

## Writing in silence

I am preoccupied by the exploration of silences as relational phenomena. This preoccupation calls for the relationships surrounding those silences and what creates them to be described. I use my own creative work to disclose sites of silence and the relationships which attend them. Rooted in the unspoken (and the unheard), silence in my work is as much an action as a phenomenon; as much a verb as a noun, and hence, possesses a discernible agency. Silence in my research may be performed or enforced. Its configuration encompasses the notion of *being* silent or equally of being *silenced*, also embracing the idea of a silence created by the act of not hearing, not having heard, in other words, a denial that one *has* heard. In making my work, I've found myself inhabiting such silences at different types of site — institutional, literary, cinematic and familial — in order to uncover and explore the repressions, denials or disavowals present in each situation. My approach, although distinctive, is not unique. It finds an echo in this statement made by Salomé Voegelin about her practice. In introducing a recent 'curatorial performance', Voegelin aspires:

to reflect on the politics of silence as the place of the not yet heard and the not yet said. To sound at once the promise of an unheard articulation and its emancipatory force, to hear the deliberate and violent suppression that determines what should not and cannot be heard, and to illuminate also the tyrannies of what is not able to or does not dare to sound.<sup>i</sup>

Just as Voegelin utilises other published writing amongst the works she co-opts to help realise her curatorial performances,<sup>ii</sup> here, I want to concentrate on the emergent role of writing, as a means of making silence legible. Writing may initially seem a counter-intuitive medium with which to attend to silence, when we might more readily associate silence with the sensory exploration of listening. And yet silence; the silences within institutions or families, and the silencing of people's and individual histories have been repeatedly conjured, explored and enacted through writing, in cinema, in theatre and in literature or poetry, just as phenomenal or sensate silence has historically been performed in the concert-hall (or the anechoic chamber). In each case, the resulting experience being characterised by the revelation of suppressed or unacknowledged presence. I begin by asking, inquisitively: How may silence be written?

*Deaf Republic*, Ilya Kaminsky's strikingly imagistic collection of poetry, which relates the story of a population's resistance to violent subjugation, can be read as an extended exercise in dramatising a mass, self-induced deafness of denial; a repression of hearing, in the face of what must not be heard. This work along with others dealing in their own distinctive ways with the repressed and the unspoken, have contributed to the development of my understanding of the potential for writing to explore situated silences. Notably, also Heinrich Böll's, 1955, satirical short story, *Murke's Collected Silences*, the story of a radio producer preoccupied with collecting the pauses and hesitations edited out of the broadcasts he supervises, and Jonathan Safran Foer's creative, 2010, die-cut redaction of Bruno Schulz's short stories, which vividly creates silence and repression, by physically excising words from Schulz's texts, at the same time creating a new narrative from the unredacted material.<sup>iii</sup>

My first sustained engagement with what I came to recognise as a site of silence arose out of an encounter with the University of Bergen’s natural history museum. The museum offered a spectacle of absence; almost its entire collection of specimens having been removed during the building’s restoration, leaving room after room of empty display cases. The only surviving exhibits were a series of enormous nineteenth century whale skeletons, which were suspended from the building’s ceiling. It was the “empty” and sequestered nature of the museum (a site “in parenthesis”) which initially attracted me to it. Crucial to my research at the museum, has been a process of listening to, gathering and working with anecdotal material drawn from its employees’ and other personal accounts. From these accounts, I gradually began to understand that what I at first took to be a site characterised by absence was in fact better understood as one steeped in repressed presence surrounded by an institutional performance of silence. The object or focal point of this silence was the museum’s relationship to the illicit bodies of the pests and infestations within its walls; a relationship ordinarily absent from its public discourse. The complex character of this covert relationship between the institution and the pests which if left unchecked, would ultimately destroy its specimens is illustrated by for example, the museum’s rigorous and systematic regime for collecting and cataloguing their bodies, which transforms them into parodies of natural history specimens, preparatory to their eradication; creating from them a private and ephemeral analogue to the museum’s “permanent” public collection; a “shadow” collection; an invisible and ordinarily publicly disavowed “other”, to the institution’s licit display of specimens.

