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**KEYNOTE: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PERFORMANCE WRITING ?<sup>1</sup>**

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This being a keynote, an opening gesture I won't dwell too long nor go into too much depth. I suppose it will suffice here to air a number of questions and provide some overall pointers as a general background for the papers and panels and work we're going to be engaging with for the next two days.

Part of the pleasure in wishing to establish cross-disciplinary dialogues around a resonance such as Performance Writing is the fact that we all, as practitioners and critics meet here in the knowledge that only the very diversity of, at times seemingly incompatible starting-points, in both theory and practice, can turn the possibility of Performance Writing, beyond a BA degree, into a culturally networked area of investigation.

I suppose this is the time to ask why are we here, exactly.

I think we all have a vague sense of what Performance Writing might entail, which we can link back to our own work and approaches but what of the overall idea that brings us here. Is there an overall idea. What is Performance Writing.

I think that's a good starting-point so let's do a Gertrude Stein on it and talk about it for what it is not. This won't stabilise any answer particularly but it will hopefully guarantee that it doesn't get looped into itself prior to the question being fully asked. So, what is Performance Writing not?

Is Performance Writing not writing?

Is it writing which performs not writes?

Is it not performance which writes?

But then does writing not perform?

And when does writing not perform? And what kind of not performance are we talking about? Is it not performance to write or is it not writing to not perform?

Some examples. Is it not Performance Writing to site some text in a space or on a

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wall or on electronic boards or is that not installation art? or is that not public art? Is it not Performance Writing to treat spoken writing as part of a sound composition or is that not music? or not sound art? Is it not Performance Writing to inscribe words on a canvas, spray them on a wall, layer text into photographs or carve them into wood, steel or other solids or is that not visual art? or is that not graffiti art? or is that not poetry? Is it not Performance Writing to use text as part of a body-related piece or is that not performance art or is that not dance or theatre? Is it not Performance Writing to bleed a word into flesh or is that not Jenny Holzer? or is that not tattoo art? or is that not activism? Not is it Performance Writing to generate text for the page or for the screen or for a book or is that not video art? or is that not literature? or is that not visual art? or is it electronic art?

You might be starting to think that Performance Writing is all of the above, or you might start to think that it is none of the above. Mostly you might think that the dialectics of either/or induce a slight irritation, some vague déjà-heard. That at a deeper level what is at stake might be less a question of classification than one of applied definition.

I wouldn't like you to think that as soon as I read "This is not a pipe" I go "Oh Performance Writing". Well, I might. But bearing in mind that, for all the push of shove of postmodern practice and discourse, the overall historical classifications (music, literature, theatre et al) are proving all the time less appropriate to read formally and place critically the kind of language work which is being produced, some concerted excavation of the intradisciplinarity of much textual work, or work which features writing in one form or another, is called for. To establish through and beyond the literary, a broader understanding of writing, its structural and functional strategies.

I would like to suggest that each artistic discipline, writing, or rather literature, among them, with their specific histories and developments and points of collapse and regeneration should be read more and explored more, not merely according to their specific discourses and histories, with the inevitable narrowing down and cocooning which ensues, but as so many criss-crossings of sophisticated skills borne out of these histories and questioned through the mental and material constructs of textual contemporaneity.

The contemporaneity of the notion of Performance Writing is that it can only locate itself as part of the atomisation of literature, music, theatre and so on. In that, of course, it inscribes itself in line with the aesthetics of suspicion, disruption, and reappraisal which have to such a large extent determined the frame of mind of this century's effusion of experimentality. In this sense, Performance Writing needs to highlight the many kinds of tensions which arise from the concerted pooling of differing writing practices. And explore the kinds of relationship text-based work entertains when developed in conjunction with other media and other discourses.

The act of writing becomes then as much a question open to literary analysis as one open to the broader investigation of the kinds of formal and ideological strategies which writers and artists develop textually in response or in reaction to their own time and their own fields.

I'm aware that much has been and is being written along those lines. But it all remains generally dispersed across so many fields and tucked away as so many side-projects that, unless one happens to make cross-disciplinary text-work a specific area of research, the likelihood is that much will escape one's attention.

