**Dramaturgies for Compassionate hospitality: *“And By the Way the Cat is Dead”***

**Introduction**

This two-year practice based project involved research into dramaturgical and processual approaches to staging practiced vulnerability as a means of creating a space of ‘compassionate hospitality’ (Ettinger, 2005: 707), with the solo performance, *And by the Way the Cat is Dead* (2017) as the main outcome of the research. The theoretical framing of the project draws on the work of Bracha Ettinger - artist, psychoanalyst and feminist theorist - and draws on performance research into autobiography, intermediality, and persona in autobiographical performance and performative auto-ethnography. This framing underpins the specific approaches to dramaturgy and process which are explored in the performance.

At the heart of the project, I found in my reading of Bracha Ettinger’s work on ‘co-poeisie’ (2005: 704) and ‘compassionate hospitality’ (2005: 707) a useful model for discussing the kinds of relationships and responses that emerge in performance and in the shared processes of making. The implications of her work for how we talk about the rupture or caesura in performance are equally significant and allow a reconsideration of what Barthes and Kristeva term ‘jouissance’ (Barthes, 1975; Kristeva, 1986). This ‘layering of significance ... a kind of vertical din’ that Barthes describes in The Pleasure of the Text (Barthes, 1975: 12) and which Kristeva discusses in terms of the movement between signifying systems in Revolution in Poetic Language (1986), can be re-configured in relation to trans-subjectivity and thus we can reconceive moments of fragility so that they allow a connectedness with each other on the level of psychic traces.

With this in mind, I explored two areas of dramaturgy. The first is the spaces opened up for the audience through non-completion, and through multiplicity and interruption. Here I was concerned with how intermediality in performance or dramaturgical ‘layering of significance’ (Barthes, 1975: 12) and the associated ruptures can trigger the emergence of a shared space where traces or threads of trauma can form part of a shared and willing vulnerability.

The second area is an exploration of the potentialities of generating a caesura between the voice written into the text and the I that speaks it in the voicing of a performance, and. As part of the research, I considered how this functions within the frame of the ‘*matrixial aesthetic borderspace’* (Ettinger, 1999: 90). I open up this internal distance or caesura in the act of voicing as a fundamental parameter for the performance to access and work with matrixial traces and generate a relation of ‘compassionate hospitality’ (Ettinger, 2005: 707).

**Core Research question**

How can a space of ‘compassionate hospitality’ (Ettinger, 2005: 707) be created in performance, and what methodological and dramaturgical approaches might facilitate this?

**Central Aims:**

* To reframe practiced vulnerability, the ‘strategic surrendering into a space of risk’ (Spry, 2011: 67) in relation to Ettinger’s theories of transsubjective co-creation and compassionate hospitality and to consider the nature of how we might *practice* vulnerability in that context.
* To structure a creative process in order to build in explicitly the transition from a textual or writing voice to the performing voice through dramaturgical *practice,* where the act of voicing is an act of taking responsibility for, or ‘bearing’ the text on stage (Barnett, 2008).
* To explore practically and theorise the workings of persona as fragments of a self that is multiple but also in an ongoing process of transsubjective self/co-production.
* Within that frame, to explore practically and to theorise the potential of structurally interweaving voices or discourses in counterpoint, using interruptions and caesura.
* To create a solo performance which considers grief and mourning practices and opens up a space for sharing these.

***And by the Way the Cat is Dead***

The performance itself, *And by the Way the Cat is Dead* asks how we take up the position of mourner in the contemporary Western world. In a context where the cultural practices structuring our experiences of loss separate us from it, through the medicalisation and institutionalisation of death (Hockey, 1993), and where the media generate an unremitting spectacle of death, how do we find a voice to share grief in a meaningful way? And how can we explore this through performance without engaging the same frameworks of spectacle or refusal? The struggle to be present in a shared space of vulnerability is central to the thematic content of the piece and our relationship to our own fragility is at the centre of its affective workings. One of the approaches I have taken to this has been to stage a series of attempts, failures, circumlocutions and interruptions to the telling of a story of loss in the performance.

