesis, antithesis, synthesis—an act of perverse collaboration, but one in which there is no respect or care, simply greed for survival and accumulation. this is a mode of collaboration we must try and avoid. in *it follows*, the only way to survive is to have sex with someone else, and even then it only puts another person in between you and the horror. you are still on the list.

i see more and more of us reaching out for queer history. watching these histories play out in shows like *pose* give me hope. although a b-plot, watching the story of ACT UP play out on screen in a mass-media format feels significant. it feels significant to see queer and trans people of colour running the show, writing the show, acting in the show and increasing visibility of these stories and identities. i worry to what extent these histories are being subsumed by normative capitalism, being used as a tool to continue that ideology.

we are in a moment where we need to learn our histories. i am lucky to have not personally experienced the impact of AIDS. i am part of a generation that has been told that all the queer struggles have been solved. i have experienced intergenerational conflict like this. i believe the way forward is intergenerational connection.

i was at an event recently where multiple generations of queer folk were in the same room, speaking about their experiences, about the ways they have experienced their bodies being policed, being surveilled, being co-opted. that was a revolutionary moment. i spoke to people of generations above me who had their eyes opened that night—shifting from “we fought the fight, the kids have it alright,” to “i had no idea what they were struggling with and i have some learning to do.”

this is the power of collaboration. this highlights the way collaboration across, between, and through bodily experience can create radical change.

collaborating with others with different experiences, though often more difficult, can be beneficial—for both parties or just one? collaborating across lines of privilege when you are the one holding that privilege, requires responsibility and respect. how do we navigate this best for growth, for both parties, without exploitation or appropriation?

dichotomies and binaries are always limiting. there is space between the poles, outside the poles, space so distant from the poles that the poles aren't even recognisable any more.

in our community, we talk a lot about passing. for many it is an end goal, understandably so. passing can bring massive amounts of safety. but passing is not something innate to yourself or your body, passing is conditional and changes in every single interaction you have, every time anyone perceives you. you have no control over it, not really.

really, almost everything about our bodies is like this. even though our bodies should be our own, they exist most when they are perceived. or perhaps they exist least when being perceived—our own tangible body replaced by someone's perception of it. it is significant when someone's perception of your body aligns with your understanding of your body. being seen instead of being perceived.

when talking about bodies, we often think in hierarchies. when talking about fat bodies, sick bodies, we talk about “better”. i am chronically ill. i will not get “better”. “better” is a construct and the

goalposts are always changing. none of us will ever really reach “better”. there will always be another “better”. “better” is the default body, but even default bodies have a “better” they are told to strive for.

even “improvement” implies that your current body is not enough. “improvement” implies invalidity.

your body is valid, your body is beautiful, your body is functional even when it doesn't function like other bodies

“improvement” and “better” are tools to sell. we can only get “better” through consumption. “better” is a billion-dollar industry.

there is a difficult tension between bodily acceptance and trans experience that sonya renee taylor works through well in *the body is not an apology*. we, as bodily activists, must acknowledge that for some trans people, changing parts of their body is necessary for survival and the alleviation of dysphoria. at the same time, as trans activists, we must acknowledge (despite the gut instinct to say “that won't work for me”) that radical self-love is an incredibly useful and revolutionary tool.

it is very hard, at times, to even consider that we may one day feel comfortable about parts of our bodies we currently want to change or remove. it can feel impossible. i want to honour and respect that difficulty. i want to acknowledge that this won't work for everyone. i sit in both of these spaces. there are still parts of my body i would like (or need—i'm still not sure which) to change. but there are other parts of my body that i feel no longer need changing. the act of reading-collaboration of *the body is not an apology* led me to this space. thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

i'm also interested in notions of bodily change that capitalism and normativity haven't got to yet. in pittsburgh, there is a conference called PLEASE TRY THIS AT HOME on radical bodily autonomy and biotechnology. their tagline is QUEER CYBORGS WANTED. so many trans people are already engaging in this practice, because the medical establishment refuses to recognise them. we share knowledge about the treatments we need to survive, we purchase what we need in online black markets, and we become more knowledgeable than the medical establishment anyway.

this once-grassroots movement is growing and growing. we now have an international trans healthcare professional organisation, by and for trans people. we have a similar organisation in aotearoa.

i am interested in the ways we necessarily professionalise and legitimise, co-opting capital and normativity ourselves in order to improve things for others, for those utilising that black market, and for those that cannot even access that black market. i myself operate professionally in healthcare spaces. i worry sometimes about the way this professionalisation has closed doors even as it has opened others.

in the collaborative workshop, we discussed healthcare contexts, especially around mental health. someone shared their experience of working in these spaces, and the suspicion the institution held about encouraging creative collaboration between patients—the fear that bringing these people together will worsen their health, for some reason or another. this is a fear. doctors were not able to discern how others with shared experience of mental distress could possibly provide healing the doctors were not already capable of.

*been thinking and writing more about bodies, my body,
my relationship with my body, how my body relates to
other bodies*

collaboration requires vulnerability. i find vulnerability hard but this is a project i am committed to. i will grow, because it is necessary.