It is also important to point out that, although much theoretical and poetic work has been done, this is especially true of exploratory poetry and deconstructive philosophy, to widen the literary debate and incorporate to it various notions of materiality (and the materiality of writing is an essential aspect of Performance Writing), it is largely true to say that the whole approach to writing remains in these fields primarily located on the page. This ignores and cuts short the debate on all writerly work which extends beyond the page.

The poet and critic Johanna Drucker points out that if much post-structuralist analysis has usefully conceptualised the idea of textuality and textual performativity, it still falls short of addressing and critiquing the range and scope of materials available to writing and how this range may affect the very idea of writing.

Marcel Broodthaers's work is a useful case in point. Indeed a large part of his work concerned itself, sometimes at a sarcastic level, with the investigation of poetic

means and poetic conventions. However, he chose to do so by locating a writerly activity not primarily on the page but into objects and spatial constructs. He would locate the points where objects and words, syntax and architecture apply direct, difficult pressure onto each other. Both in intent and product, his work displays an awareness of the act of writing and of its points of fission. So is the literary field's indifference to his work an example of literary blindspot? Is it lack of vocabulary? I would argue that along with the development of a shared terminology, it is a shift in attitude with regards to what defines the writerly that we should wish to operate.

A number of debates in the visual and performing arts as well as in cultural studies have applied deconstructive theories to question and articulate the importance of the contextualisation of practice, the siting of work, the locations (and relocations) of identity in the contemporary arts. It is questions like these which could provide the extra-literary pointers we need to get to grips with the wider implications contained within the idea of Performance Writing. Hence the textual does not only throw up the question of the literary, it also urgently prompts an interrogation of the impact the use of writing applies on visual, sonic or movement arts. And vice-versa.

It is also paramount that the impact of this cross-fertilisation does not remain fixated at a formal level, but that it acutely and insistently, one might say intravenously, makes a point of examining the personal motivations and urgencies for work, the ways in which such forms are used and function in their relation to social, cultural modes of identification and, often oppressive, models for representation.

Indeed, writing's link with language inevitably forces the appraisal of writing as so many activities which at one level or other grapple with the psycho-social and political violence of any collective language, however localised.

I don't know whether the idea of Performance Writing can in itself provide the means to instate theoretical grounding and clarity of practice in the cacophony of textual cross-disciplinarity but I certainly hope it provides a step on the way.

So rather than entertaining ideas of aesthetic orgy or formal fusion, anything goes as long as there's something like a bit of something which looks like writing in it and leaving it at that, my sense is that Performance Writing would wish to inscribe itself within debates that revel in conflict.

Conflict at a formal as well as an ideological level. The conflicts and tensions at work

within and between any of the elements a writer may choose to explore, sometimes collaboratively. The conflicts and tensions exposed by the expressed or subtextual semantics of such a piece. The way it resonates at a local-subjective as well as a wider cultural level. Performance Writing would be about detail. A close attention to the workings, the sitings and the political dimensions of atomised writing practices - whether on or beyond the page.

It is in this complex and responsive reading of the performance of writing that one can most clearly make sense of this field, not primarily as a unified academic discipline, not even necessarily as one delineated, hybridic artform, but rather as an area of joint practical and critical investigation of the many uses writing and language are being put to and push themselves into.

In this sense, Lorna Simpson's stylised photographic combines of portraiture and verbal cliches, Heiner Goebbels' text-sound theatricalities, Gary Hill's conceptual use of text and video as sculptural environments, or Susan Howe's acute paginations of some of her poetic texts, to name but a few, do not merely read as inherently divergent or potentially parallel activities. More importantly, they read in relation to the act of writing, the performance of writing itself.

The extent to which its litterarity is *sine qua non* (or not) to both the process and production of the overall piece whatever its media and context of reception.

As Susan Hiller could have said, a frame is not square by nature. Similarly could one not argue that there is more, not less, to writing than the page, more, not less, to writing than language, more, not less, to text treatment than syntactical or morphological experimentation. And that to engage with writing in such extensive material terms, both as writers and readers, is what inscribes the performance of writing. A performance of itself at a relational level.