The performance is partly autobiographical, tracing the story of my own loss of a close friend several years ago and in doing so, staging an incomplete and unfinishable lamentation for him through fragments of poetry, music and stories. This is performed in parallel with an almost-academic literature review on the subject of grief, delivered as an informal lecture to the audience and spread out on cardboard signs across the stage (see video documentation). At the end of the performance, the audience is invited to write something on a postcard about grief in their own culture or personal experience, and to leave it on the stage to travel with the performance to future audiences. There are postcards from previous audiences laid out on stage throughout the performance and spectators are able to spend time reading and adding their own contribution at the end. The performance appears, on the surface, to be one in which the audience is invited to witness my process of struggling to grieve and then offer something of their own. However, at the same time, I attempt to sustain a mode of performing which demonstrates or presents the action of mourning with a level of distance - a presentational style which opens up space for the spectator to consider and engage with their own experiences and views, rather than to get caught up in mine.

There are, therefore, three different modes of speaking in the performance: a collection of fragments of poetry, music and song which function as a staged attempt to build a dirge; an autobiographical narrative and account of my experiences; and a form of literature review in which quotations and fragments are spread slowly across the stage throughout the course of the performance. All are addressed directly to the audience and draw attention to their own form and making, but each of these modes of expression begins with its own space on stage and develops according to its own logic so that as they become more interwoven during the course of the performance they interrupt each other and the flow of the work is, to some extent, disrupted. In particular, the affective qualities of the musical and poetry elements are repeatedly disrupted by the conversational elements which are delivered almost in the mode of stand-up comedy and the literature review which retains a level of seriousness and distancing throughout.

**Methodology**

The approach to structuring this project was to distinguish clear phases for the work: research, process writing, writing and devising the performance and while there is inevitably overlap between these phases, they can be seen in the research timeline included in the collection. This structuring of the process draws on my approach to making previous work in both *Μα ποια Πάπια (or I’m not a Pheasant Plucker)* (2015) and in *Transforming Me: a Bilingual Solo (2014),* and also mirrors the approach to shaping evocative auto-ethnographic research as discussed below in the contextual and theoretical framing section of the report.

In the first stage, the research period, there was both a focused close rereading of Ettinger’s work and also a clearly defined period of research, reading and analysis relating to the subject matter of grief and mourning. Bracha Ettinger’s work on transsubjective identity formation and the matrixial borderspace has not previously been applied to theatre dramaturgy or spectatorship and this process of rethinking theoretical frameworks was essential to understand how I wanted to move forward with the work. This application of her work to key concepts in performance research is outlined in this report in order to make clear how my process was underpinned. In the first, theoretical and contextual research period, I also researched anthropological studies of mourning practices and death rituals with a particular focus on industrialised and consumer cultures; I researched lamentation forms from different cultures; performances, poetry and religious forms; which later fed into the literature review element of the performance and informed the form of the work.

Following this, I set up frameworks for process writing. This second stage of creative research writing (or in other projects also research improvisation) is essential in all my work, but particularly important in work which engages with personal material. It is a stage in which nothing created will be used in the performance in that form, and it creates an additional layer of dramaturgical processing between the expression of more intimate raw material and the subsequent compositional process for the piece itself. This process based methodology is significant in the construction of a performance persona in a way which directly reinforces the act of ‘practising’ vulnerability as processing and building an intentional dramaturgy around it rather than simply allowing a more raw vulnerability to emerge on stage. This *practice* is essential for the audience to have space for their own experience. The process of writing, devising and testing material directly for the performance began after a period away from the project. At this point the decision not to use any of the initial material at all was finalised and I gave myself time to find distance from it.