*bodies are complex and complicated and have many layers. sometimes
my layers clash with your layers. how do we work through that?*

holding and nurturing an understanding of the ways our bodies align and the ways they don't is critical to moving forward. collaboration on personal matters can be difficult, but it is possible and rewarding.

we acknowledge that, as queer and trans folk, we all carry complex traumas. sometimes these traumas may interact weirdly or conflict with each other - hold space for that and be gentle¹

we have run a small, personal, intimate, and domestic queer space for nearly three years. we all hold traumas, and these traumas have conflicted. for example, trans folk transitioning from different directions will occasionally meet in the middle in ways that might clash. understanding this and holding space for each others' feelings is essential.

recently, an online celebrity of sorts implied that encouraging acceptance of non-binary folk and the pronouns they use makes

1. text from a collaborative guideline/kaupapa statement created by QITAS, 2019.

it hard for binary trans folk. this may be true for this person, and others may feel the same way, but there are ways through and around this. working through this requires radical acceptance. it requires love. it requires being able to step back from your traumas, while still holding them in tenderness along with the trauma of others—the hardest thing.

i think the way forward must include open communication in good faith and holding space for love, understanding, and a willingness to appreciate each other's experiences. this was the spirit in which the workshop was held: people were invited to contribute and share and discuss our experiences, their similarities and differences.

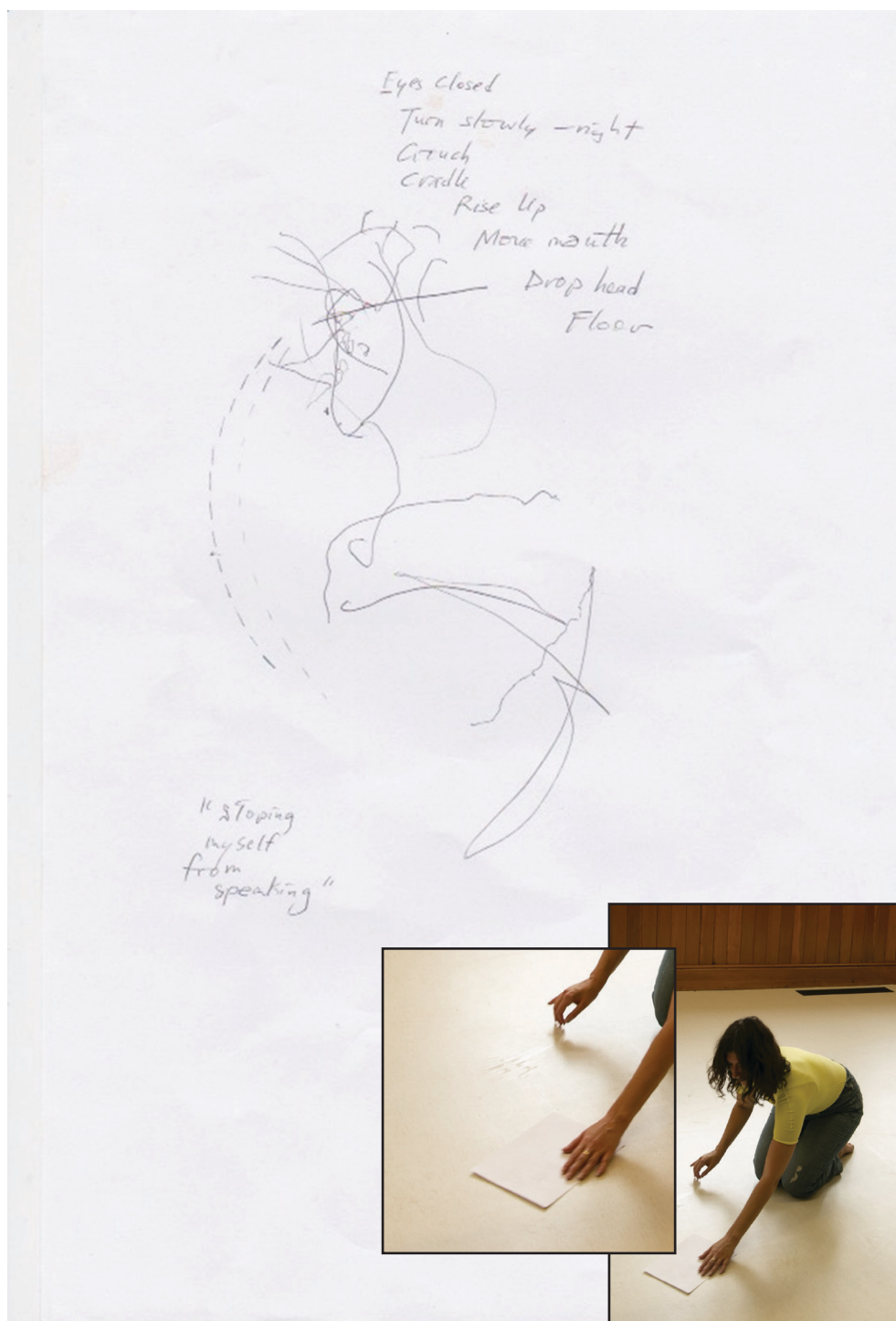
as queer and trans folk, the traumas we hold often lead us to a gut reaction of lashing out or shutting down. this is an understandable response. when so many spaces are hostile or dangerous, it is safer to assume the worst. it means we will be sure to avoid the worst, and the good that we avoid as a result is a necessary cost.

it is hard to be vulnerable. it is the work of creating safe, comfortable, loving, and understanding spaces to exist and collaborate in that aids us in starting to shift away from this position of fear and distrust. hold space for that and be gentle.