My work at the museum has given rise to a range of public artworks,<sup>iv</sup> each of which has explored different facets of the institution’s intimate relationship to the “wrong bodies” present in its midst. This is a doubly repressive relationship: the museum aspires to eradicate these unwanted bodies, while remaining publicly silent about their presence. The installation, *The Wrong Bodies* (figs. 1 & 2), consists of a drawer containing a mass of insect carcasses, caught in small cardboard and glue “sticky” traps, which were harvested from the museum’s dark corners and margins, where they had been distributed (each carefully labelled with a date and location) in order to monitor and classify the illegitimate bodies present within the collection. Laden with insectile remains and discreetly sited in the museum’s World Views Room, this work puts these ordinarily unacknowledged “wrong bodies” on display in order to publicly disclose their presence in the natural history museum.<sup>v</sup>





*Above:* figs 1&2. Andy Lock, *The Wrong Bodies* (sticky traps and insect carcasses), installed in the World Views Room at the University of Bergen Natural History Museum, 2020;  
*Below:* an accompanying text work, also titled *The Wrong Bodies*

Bodies without provenance,  
Discreetly colonising the museum's gaps.

Consuming matter, erasing data,  
Condemned as pests.

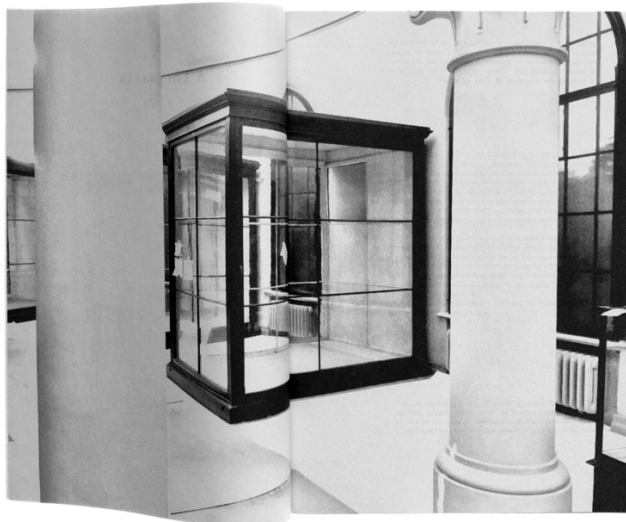
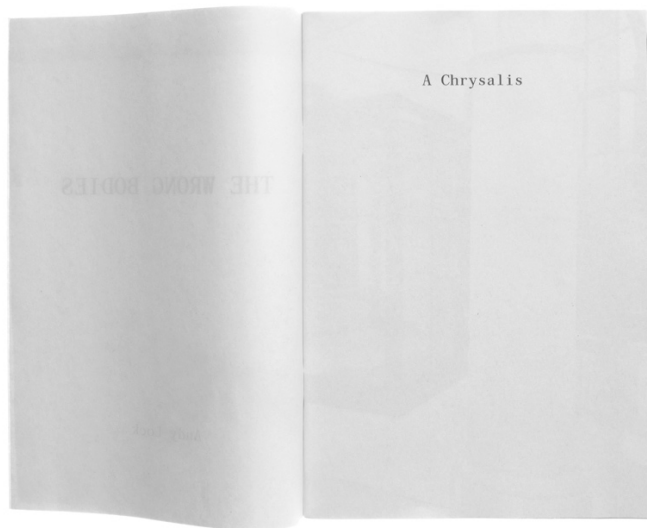
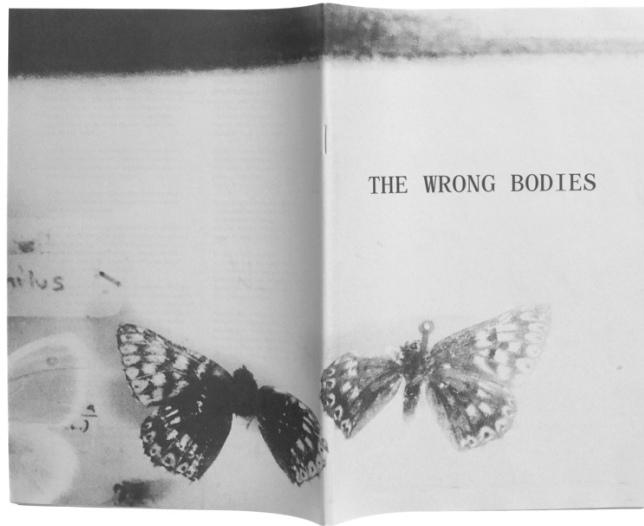
An illegitimate ecosystem,  
Acknowledged only by attempts to eradicate our presence.