The approach to devising combined task-based improvisation with writing, using textual fragments, words and phrases as starting points for storytelling or singing, and the text was finalised through improvisation and repetition rather than through scripting. As a solo piece, it was important to have regular input from the outside and this was essential in the process of structuring the work particularly. This improvisational approach to writing and devising was focused on bringing text into the space through the voice rather than creating and reading of learning a text. This allows the final performance (though it is a set text) to be performed with the sense that it is a choice to share something and that it is in process so that the repetition of the act of performing it is more akin to a ritual than a theatre show.

The dissemination of the work included work-in-progress performances and public performances across several different contexts to understand better how the piece worked with different audiences and different frames – a theatre festival, a gallery in a live art festival, an academic conference, and an event specifically engaging with the subject of death and how we deal with it. The different expectations surrounding theatricality performativity and authenticity in these different contexts offered insight into the dramaturgical workings of persona and the relationship with the audience (see page 16 of this document). Although the details of the process are outlined in the research timeline, it is worth giving a brief summary of each performance here as a frame for the later discussion.

Work in progress open rehearsal at Bios, Athens

This was a small invited audience of about 12 people with a discussion afterwards to feed into the development of the work. This was primarily a Greek audience and gave a sense of how the piece worked for a non-English audience as well as providing feedback about the performance itself.

Work in Progress performance at *Performing Writing*

This was a performance of the 25min version at the Performing Writing Conference, SPCA, Wellington, New Zealand with an audience of about 50 people from a number of different countries. Some useful feedback emerged from this including a more extended exchange with artist, Cath Clover (see audience feedback). The decision to avoid formal modes of audience feedback was made at this point. The reason for this was the extended conversations after the performance about mourning, grief and loss and the emotional response of the audience. It became clear that the post-performance discussions about personal experiences that audience members wanted to have with me and each other were themselves a space of compassionate hospitality, and an essential part of what I wanted the piece to do.

Two work in progress performances, FaB Festival, Bath UK.

This was the trial of the slightly longer 40 minute version of the work at a live art fringe festival in the UK. This was the most difficult experience of performing the work because there was no marketing available to the public and there was a feeling that people could come and go, which wasn’t suited to the work. The lack of programme information meant that people didn’t know what the work was about before watching. On the dramaturgical level, the frame of a live art festival also felt wrong because it shifts the balance between performativity and theatricality too far towards the performative in the persona and voice. This was a very useful experience in understanding how far I needed to shift myself performance persona away from my experiencing self and that it is not merely the dramaturgy that affects this; it is the context and expectations of the audience.

Three performances at Theatre de Menilmontant, Dreams Before Dawn, Paris, France.

This was the premiere of *And by the Way the Cat is Dead* in its final form, fully subtitled in French. This was significant because the subtitling of the work made visible the fact that the spoken script was set and the context of a theatre festival meant that the expectation was of theatricality, not performative authenticity, and the sense of constructing an *example* of what a lamentation might be or fail to be was more visible. To my initial surprise, the performance worked best in this environment (see page 16 for further discussion.

Documentation performance, New Adelphi Studio, Salford University, UK

This was not a publically advertised performance because it was being video documented, so was performed for students and colleagues as a practice based research presentation.

Performance at *Day of the Dead: Talking, Connecting, Remembering.* Salford, UK.

This was an event specifically engaging with the subject of death and how we deal with it. It was a large audience and put the work in the context of wider discussions and workshops reflecting on the subject. It was the most emotionally risky performance of the work, because I performed shortly after a very personal and moving presentation/testimony about suicide and the charity Papyrus. This was a reminder for me of the risky space that is opened up in *practising* vulnerability and the limits of dramaturgical processes in making safe this difficult territory.