ANCIENT FOOT

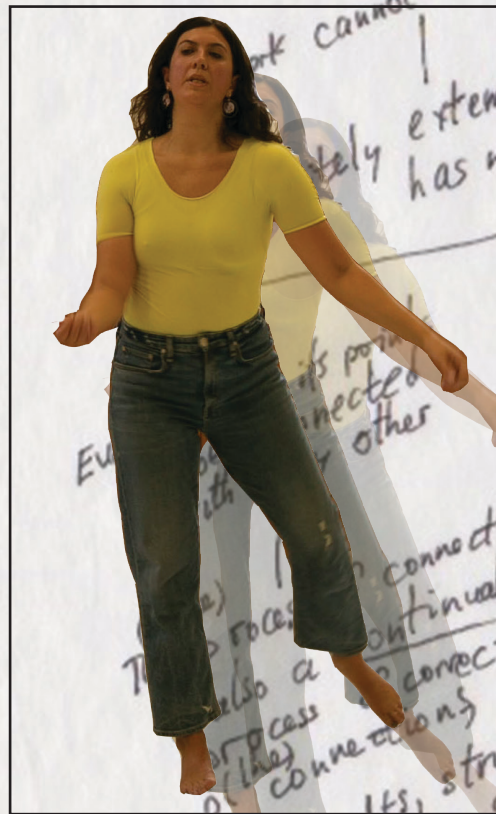


These drawings are by Kayla Marshall, and were made during a collaborative weekend residency alongside Charlotte Filipov (photographs), instigated by Brooke Stamp (words and movement).



DISCORDANT SYMBOL

MYTHOLOGY WALKING



A woman with dark, wavy hair is captured in a dynamic dance pose, wearing a bright yellow short-sleeved shirt and dark blue jeans. She is barefoot. A semi-transparent, ghostly double exposure of her is visible behind her, creating a sense of movement. The background is white with various handwritten elements in black ink: "way:" with an arrow pointing left, "ure" with a line, "phiboly" and "no ifra" with an arrow pointing up, "Taken to pieces inverted", "ing" with a curved line, and "rhizome" with a line. The overall aesthetic is artistic and conceptual.

Those who travel in it, then, must learn to correct constantly the image they have of it whether it be a concrete (local) image of one of its sections, or the hypothetical image of its global structure.

Metaphor for the network model

A network hierarchy is a tree structure (infinite no. of corridors that connect its nodes)

DRILL SPECTACLE

PEDAGOGUE PARADE



Tip-toeing
Cutting
Collage
Breaking

Speaking
Ideas
line
M-on
lang.

Shaking hands
Shaking hands
(Simultaneously)

Staircase

Timed
(Go up + down)

+ loop
(of choreographed)

Up right.
Hair behind ear
(right)



CONTIGUOUS DUAL

Performing a memory

Let's start with the experience of a memory. Specifically an episodic memory—a scene from your life that can be remembered with the faint glimmer of something like re-experiencing the event. Let's go back to this morning, the moments between waking up and getting out of bed. Shut your eyes and try to enter that space. First, what are the concrete details: Did you wake up by yourself or with an alarm? Was there someone in the bed with you? How long did it take you to get up? Now the phenomenological: What did the sheets feel like? Were you groggy or alert? Did you remember your dreams? What was the quality of the light in the room? What was the temperature of the air on your skin?

From the perspective of cognitive neuroscience, we know a fair amount about the biological processes at work when we generate memory and other thoughts, but little about how these processes actually produce the subjective experience of thinking and remembering. The neuroscientist David Marr described this as, “trying to understand bird flight by studying only feathers: It just cannot be done.”¹ We know that thought requires the firing of neurons, that they set each other off in chains of action or inhibition, depending on the chemicals they pass to each other. We can observe synchronising patterns of neuronal firing in the changes to the electromagnetic field at the scalp, and the location of activity by tracking the changes in blood flow through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). But as for how this electrical and chemical activity constitutes a thought; it's flight and we are still amongst the feathers.

While it's easy to imagine transient thoughts that come and go as shifting patterns of activation, what about the thoughts that are able to be repeated in some way? What about memory? Early studies searched for the location of an engram, a functional unit of information thought to be stored in a discrete location in the brain, as if it were a filing cabinet or a hard drive.² Researchers trained rats in mazes and then removed parts of their cortex, trying to find the key location without which the rat would forget how to run the maze. What they found, however, was that the memory was affected not by **where** the cortex was removed, but by **how much**. The greater the volume removed, no matter where from, the worse the rats performed in the maze. This led to the conclusion that the trace of any one memory, rather than being localised, is distributed throughout the brain, encoded in the changing strengths of relationships between networks of neurons.

At the algorithmic level, details of episodic memories are bound together within a cognitive diagram of their associations, called “event models”.³ The act of recalling these memories triggers

1. David Marr, *Vision: A computational investigation into the human representation and processing of visual information*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982/2010), 27.

2. Darryl Bruce, “Fifty years since Lashley's ‘In search of the Engram,’” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 10, no. 3 (2001): 308-318.

3. Gabriel A. Radvansky and Jeffrey M. Zacks, “Long Term Memory,” *Event Cognition*, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), www.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199898138.001.0001.

a reperformance of the models that were active at the time of encoding, i.e. a restaging of the gestures and patterns that were active in processing the original experience. For example, one study using fMRI to track the location of activation in the brain had participants watch a film and later recount its plot. They found that the pattern of activation as participants encoded each distinct scene was so similar to the pattern when they later narrated it, that the part of the story being recounted could be predicted from the signature of activation alone.⁴ Beyond this, they ran fresh participants who listened to this narrated version of the film and their pattern of activation was again so similar that the individual scenes of the film could be distinguished. What this means is that not only does remembering constitute a restaging of the original pattern, like a script for a performance, but our communication to others through language also acts like a transmission of this script.

Look at the room around you, try to catalogue as much detail about the objects you can see and the spaces between them. Below the level of explicit perception, you are building a cognitive model of these relations. Look at the object you're accessing this text from, whether it be paper, a phone, a laptop. If you're listening to the audiobook, move the object transmitting it so that it's within your reach. Next, close your eyes, and try to hold the model you have built in your mind's eye. Keeping your eyes closed, reach out to touch the top left corner of your reading device. How accurate were you? Try this gesture again. Did you improve the second time?