We are the wrong bodies,  
Trapped not in amber, but in glue.

Captured and catalogued,  
We become specimens.

A shadow collection.<sup>vi</sup>

This short text represents one facet of my emergent writing in response to this particular institution's unspoken and repressed presences. It appears in my artist's book also titled *The Wrong Bodies*. Much expanded from the fragment above and also encompassing materials from my live presentations at the museum, this book is intended as a companion for the museum visitor, offering an alternative guide to the invisible shadow collection, which exists unacknowledged, alongside the museum's public displays of specimens.



above: figs. 3-5. pages from Andy Lock, *The Wrong Bodies*, artist's book, 64 pages, 2020

In the course of my research, I became particularly intrigued by an event in 1979, when the museum was compelled to break its silence around the illegitimate bodies within its walls and publicly acknowledge the presence of a particularly invasive insect infestation. Using anecdotal accounts drawn from an eye witness and a university employee, I began to create a text work, based on an interweaving of excerpts from verbatim transcripts.<sup>vii</sup>

## I. skadedyr

‘skadedyr’.

‘Skadedyr’: What is that? Small animals doing harm.

It was 1979 and they were having an infestation of museum beetles

American Vepse—bol—klanner.

It says here in the newspaper,  
they’re going to exterminate the ‘American’...  
and there is a name of this “wasp”

American Vepse—bol—klanner.

Small beetles that eat up all the organic tissue on museum specimens

You have to be very careful not to get these beetles inside your collection and if you do, you have to be very quick to eradicate them.

## II. A Coat Made of Plastic

They made a coat of plastic,

Imagine what it took.

They made a coat of plastic for the whole house.

That was the first time I saw something like that  
And I couldn’t believe what I saw.

I couldn’t believe my own eyes.

It was very neatly done too, as these things are.

I don’t know how they did it, but it was beautifully done  
And it looked so ridiculous and we laughed.

At one point it was decided that to get rid of these museum beetles, they had to wrap up the museum and fumigate the place.

### III. Blåsyre

They used this Blåsyre, which I think is Zyklon B

And it said in the newspaper, “the work has been going well”.  
The work has been going well and “they have been using Blåsyre”.

They wrapped the museum in plastic and put boxes of this gas - which I think must have been in some kind of powder form - in every room in the museum...

They wrapped the museum in plastic, opened the boxes and let the gas come out, naturally.

Why did they do this packing up? because that was the most that we could see and the answer was... Where have I got this from? I don't know... so that the poison should stay inside the building. It should not go outside the building. In order to function better,

but I never thought...

When the fumigation had run its course

The idea never occurred to me...

When the fumigation had run its course and supposedly all the beetles were dead...

It never occurred to me that it could be poisonous for people going outside as well.

When the fumigation had run its course and supposedly all the beetles were dead, they had to slowly start unwrapping the building.

This is an old building.  
There is presumably a lot of leakages in such an old building.

And from what I've been told as soon as they started unwrapping the building...

It's a hundred and fifty years old, so we can imagine holes here and there...

As they started unwrapping the building, a lot of the gas that was still remnant in the building came out

And so I'm sure if there was a very dangerous poison inside ...

A lot of the gas that was still remnant in the building came out and apparently, birds... fell from the sky.

They really needed to take care.

Birds that were flying over the museum fell from the sky, because of the gas that was still escaping

They made a coat of plastic for the whole house.  
And it looked so ridiculous and we laughed.

The birds ...

And I couldn't believe what I saw.