The writing, devising and the performance phases of the process also raised several other areas for consideration methodologically: ethics, documentation and feedback. Ethically, the first concern in the making process was the representation of others in the work. In writing autobiographically, other people’s stories are inevitably woven in and my experience might encroach on their sense of events - what happened and how they felt. There is also a risk of losing the sense of the real person, especially in dealing with the memories of someone who has died as they can get lost in the narrative or allegorised out of existence. In this case, some of the performance is about an old friend, who committed suicide many years ago. For other people, Luke was a friend, a husband, a son and a brother, and my friendship with him, the loss I felt when he died and my decision to share some of that in my work, does not give me the right to open up their wounds. In the end, I made the decision that I would not show the work at home in Jersey, partly for these reasons and partly for the effect of proximity on my ability to perform the work and the intimacy of that process.

The audience for the work were the next concern ethically speaking. The work raises difficult subject matter and also contains an invitation to share something personal. It was important to me to offer the audience a clear way to avoid sharing anything if they preferred not to and to ensure that the programme material and online information about the performance made clear that the subject matter related to grief, particularly after the experience of performing in Bath where this didn’t happen in the way I had hoped.

As I began to suggest above, finding an appropriate feedback process was also a challenge. The postcards themselves which people chose to leave with me to travel with the performance for other audiences to read are an indirect but powerful form of feedback. These are included as images in the research collection, but for ethical reasons are not published publically. It was very explicitly stated in the performance that these postcards would be shown publically in future performances, however they were not given with the intention that they would be more widely available outside future performances of the work. Given the intimacy of sharing these stories, I also felt that this process precluded a more general audience feedback mechanism outside of specific work in progress showings where attendees were colleagues in research or performance. There is a document included with feedback relevant to the research questions and this came from conversations at work in progress events and in some cases from written feedback sent subsequently. I did not choose to use questionnaires or directed conversation after the public shows because as I state above, it would disrupt the process of establishing a space of compassionate hospitality where reading and contemplation at the end of the performance opens up conversations. It was very important to me that the audience had the freedom to spend time reading and to leave as and when they wanted. In general, audience members have either wanted to talk and share personal experiences directly after the show or to read the postcards or to leave.

The choice to weave the audience responses into the fabric of the piece through the postcards rather than make use of formal response mechanisms was essential in allowing the exploration of compassionate hospitality to take place. However it also means that there is less explicit feedback from the audience about their experience of the work. In the public performances, there is what I read instinctively in the spectators as I perform; what they have said to me afterwards; and the postcards which they write and leave with me, which give a sense of the impact of the work on an intuitive level.

The documentation provided as evidence of the research process and outcomes includes examples of process poetry, an early draft of the shorter work in progress version as a text, video documentation of the second version of the performance, images of postcards, and extracts of feedback. For ethical reasons the video documentation provided is from a specific documentation run where the audience visible in the video are academic colleagues who knew that the performance was being documented for research purposes.

**Contextual and theoretical framing**

The approach to performance in the research project can be situated in the well-established field of solo autobiographical and semi-autobiographical work which draws on personal material as a means to address wider socio-political issues. This includes the work of artists such as Bobby Baker and Brian Lobel. I note these artists in particular because there is a focus in the work of each on using personal material to open up questions about a wider issue. Bobby Baker’s work has been discussed in considerable depth in *Autobiography and Performance* (2007) by Deirdre Heddon where she describes her persona as ’an exaggerated, cultural (rather than strictly personal) version of herself’ (43) and this is a useful starting point for contextualizing my work within current approaches to persona-based performance.

As in Bobby Baker’s work, in my own performance, there is a distancing from the personal self which is essential to the shaping of a relationship with the audience based on the visibility of the construction of a voice or voices. As Andy Lavender puts it in *Performance in the Twenty-First Century*, ‘the persona appears to signal a specific self, a being at the borderline between characteristic originality (the things that make one different from anyone else) and characterful fabrication (made-upness precisely for presentation) […] a self that is somehow sincere and always also fabricated’ (2016: 143). This simultaneous sense of the authenticity of shared experience with the explicit sharing of a process of construction is a balance that it is important to sustain. This means attempting to allow the *rhetoric* of sincerity or authenticity to be visible and at the same time to be sincere in the purpose of building that rhetoric is central to my approach.