The process of building an event model is much like building a spatial model of the world, in that both involve binding of individual elements and the relations between them. These models are not discrete and faithful records, but rather they shape and are shaped by event schemata: generalised models of how we expect events to go based on previous experience.⁵ Our experience of life is mediated by the many overlapping schemata in which we maintain the relations between space, objects, other people, and ourselves.

If cognition occurs as a pattern of activation, then we can picture it as gestural and performative. And if the act of remembering is the reperformance of a previous gesture, then we can think of memory as a biologically encoded script for such a performance. If we view memory this way then we can apply theoretical frameworks that have been built around performativity within other fields such as performance art—a discipline which has meditated at length on the nature of bodies in space and in relation to each other.

4. Asieh Zadbood et. al., "How we transmit memories to other brains," *Cerebral Cortex* 27, no. 10 (2017): 4988-5000.

5. Howard Eichenbaum, "Memory: organization and control," *Annual Review of Psychology* 68 (2017): 19-45.

What does it mean to be performative?

The trajectory of performance art that emerged in New York in the 1960s centred itself around the question of what performance is and does. First, performativity is not a quality that separates art from ordinary life, but rather is inherent in both. For example, the dancer Yvonne Rainer in works like *The Mind is a Muscle* (1968)—aptly titled for our conversation here—used choreography derived from “pedestrian” movements, in both senses of the word; ordinary, as well as literally mirroring the bustle and unchoreographed co-ordination of pedestrians on the street.⁶ Performers, together and individually, were instructed to move with a “[t]ask- or work-like movement with a ‘factual’ quality,” collaboratively building the work in their actions.⁷ For example in *Stairs*:

Steve handstand - David grabs his legs while Y gets foam, place, rolls down, D and S come front, push mat as D and S rejoin Y, breast-hold while she alone walks up and jumps.⁸

For the feminist critic Amelia Jones, the use of the body as an art object constituted a “dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism,” a subject structured by clear demarcations between mind / body and self / other, by making visible the **intersubjectivity** between artist, art object, and viewer that is inherent within every encounter with art.⁹ Other artists, instead of inserting ordinary life into the realm of art, inserted art into the realm of ordinary life. Adrian Piper, for example, who stuffed a towel in her mouth and rode the subway, and toured galleries with a handbag full of ketchup, violated the norms which ensure the smooth functioning of pedestrian life in order to upset her own visible invisibility as a white-passing black woman.¹⁰ Using the body directly in the work brought with it all the messy specificity and context of the subject as well as highlighting the subject’s position within matrices of power, aspects which Modernist formalism sought to suppress.¹¹

If we think about our own cognition in the same way, a lens of performativity allows us to frame it as embedded not only within the body as an evasion of Cartesian dualism, but also within social contexts shot through with racialised, gendered, and economic inequities. And remember that both these contexts—of the body and the body politic—are in turn represented cognitively as schemata, and as such are cognitively performed in ways which shape our behaviour and thus our own influence back on to those contexts. A performative perspective on cognition can especially help us to

6. Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind is a Muscle*, (London: Afterall, 2007), 10.

7. Yvonne Rainer quoted in Wood, *Yvonne Rainer*, 7.

8. Ibid, 79.

9. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1.

10. Adrian Piper, *Catalysis*, (1970-71).

11. Jones, *Body Art*, 13.

understand what it means for cognition to be constructed in action. In defining performativity, Judith Butler quotes Nietzsche's assertion that the doer is constituted by the deed, and applies this to her own argument about gender, in that gender identity is not essential but rather something that is constituted by its own performance. Likewise, we could say that a memory is not a stable entity (remember the engram), but rather it is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."¹²

For the critic Peggy Phelan, performance art is a gesture in line with linguist J. L. Austin's distinction between **constative utterances**, acts of speech that merely describe external referents in the world, and **performative utterances**, which are actions in and of themselves.¹³ Crucially, Austin's performative utterances are not subject to any binary positivism of being true or false.¹⁴ Recall the choreography of Rainer's *Stairs*—the performers move with a busy orderliness as they approach their tasks, which independently constitute small units of meaning: a jump, a somersault, a handstand, the execution of which depends on collaboration of the performers, which can be reconfigured endlessly, and can repeat the same units of movement, which only exist in their moment of execution and, even if repeated, are unique in every iteration. In this framework, thought is not abstract representation, but something as physical as a somersault.

Shut your eyes again and try to remember the gesture of reaching out in the dark. Don't physically move but picture it as clearly as you can, picture the trajectory of your reach, the pressure of contact on your hand. While you may not outwardly be repeating the movement, internally your neurons are shadowing the earlier pattern of activation in order to simulate this previous experience.

What does it mean for cognition to be performative?

As with Jones' assertion, the major advantage of thinking of cognition as performative is that this position evades a Cartesian dualism which conceives of mind and body as separate, and which imagines subjects as able to function as rational observers divorced from corporeal reality. Despite this totalising framework supposedly having been unravelled by poststructuralism, it has tended to linger or mutate rather than die. In the field of cognitive science, Alan Jasanoff has argued that while we have ostensibly moved beyond the idea of a Cartesian subject and accepted that the mind emerges from the biological functions of the brain, the spirit of dualism persists by drawing a distinction between the brain and the rest of the body, mystifying the brain and its behaviour.¹⁵

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

13. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The politics of performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 149.

14. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

15. Alan Jasanoff, *The Biological Mind*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018). See also: <https://aeon.co/essays/we-are-more-than-our-brains-on-neuroscience-and-being-human>.