The birds... fell... from the sky.<sup>viii</sup>

My writing has developed within the broad ambit offered by Jane Rendell's conception of site writing: that is, "what happens when discussions concerning situatedness and site-specificity enter the writing of criticism, history and theory".<sup>ix</sup> At the natural history museum I recognised that the site within which I was working should be understood in an expanded, immaterial sense as created and defined by the institution's relationship to its wrong bodies. This is consonant with Rendell's description of sites as including those 'material, political and conceptual – as well as those remembered, dreamed and imagined'.<sup>x</sup>

I realised that this expanded notion of site could also apply to literature and poetry such as that I've already mentioned, and I began to weave my responses to these texts, as sites of silence, into my writing practice. For example, several iterations of the work, *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence* begin in a radio studio in post-war Berlin, and with the character of an unnamed "he"; an allusion to Heinrich Böll's radio producer, Murke, but also a cipher; a mediation of my own experience; my own position as a compulsive collector of silences. In the opening scene of *Between Our Words...* this composite figure reflects on the significance of the pauses and hesitations he has edited out of the broadcasts which he has created; allowing *me* to reflect on my own relationship to the silences within my work and ultimately those in my own history.

Berlin, 1955. Evening, and the building around him is quiet, the other workers long departed. High above, the empty cars of a paternoster lift circulate, endlessly. Far below, in rooms carefully insulated from the sounds of the city, he finds himself occupying a world in parenthesis.

He carefully runs his hand over the surface of a studio console, salvaging small clippings of audio tape. Each fragment contains a pause, a breath, the shape of a thought. Each represents a hesitation, a withholding; a lacuna, edited out from some or other speaker's utterances. He sweeps the clippings into a small tin. Pockets it. Later, he will splice these fragments together, to create a recording composed not from words, but from the gaps between them.

Now, he sits alone, reflecting that he has covertly become a collector of silences. in a country and at a time where every silence is like an unexploded bomb, peopled not by absence, but by presences denied.

Silence he understands, is a construct. It is not a signifier of emptiness, but an illusion that masks the presence of something unacknowledged, repressed or denied.

And whenever we encounter something we perceive as silence, we should perhaps ask ourselves: “here, at this site, who or what is denying the presence of what or whom?”, because in order to *be* silent, one must be silent *about* something.

Silence is not *only* experienced, it is enacted or performed, and it is motivated. It comes in many forms, but *always* it has an object. *Always* there is *something* that remains unspoken.

Sometimes, he believes, if one inhabits silence, that “*something*” may be disclosed.<sup>xi</sup>

My expanded understanding of site also encompasses cinematic depictions of interpersonal silence, which had influenced the development of my work. *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence* also features a response to Yasujirō Ozu’s 1949 film, *Late Spring*, which can be read as an extended examination of intergenerational silence and withholding in a post-war Japanese family. Ozu’s work contains particularly telling images of silence: in particular in the climactic scene, in which a father, Mr Somiya, his daughter newly-wed and departed, sits alone in her absence, in the now empty family home, wordlessly peeling an apple.

An image surfaces; a 4×3 window of grainy black and white; a movie playing in the mind’s eye. The image flickers into life. A domestic interior, post-war Japan, framed in wide-shot by the movie-camera’s lens. It reveals a bride-to-be on the verge of leaving her family home.

She exits, but instead of following her story, her narrative, the camera unexpectedly chooses to return, lingering in the quiet rooms of the house. Contemplating each in-turn, mirrors and the forms of empty chairs.

Nightfall. Mr Somiya, widower, father of the bride, returning home alone, sits in silence; pares away an apple’s skin.

Lets-fall, with flesh of fruit, words unsaid.<sup>xii</sup>

The diverse fragments and exercises in my site writing; the disparate nature of its various voices and characters were an indication of a deeper unanswered question about my research; namely,



what *my* position was in relation to the objects of my inquiry and by extension, what was the basis of the knowledge claims made within my work? Jane Rendell notes the need for ‘writers [to] reflect on their own subject positions in relation to their particular objects and fields of study’ as central to the practice of site writing which she delineates.<sup>xiii</sup> It was an emergent strand of autofiction writing which allowed me to address this crucial aspect of my own practice. My presence had throughout, clearly been central to my inquiry as a point of ordonnance or ordering, and yet it was typically mediated through other personae. Mine was a presence whose significance within my writing had remained if not denied then certainly unacknowledged.