The construction of a persona in dealing with personal, risky or vulnerable material requires that dramaturgical distance is built in, between the writing and experiencing self, and the performing persona. Looking at the work of Brian Lobel however in *Ball, And Other Funny Stories About Cancer* (2012), this dramaturgical distance is less visible as he stages his voice as a performer with a greater directness in his address using humour and intimate explicit detail in order to refuse and uncover the taboos around how we talk and think about cancer as a society. This does not mean that his work does not objectify or rework the self into a performative identity however; he explicitly stages his exposure, itself a dramaturgical device as his ‘way of making cancer our shit, as opposed to just [his] shit’ (Lobel, 2008: 158).

As one of the lucky audience members who has donned surgical gloves in *Appreciation[[1]](#footnote-1),* the final part of the *BALL* trilogy, I can confirm that Lobel is not afraid to expose himself. However it is also interesting to note his attention to ‘professional silences created by artists as a conscious artistic choice or statement’ (2010: 29) in his article for *Performance Research*. This sense of silence as a significant statement validates more broadly in society the choice of silence, and recognizes it as an important space both in terms of not sharing publically at all but also in leaving spaces and gaps in the work.

This is evident in Bobby Baker’s *Drawing on a Mother’s Experience* (2008) in the moment in which Baker sieves flour over the image and talks directly about what she won’t say: ‘There is one element I always seem to find very hard to talk about in public. It’s the most important element in my life. So, I won’t.’ This very simple direct statement and the action of sieving the flour is a powerful act of claiming privacy and silence within the context of a piece that at the same time gives a voice to female experiences which have been undervalued and unrecognised as artistic subject matter. Equally the counterpoint of the spoken narrative and the visual composition in the piece opens up spaces of ambiguity and the unspoken.

Deirdre Heddon in *Autobiography and Performance* suggests however, that ‘Baker’s “secrets” are not only moments of refusal or moments of “privacy in public” they also perform spaces in which I, in the role of the spectator, can bring myself into (the) “play” as I fill in her gaps with my own stories’ (Heddon citing Etchells, 2008: 164) and this is something in common across both Baker’s and Lobel’s work despite the fact that Baker’s claim of privacy appears to sit in contrast with Brian Lobel’s very explicit direct address.

Silence and the interruption of intimate material in my own work have elements in common with both Baker and Lobel’s work. I explore silence as refusing to remember; as remembering, as taking the place of the unrepresentable; interruptions as refusing to impose coherence on stories; refusing objectification of an event; silence allowing traces; and admitting we don’t always know how to speak, while at the same time attempting to employ an ease in the manner of address, to work with humour and irony, explicit detail and deliberate constructions of intimacy and exposure (see video documentation).

Coming from another perspective but also working in solo performance is Tami Spry whose research in evocative and performative auto-ethnography offers useful frameworks to build on in terms of ethics and methodologies for engaging with vulnerability on stage in a focused and purposeful way. In autoethnography however, the focus on building knowledge and understanding is towards ethnographic insight into cultural practices or experiences that the researchers have themselves undergone, through analysis, creative expression and reflection. Spry in this context sees the ‘performing body as raw data of a critical cultural story’ (2009: 583) and gives particular attention in her thinking to the construction of the performative self within this.

While my own research is aimed at contributing knowledge in the field of dramaturgy and performance theory rather than the ethnographic study of cultural practices and experiences, Spry’s work on the performative self and on practiced vulnerability provides a useful starting point, particularly as her work also draws on Della Pollock’s discussion of the performative self as multiple and emergent. Pollock states that rather than projecting a self, performative writing projects ‘a relation of being and knowing that cuts back and forth across multiple “divisions” among selves, contexts, affiliations’ a multiple self which is in a process of (self)production. (Pollock, 1998: 87)