Beyond this, the hangover of Cartesian dualism combined with 20th century cybernetics led to a tendency within cognitive science to view the brain as a disembodied, computing organism, which receives inputs (stimuli), performs a computation using abstract symbols (cognition), and generates outputs (action). In this model, information travels in a single direction, with no feedback between the levels, and with cognition happening within the sealed system of the brain.¹⁶

This framework has not gone unchallenged, in fact as far back as 1916 the psychologist Margaret Floy Washburn proposed the inextricability of bodily movement from mental life.¹⁷ More recently there have emerged challenges that insist that cognition is inherently **embodied**, as a whole body function, **enactive**, being constituted in action, as well as being **embedded** in the wider physical and social context that the body inhabits and, as such, constituted in relation to others.¹⁸ These elements have all been played-out and become well-established in the trajectory of performance art, however their emergence in the field of cognitive science has by no means become the dominant perspective, often derided as an unscientifically vague fad.¹⁹

Remember, it doesn't last

Beyond locating thought and memory as embodied / enactive / embedded, a performative lens on cognition allows us to see that it also shares what, for Phelan, is the greatest strength of performance: its **transience**. For Phelan, the impermanence and unreproducible quality of performance means that it “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.”²⁰ This is again pertinent as the current resurgence of dualism comes in the form of trans-humanist promises of radical life extension through uploading or technologically externalising consciousness into a more permanent form in what theorist Rossi Braidotti calls “the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self.”²¹

The futility of technologically transcribing thought into some stable medium is the same futility that Phelan ascribes to attempts at documenting performance. For Phelan, writing especially relies on reproduction of the same, while at an ontological level performance is non-reproductive.²² Resisting reproducibility is for Phelan a strategy for resisting capitalist economies, which is why she advocates for resisting documentation. If we write a memory, or thought, at best we can create a script for the reperformance in the minds of others or for ourselves, but as Phelan cautions,

16. Arthur M. Glenberg, Jessica K. Witt, and Janet Metcalfe, “From the revolution to embodiment: 25 years of cognitive psychology,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8, no. 5 (2013): 573.

17. Ibid.

18. Rafael Núñez et al., “What happened to cognitive science?” *Nature human behaviour* 3, no. 8 (2019): 782-791.

19. Stephen D. Goldinger et al., “The poverty of embodied cognition,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 23, no. 4 (2016): 959-978.

20. Phelan, *Unmarked*, 148.

21. Rossi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 91.

22. Phelan, 148.

reperformances are only ever iterative, not replicative, each restaging is unique in and of itself.

Memory—our original attempt at transcribing the gestures that have constituted our lives—is fallible, itself just another performance that happens in an instant and then falls into nothing. The void of the past into which all things fall is the enduring reality that trans-humanists try to scramble away from when they propose transcription of thought, memory, and consciousness itself into digital forms. Acceptance of the void, of the fleeting nature of all things is, for Phelan, an evasion of the reproductive demands of capital, an escape hatch from its demands of permanence and profitable exchange.

Gemma Banks

In waves

The lining is on the loom

We carry a sewing machine into the studio. There are piles and piles of peach paper with fluorescent ink and perfume samples. The tiny space fills with the scent of jasmine, liquorice, ink, and cotton. I place the first set of papers on the needle-plate. The presser-foot comes down and I begin to sew the pages together.

The sky spins its magic and I feel its transcendent pull

I feel it in my palms

The colour as we slice

The grass on the field

The foiling of the windows

It stays with me when I leave

Resting next to me as I sleep

Silent waves

Smiling as I walk beside him

He whispers into my ear

These feelings are silk.

Holding nothing, holding something

Waves quarrel amongst themselves

Rising up and slamming down again

A tsunami of cells

Tissue and marrow

It reminds me of when I was young, and trusted monsters

He reaches out and grabs the knife

Butters the bread and hands it to me

Three days equal fifty in this world

But my eyes are fixed

It ripples through my chest, a compulsion held by many strands

I notice the way his shoulders hang as he walks into the room

He steps to the right as I step to the left

My pen torpedoes through the air

I'm in love, I think

Pass me the scalpel, he says

I walk into the studio and straight out again

The ocean roars and I do too

Longing for more

Always more.

A note in the tarmac

The road is quiet

We circle each other

I begin to shiver

We watch the dawn rising, the printers hum

Ash falls from the sky

Blurring my glasses

And staining my scalp

Language dissolves on our faces like rain

A yellow mask enters the room

Digging into my spine

I split in two.

Green Square

I drop my bag on the floor

There are colours everywhere

Ink is in the air

Right up until the opening, my fingers thread

I tie narratives to memories, mechanical moments

The walls bleat, they're sick of the hollow glow thrust upon them

We watch horses

An evening passes

There are serpents in my dreams

And screens on skyscrapers

Crumbs in the keyboard and 2% left in the wireless mouse

I wake with burnt arms.

You wore sandals to work

As the weeks go on, an incision is made

Hands in, gripping my flesh

Together foreign bodies wrench me apart

Forming into an image, a disconcerting image

A man at the front and a bookcase at the back

The moment I saw it my heart undressed

Tell the stitching to stop!

The bus breaks down and I start walking

The heat is linoleum, an impossible covering

I run back to the apartment and collapse in the cool

I sit at my desk hoping the goblins will drown

I open my drawer and pull out an orange

I position the knife and pierce the skin, four quarters

I sink my teeth deep into each centre

I've made peace

And I've remade peace

I stab poles in the snow

And all I've learnt is

Peace is fleeting

My eyesight rises and I begin to lift.

Bodies of water

There are raised voices. The paperback I'm reading falls between my legs. Two women are arguing on the pier. "It's always been like this!" the younger one yells. The older one looks mortified, her face disfigured in shock.