You might think that all of this really provides a very stretched out definition of performance. And doesn't fully address the writing traditions which come out of theatricality and are still being carried through in much live work. Should theatrical writing be privileged in our appraisal of Performance Writing on account of its long-standing history? If anything this does make writing's relation to performance more strenuous and difficult to disengage from established conventions of production.

This is a long debate. Indeed, how do we clarify the ambiguity between performed

textuality and spoken writing. Perhaps I could sketch it out in terms of process. What is the process of live performance in its relation to writing. Is it writing's role, in that context, to function as a guiding background, as the blueprint of a live piece? This would mean that the text remains absorbed, subsumed by the live performance.

What if the writing were to openly interfere with the live piece? What if it were to force a disjunction between performing a hidden text and performing writing?

Can one turn the hour-glass and argue for the specificities of a live writing (I use the term with caution) where the performer's presence is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing (*mise-en-presence*), much like late-Beckett, The Wooster Group, Laurie Anderson, Forced Entertainment's *Speak Bitterness* would seek to instigate. I remain excited by this idea of a live situation where writing is another performer and as such needs to be addressed explicitly. During and as part of the live piece.

In other words, the performance of writing would be this observation which seeks to locate expressly the context and means for writing, both internal and external to language, whether these be activated for and through a stage, for and through a site, a time-frame, a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page.

This does not really imply spontaneous and magical multi-layering, simultaneity of process and product, cooking and eating at one and the same time. But it does rest with the idea that everything about a piece of work is active and carries meaning. Any treatment, any font, any blank, any punctuation, any intonation, any choice of materials, any blob, however seemingly peripheral to the work, is part of the work, carries it, opens it up, closes it in, determines it. This is its performance. Its points of impact.

So where does the text start or end? In the case of a text for the page, does it start and end at the words? at the fonts? at the presentation lay-out? at the edges of the page? or in the case of a text-sound piece, does the text start and end at the recitation? at the vocal treatments? at the overall composition? How are we to articulate this? The critic Marjorie Perloff talks of contemporary poetry as an activity which increasingly defers the activity of reading. Which increasingly highlights the tensions between the visual and the verbal aspects of writing. One could take this

further and say that practitioners which engage with a process of writing inevitably forward an intervention of language and of reading which destabilises and refocusses the processes of looking and/or of listening.

Of course, we might start to wonder whether writing can function as a sound-effect or as a mark-making device. Whether writing can be fetishised into a word-thing or a word-sound. Whether reading can be turned into looking and listening.

I said earlier that writing's link with language inevitably forces the appraisal of writing as an activity which grapples with the psycho-social and political dimensions of any collective language. Only at the risk of turning writing into a look or a decorative device can this be played down.

Writing questions the authority of language with language, through language, as well as beyond language. No performance of writing takes place without it. This is part of the responsibility which comes with writing. What makes writing, writing.

For at its most direct, writing (whether visual or spoken) takes its cue from the social body of language, however distended this cue may be.

This may generate or force up formal, ideological unreadabilities, aesthetics of erasure or aesthetics of presencing, extreme dislocations, specific realignments of language through writing which does occur as a response to the psycho-social situations it highlights or undermines. Whatever the context or materials, the overt tensions and dynamics between language and writing are difficult to ignore. So can language be used as an image, can the text function as an object? Is that still writing?

Another example. The Mexican writer and performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena mentions in an interview that he uses performance in a very different way from his writing. That where performance might impede the materialisation of his point of view he goes with writing and vice-versa. This might seem logical. A question of moods. A question of appropriate skills for appropriate uses. And that's exactly the point. But it's got a catch. And it lies with us. Do we as audience as reader read Gomez-Pena as a writer or do we read him as a writing performer? Does it matter? Well yes if one considers the writerly an exclusive domain of the literary. But then what validates writing as literature? is it writerly skills or is it cultural domain?

What of language occupies the writing, what enables it, what prevents it, what forces its relocations, what makes a piece readable, what occupies the making and the performing of writing, and what occupies the reading, the reception of writerly activities?

With this, I'll ask again: Where does a text start? where does it not end?