If a text or a film could represent a site of silence, I realised that so too, by extension, could a personal history. My own personal and family history, which had long hovered at the periphery of my research without ever urgently suggesting itself as an object of interrogation, could, I proposed, represent a legitimate site for the exploration of the unspoken and the unheard and at the same time create an opportunity to very directly address the question of *my* relationship to the objects of my inquiry. The writing which emerged from my decision to explore this personal, familial history, once again transposed the experiences described, by way of an anonymous third-person, “he”; however, the underlying voice which has emerged from this writing process is nevertheless an autobiographical one, or perhaps more accurately, an *autofictional* one. Here, I am referring to autofiction in those terms described by Serge Doubrovsky, who used the neologism ‘to distinguish his work from other forms of creative writing, on the one hand, and from straightforward forms of autobiography on the other.’<sup>xiv</sup>

The father and son relationship explored in the following excerpt from *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence*, represents the core of the autofiction writing which has emerged from my exploration of my own personal, familial history as a site of silence.<sup>xv</sup>

He arrives at his father’s house in the early afternoon, noticing that the garden is beginning to fill with weeds. The house as he enters it, is quiet, but he senses his father is there, inside. He will talk to the old man, today.

Will tell him, at last, that instead of a recollected childhood of words exchanged, it is all the words withheld, that he now remembers; the frequent spells when he, the father, withdrew and would not speak either to the son or to his wife.

Living as he does these days amid other, ever-growing gaps, it is doubtful whether the father can remember those earlier interruptions in the discourse of family life, but as a child, the son had lived amongst the silences his father had created, had inhabited the gaps produced by the father’s withdrawal.

Silence breeds silence, and the son imbibed the father’s habit, became practiced himself in the art of withholding, until non-disclosure became a way of life. Was more the father than he cared to know; answered silence with silence, became the man; reserved.

“Why did you behave this way?” he will ask his father now, but the old man will not, cannot answer and will only look at him questioningly. It is safe to ask now, because there will be no answer, only further silences.

Growing to adulthood, the son found himself compelled by encounters, which somehow spoke to his own memories of earlier, incomprehensible silences; discovering their echo in other, unexpected places, experiencing a frisson of recognition each time he did so.

He too became a connoisseur of gaps, of intervals; all the while, drawn to discover what might be found therein. His compulsion leading him to recently vacated rooms, where absences hung quietly like over-coats, expectant, waiting to be claimed.

Where once he had perceived only absence, only silence, he now found that both had form; that the silences between lovers were not equivalent: superficially identical, they were capable of signifying both deep contentment or separation and loss.

He understood that conversation was created as much from the gaps between words as by the words themselves and if a conversation, then why not a text. If a conversation, then why not a human life?

*Home*; the template for all the silences, all the gaps that followed. He has come home, to a site that for all its familiarity, is nonetheless the hardest to perceive.

Even as he sits with his father, unspeaking, holding the old man’s hand, father and son both drifting back to their respective childhoods, fresh silences begin to emerge between them: an ever-growing, untraversed terrain and he reflects that far from framing absence, these silences are freighted with all that remains unsaid; all that is now unutterable between the two.

In these gaps,

between our words.

We are becoming.<sup>xvi</sup>

The identification of my own personal history as a site for the exploration of relational silences necessarily shifted and clarified my own position in relation to the object of my inquiry. My understanding of my relationship as a researcher to *site* was transformed: this exploration of personal history as a site of silence explicitly implicated me as a facet of the site. I was not external to it; not an interloper, but a central feature of its construction. My autofiction, but also my site writing practice more broadly create a writing subject, whose presence and experience become central to the creation of both site and knowledge.

My understanding of my writing as research has been informed by Mona Livholts' (2019) account of research carried out using a 'situated writing' practice, which Liz Stanley defines in her foreword to Livholts' book, as 'a form of reflexive autobiography mixed with storytelling which exemplifies as well as promotes its claims in terms of situated knowledge'.<sup>xvii</sup> Stanley's description consciously recalls Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledge and a subject whose knowledge emanates from an identifiable 'somewhere'.<sup>xviii</sup> It seems essential to the development of my own writing practice as research, to identify that the insights which emanate from this practice are themselves localised, limited, partial and situated, even embodied; that they too arise from an identifiable 'somewhere', and even when not *explicitly* autobiographical or autofictional, they nonetheless remain situated by the traditions in epistemology identified here.

Within my autofictional exploration there is a particularly satisfying sense of alignment: the modality of the autofictional writing that has emerged in relation to my exploration of familial silence is congruent with both my subject position in relation to the object of my writing *and* my articulation of the nature of the knowledge claims which I make from that position.