Haunted by holograms

Her mother tries to touch her but the girl is already running

The walls are twentieth century

The floors; parquet

Sinking until born of bronze

I drip down to the mat

Pressing my hands to the floor

I marvel in the wake of loss

I dive in red

I have been here before but then again I haven't

Altered landmarks

Where there was a puddle, there is now an ocean

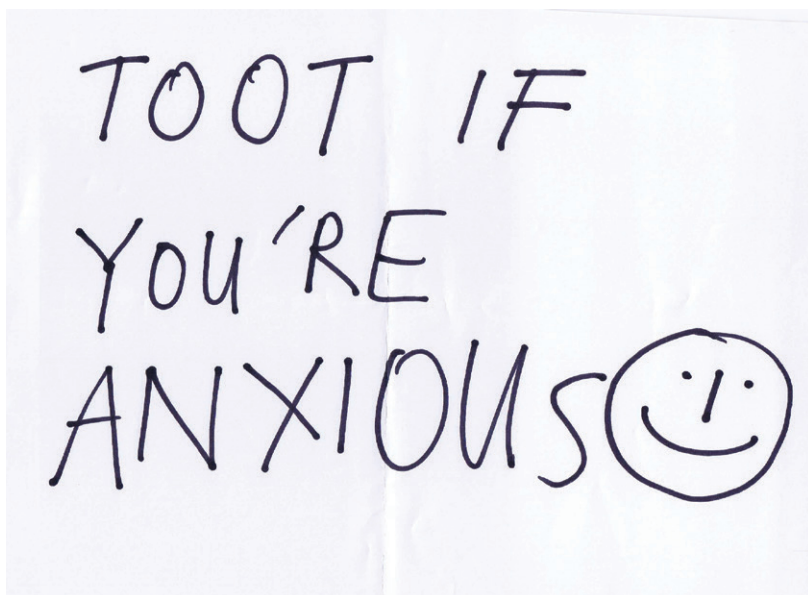
Letting go

The dust, my lungs

The feeble fool

Beyond the walls, the doors, the hallways, there is a waterfall

And the waterfall is falling, falling, falling.



Sign made as part of the *Inbox Anxiety* Public Performance, 22 September, 2019, Cnr Worcester Blvd and Montreal Street.

Can I join a twelve-step meeting for inbox avoidance?

It feels slightly ironic to be undertaking a physical residency at The Physics Room, when my performance is digital. You can be online everywhere and anywhere: its reach stretches as far and broad as a wifi signal. But as divorced from the physical that the world wide web might seem, the Internet still occupies real architecture. It exists in our concretely occurring lives through modems, antenna, and fibre optic veins laid deep on the seafloor. It exists in real networks of friends, shared activities like tennis or swimming. Online coordinates are usually matched to offline behaviours, or vice versa. Even if we were to label it all a big mistake and delete the Internet from our human browser history, we still couldn't change how it has affected our headspace.

My head is uploaded to the Cloud but in reality, I'm in Ōtautahi. In Christchurch, although I know very few people, I have plenty of companions to perform for and to. Hamish takes photographs and makes sure I always have someone to eat dinner with. I go to yoga with Rhea and Michelle, meet Kim from Pūkauri Productions, drink coffee at The Physics Room headquarters and laugh at Jamie holding up a big sign for me that he doesn't want posted publicly. I perform to different audiences: to the gathered group of acquaintances picking at grapes, to the select and registered attendees of a workshop, to the infinite microcosm of Likes and Views online, to the senders and recipients of emails, to strangers on the street.

To be on social media is to be a mime in a maze of mirrors. You're the performer you're being performed to you're watching a performance you're in the car waiting for the event to end. I've had inbox anxiety for a long time. The majority of my work connects to being online and I don't know how to separate myself from it cleanly.

I'm SO online. Burnout is an apt way to diagnose how I am handling my inbox, barely able to tap on a notification. I am somebody out of an episode of *Hoarders*: shameful, in denial, and paralysed by a crippling inability to deal with the volume of content around me.

The inbox is a place of economy and precarity, scarcity, overwhelm, and deficit. We're facing a genuine loneliness epidemic.¹ It's also a place where memes exist, where I sustain the friendships I'm unable / too tired to migrate offline. How do we throw out the garbage and keep the good content? I'm the baby; the internet is my bathwater.

Hell is other people, or at least being constantly accessible to them. Intimacy feels as bright as the sun. I can't look at it directly. I have to manage it through laptop screens and drunken phone DMs. My dismal Tinder date from Tāmaki keeps texting.

I get separation anxiety when I plug my phone into a wall charger

I remember hearing a friend use the phrase, "it's too admin" to justify why they weren't going out that evening

I don't go on dating apps because it is frightening for 70 dudes to have access to you

Making a rain dance to SMS notifications

Burying my phone in quicksand

A watched pot never boils but my phone still rings

I definitely saw your messages and they made me feel a little bit sick

WINZ is the only person who sends me letters anymore mostly saying that I owe them money

Daily phone usage report for the last five days (10/10/19 - 15/10/19):

3 hours 58 minutes, 80 unlocks
2 hours 13 minutes, 30 unlocks
3 hours 19 minutes, 58 unlocks
3 hours 55 minutes, 113 unlocks
4 hours 13 minutes, 94 unlocks

1. Shainna Ali, "What You Need to Know About the Loneliness Epidemic," *Psychology Today*, last modified July 12, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201807/what-you-need-know-about-the-loneliness-epidemic>.

Inbox Audit:

87 unread conversations on Messenger since 01/01/2019
99+ WhatsApp notifications
147 unread emails in my priority inbox
17, 571 total unopened emails
27 unopened texts
15 recent DMs on Instagram
10 unopened message requests on Instagram
19 unopened message requests on Facebook
4 unread threads on Slack
6 unread messages on Twitter
3 other social media accounts
3 other email addresses

The writer confirms that this information holds true at the time of 12:52pm 15/10/19 and that all unopened messages remain un-replied to.

On Mon, 16 Sep 2019 at 21:16, Rosabel Tan <rosabel@gmail.com> wrote:



Screenshot from email received during the *Inbox Anxiety* HAMSTER email takeover during Vanessa's *HAMSTER 5* Residency at The Physics Room, 21-22 September, 2019.

I want to find out how we feel about the Internet. How can we understand the ways we interact online through physically embodying those social states?

Part of my performance is moonlighting as The Physics Room online. I am trying to be antagonistic and un-institutional, but I also hope people think I am funny and get what I am doing. I have minimal employment fealty to this account, but I still hold some baseline pride when it comes to taking selfies. People who I don't know reply to my stories, friends and strangers email me whilst in moniker. Real life connections follow me over separate social media accounts (@deathbypdf, @physicsroom). It feels like getting married and your families intermingling. Should I take "room" as my new last name?

The other part of my residency is offline: through public performance and workshopping. For my public performance I sit in a corner of the Christchurch CBD and try to get people to talk to me. It is much harder to do this outside of a phone screen. Trying to talk to others in broad daylight as you occupy a street corner doesn't feel friendly anymore, it feels weird and unsafe. Either I want attention or just to be invisible. Being online is a two-way highway. I manage to find some lone souls on the street willing to chat, the rest ignore my increasingly desperate eye contact. Face-to-face interaction takes us out of our bubble. It reminds me that we have decided what forms a collective, a family, a neighborhood, and a city. We don't really interact with the Other much anymore. And it's much easier for us to be vulnerable in cyberspace.

For the workshop, participants and I test out how we can present our online selves offline. Part of this activity is seeing what an IRL inbox might feel like.² Those who partake respond to a variety of questions, mimicking the range of messages one might receive within a day: spam, DMs about opportunities for exposure, benign family texts, passive-aggressive hate-mail, and vulnerable confessions. Each person's response is sealed in an envelope, shuffled like playing cards, and read aloud by allocated speakers. The slowness of pace, of having to physically open an envelope, translate a person's handwriting, then read it aloud means that the information is processed in a way that would never occur naturally online. It makes me wish for the slowness of dial-up Internet.



Vanessa Crofskey (@deathbypdf), Instagram Photo, September 20, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2nQXVipJHP/>.

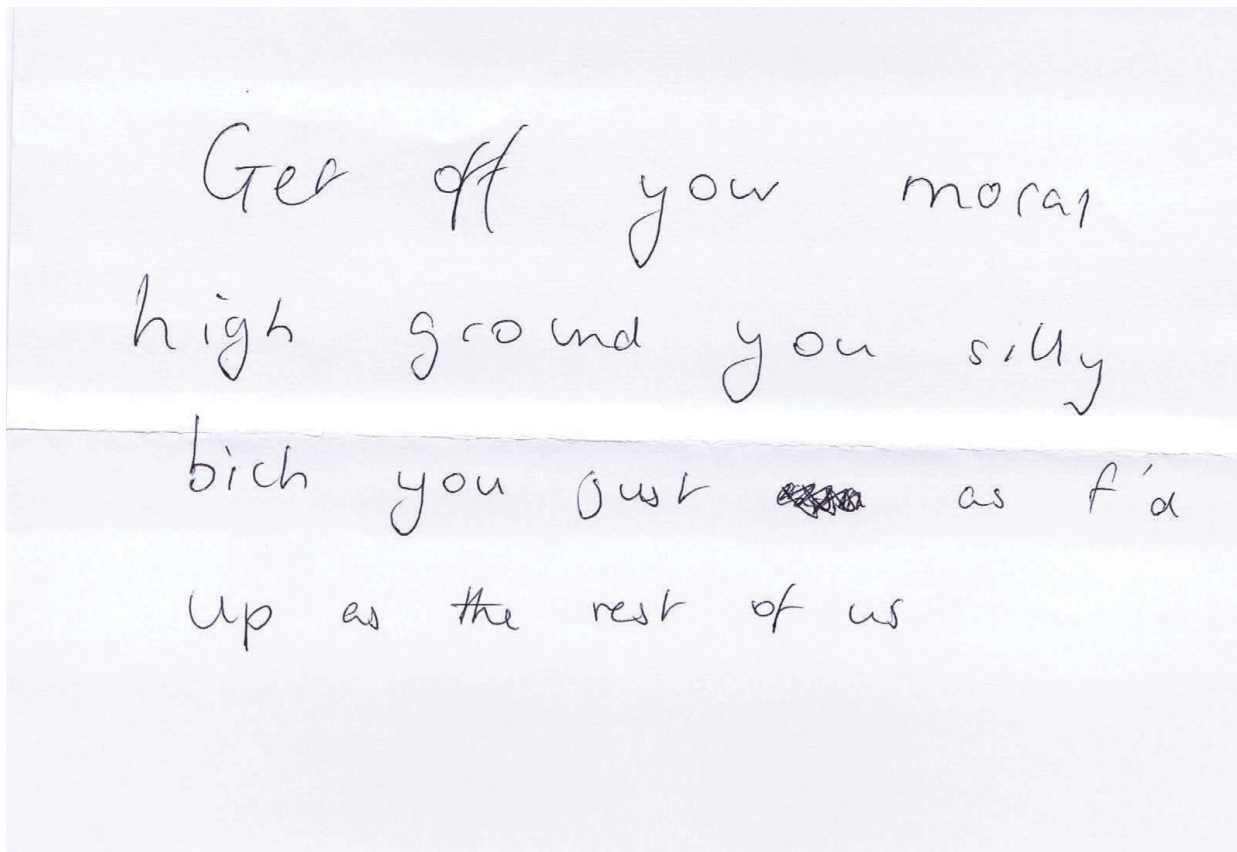


Really great idea to run a public performance about talking to people when you fucking hate talking to people. The Physics Room (@physicsroom), Instagram Photo, September 22, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2sY9VLp6Se/>.