I wrote in *Between Our Words I will Trace Your Presence*, that 'home [was] the template for all the silences, all the gaps that followed. ... [and yet for all] its familiarity, [it] is nonetheless the hardest [of these] to perceive.' So it is that the silences my work reached out to identify, explore and depict have led only slowly back to those unspoken presences in my own personal history. It is my writing in response to that history which has, however, allowed me to lay the groundwork for an epistemic approach which positions my art-practice within a tradition of knowledge production situated by and contingent upon not only where I am but also, who I am.

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Voegelin, Salome, <https://www.salomevoegelin.net/curatorial-performances> (accessed 11,12,20)

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Abstract for *Leaning into the audible to bear the inaudible call its own name*, a curatorial performance on silence, for Brückenmusik, On Silencing; zur Produktion der Stille 29.06.19 Cologne, Germany. <http://www.brueckenmusik.de/?p=1730> (accessed 11,12,20)

<sup>ii</sup> Voegelin describes a curatorial performance thus: 'Records and CDs, texts and scores, instructions and objects are laid out across the floor. I activate these things in performance, either to a script or in improvisation. Walking around I pick them up, I read texts, recite, sing and shout words and works, play and interpret their textual and artistic materiality and content.' <https://www.salomevoegelin.net/curatorial-performances> (accessed 06,05,21)

<sup>iii</sup> Schulz's stories were collected as *The Street of Crocodiles and other stories*. Foer's die-cut book based on that publication, is titled *Tree of Codes*. Sebastian Domsch discusses the consequences of Foer's strategy in Framing absence: A narratology of the empty page, *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* 2017; 3(2): 273–288 (accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2017-0018>)

<sup>iv</sup> These have included installations, publications, public presentations and performances My presentations and performances at the museum included: *Foreign Bodies, Empty Rooms*, February 2019, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/851610/867107> and *The Museum's Wrong Bodies*, October 2019, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/851610/867115>.

<sup>v</sup> Fittingly, I was able to gather so many of these traps *not* because the museum's pest control is poor (it is not), but because a member of museum staff had privately collected and stored these sticky traps laden with their cargo of insect carcasses.

<sup>vi</sup> Lock, Andy, 2020, *The Wrong Bodies*, artist's book

<sup>vii</sup> I'm grateful to the respondents who provided these accounts, for their permission to use their words in my work.

<sup>viii</sup> Lock, Andy, 2020, *The Wrong Bodies*, artist's book

<sup>ix</sup> Rendell, J. , <https://site-writing.co.uk> (accessed 01,04,21)

<sup>x</sup> Rendell, J. , <https://site-writing.co.uk/> (accessed 11,02,21)

<sup>xi</sup> Lock, Andy, 2020, *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence*, spoken word performance, Borealis Festival, Bergen.

<sup>xii</sup> Lock, Andy, 2020, *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence*, spoken word performance, Borealis Festival, Bergen.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rendell, J. , <https://site-writing.co.uk/> (accessed 11,02,21)

<sup>xiv</sup> Dix, 2018: 1 As is implicit in Doubrovsky's initial use of the term, I am using it to identify writing which is neither straightforwardly fiction or unequivocally autobiography.

<sup>xv</sup> First presented as a live, spoken-word performance at Cracking The Established Order, De Montfort University, UK, June 2019; subsequently performed at Borealis Festival, Bergen, February 2020 and first published, in *Fluid Territories*, Sandborg et al, 2020

<sup>xvi</sup> Lock, Andy, 2020, *Between Our Words I Will Trace Your Presence*, spoken word performance, Borealis Festival, Bergen.

<sup>xvii</sup> Liz Stanley, in Livolts 2019, viii

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<sup>xviii</sup> Mona Livholts' conception of a 'situated writing' practice (Livholts, 2019) posits a notion of 'locality', which is not limited to a spatio-temporal understanding of site and situatedness, but speaks to Donna Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988); to the situated subject whose presence informs and underpins Livholts' conceptions of writing practices as research methods, and to knowledge claims which are localised, partial and embodied; constituting a perspective emanating from an identifiable "somewhere". Haraway 1988: 590