2. I did forget that letterboxes exist.



Participants in *Inbox Anxiety: An Open Workshop*, September 21, 2019. Photograph by Michelle Wang.



Sign made by participant in *Inbox Anxiety: An Open Workshop*, September 21, 2019.

Inbox anxiety is the sickness of “digital dystopianism”.³

Understanding our anxieties can help us figure out how to process our relationship to an object or situation. To be online is to be controlled by or connected to a computer, but we also built computers. We made institutions. We even made self-checkouts at supermarkets. Structures and systems are all made up of us—unsure and doing our best. Our lives still run on human schedule. I’m not saying this to diminish the current power imbalance that it feels like big data companies have over us, or to naïvely assume that we have been given equal footing. I just want to remind a person that everything is rooted in that which once looked like soil.

There is something so sincere about spam: it just wants you to follow its lead. It reminds me of how clumsily we are tethered to one another. Even in the digital hellscape, we are pulled into each other’s orbit, for better or for worse. There is an oscillating tension held between intimacy and isolation, one that digital technology exacerbates. The masks which suffocate us also enable us to co-exist in mutual space without the threat of social rejection. We live in an era of shifting boundaries: public <—> private / url <—> irl / work <—> play / identity <—> community. Human connection has been our lifeline above all. It’s what keeps us on the web, it’s why we got catfished by capitalism, it’s the reason we swim through inboxes full of porn, bios, headshots, and bots. To reach each other.

This digital landscape is our city: full of neighbours, transparent interfaces, walls and windows. Not all of us get along. Not all of us know each other. The soil is turbulent and our social positions unstable, but perhaps that was always the case.

3. Greg Goldberg, *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

About the contributors:

Caitlin Clarke is an artist based in Christchurch. She works primarily with pottery, fabric, installation, and landscape and is focused on the critique of the capitalist mindset through conversations about our current ways of living. They work on how connections to the earth, one another, and ecologies can help us grow. Caitlin has most recently exhibited at Laurel Projectspace, with her project: *A Path In*.

Lynley Edmeades completed an MA at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 2012. Her first poetry collection, *As the Verb Tenses* (Otago University Press, 2016) was longlisted for the Ockham NZ Book Awards, and shortlisted for the UNESCO Bridges of Struga Best First Book. She has a PhD in avant-garde poetics and teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Otago.

Pūkauri Productions was founded by two courageous humans driven by a desire to connect, communicate, and create. The empowerment of others, be they creatives or audience, is a major focus for our company. It is our hope to provide and grow a platform and community for New Zealand artists by offering opportunities of paid work to begin or develop performance careers. Among our core values is the Māori language and its traditional customs, and te whare tapawha, the four bodies, mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional. We are Sheree Waitoa and Kim Garrett.

Jennifer Katherine Shields is an artist, writer, advocate, and organiser from Ōtautahi, Aotearoa. Her practice stems from her academic background in queer

history, theory, and sociology, as well as her background in queer and trans activism and advocacy. Jennifer is also interested in alternate spiritualities, especially as to how they relate to the queer community and queer experiences. She is a tarot reader and a witch.

Brooke Stamp (b. Sydney 1979) is an Australian dancer, choreographer and educator. Her career spans two-decades of inquiry in dance, visual art, sound-performance, writing, and dramaturgy; and is distinguished by a prolific body of work with Melbourne-based experimental dance company Phillip Adams BalletLab, alongside performances with Adam Linder, Miguel Gutierrez, Maria Hassabi, Rebecca Hilton, and Shelley Lasica. She has collaborated regularly throughout the past decade with the Australian artist Agatha Gothe-Snape. Brooke has an MFA from the UNSW Art & Design, and is currently undertaking a PhD at the Victorian College of the Arts (Melb).

Charlotte Filipov is an artist and writer based in Christchurch. Their practice is fluid and takes cues from contemporary media and technology. She takes a critical position toward cultures built around these systems using visual and material analogy as a device to explore instances of cultural phenomena.

Kayla Marshall is a Christchurch-based artist who is currently studying extramurally through Auckland University of Technology, toward a Doctorate in Philosophy. Via a practice-led methodology, she investigates the interpretation of art's affective dimension. Grasping subjectivity as becoming, instead of a structural independence, allows

her to assess and transform the formations and futures of emerging connections.

Robin Murphy is currently undertaking a BScHons in Psychology at University of Auckland, focusing on memory and cognition. They also hold a BFAHons from Elam, where their work focused on locations which structure personal and collective memory. Robin has been published in *Matters*, *LE ROY*, *Argos Aotearoa*, *brief*, *VIA* (Los Angeles), written texts for shows at Fuzzy Vibes and Import Projects (Berlin), curated shows for Window and hāpori, and has exhibited at Artspace Aotearoa.

Gemma Banks works as a designer, artist/writer, and art administrator. Originally from Ōtautahi she is now living in Sydney working at the Art Gallery of NSW. She agrees with Elizabeth Farrelly who describes Sydney as equal-parts Dickens and equal-parts Arabian Nights. She enjoys the work of Sophie Calle, Maggie Nelson, Lydia Davis, and Patti Smith.

Vanessa 梅 Crofskey is an artist and writer based in Tāmaki Makaurau. She is a staff writer for *The Pantograph Punch*, an extroverted introvert, and a current curator at Window Gallery. She likes thinking about the internet, swimming pools, and what to eat next. Her latest collection of poetry will be out in *AUP New Poets Volume 6*.

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