This is significant in particular in attempting to avoid the construction of an autobiographical voice that lays claim to truth by virtue of the authenticity of that act of voicing, as this risks an exclusionary effect. The multiplicity of the self and the sense of the self as emergent draw attention to the ways that one person’s experience is multiperspectival and multiple in its relation with the process of self-formation. Further, this reinforces the sense that my story is one example of a story which has many possible renderings within it and which reflects the multiplicity of experience in the room and beyond. In *And by the Way the Cat is Dead,* my loss is not the fundamental centre of the work. By staging multiple voices and visibly staging the construction of these voices and the spaces between it draws attention to the fact that this is not *the* story. It is an example of a telling. (See draft script for the process of arranging voices and the video documentation for the performance)

In *Body, Paper, Stage : Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (2011), Spry seeks to engage with this sense of multiple selfhood as a ‘performative-I’ which underpins three stages of process: as ‘a critical heterogeneous autoethnographic research disposition’; as a ‘critical and embodied’ disposition underpinning the composition of autoethnography; and as a ‘performative-I persona’ for performing autoethnography (28). The performative-I as a positioning for research in relation to a ‘negotiation between self/other/culture/language’ (30) is an interesting way of thinking about the position of the artist as researcher as well, however I am interested more particularly in the construction of the ‘performative-I persona’ here, where she discusses the idea of ‘practiced vulnerability’ as agency. She describes this as ‘a space of active reflection where one inhabits the intersections of his own personal experiences with the intimate politics of others’ (168). This conception of practiced vulnerability as a space entered with active reflection, and her emphasis on ensuring you rehearse, shows a care for the performer-researcher in terms of well-being and an attention to the value and rigour of the process as an act of research. However, it does not engage with the performance as a work created for an audience. Her conception also of the persona as ‘the crafted articulation, a critical construction of self—of you—as she/you exist in the story … the self that exists in the particular times and places of the autoethnographic text’ (173) does not fully engage with the complexity of performance time and space, shared with an audience.

Spry states in her earlier article that she sees this performative-I as ‘a representation of the conﬂictual eﬀects of the coperformance, of the copresence between selves and others in contexts’ (2009: 584). However, because her work is more focused on the performance as an integral part of ethnographic research, this discussion of co-presence also does not fully extend into a consideration of what the performance is doing and how on a dramaturgical level and in relation to the audience. Nevertheless, this concept of practised vulnerability as a means of ‘dialogic engagement between person and persona’, which facilitates the transition into a ‘performative-I persona’ (2011: 175) in rehearsal is a useful one because it gives a clear sense of the distinction between the experiencing subject and the performing persona. In order to create a performance which is hospitable to the traces of others’ pain or trauma however, it is necessary to ‘practice’ and process vulnerability further than she suggests, so that while traces of that risky and uncertain space might still remain in the work, the audience does not feel over-exposed to the risk of the artist in the act of staging their personal material. It is to this purpose that I explore specific dramaturgical choices in shaping the work and the impact of working through material in a process writing phase.

Central to this creation of *practised* vulnerability and the performing persona is the imbrication of ‘the actual and virtual, presence and absence, the real and fabrication’ (Lavender: 2016: 34), the explicit and visible construction, in other words, of a performance which both authenticates and de-authenticates its relationship with the real. This is a lamentation. This is a demonstration of the (im)possibility of lamentation. The failure to inhabit an authentic space of lamentation is inevitable in the context of performance and that in itself offers space to consider how we fluctuate between performing emotion and failing to manage and process emotion in everyday life.

From here, I wish to consider three key aspects of the dramaturgy of persona – the persona as multiple and fragmented; the persona as not only in a state of continual emergence or (self)production but as co-emerging, using Ettinger’s concept of ‘co-poeisie’ (2005: 704); and the transition from a writing voice to a performing voice through *practising* vulnerability, where the act of voicing is an act of taking responsibility for or *bearing* the text on stage (Barnett, 2008). These approaches to the dramaturgy of persona were explored in this project as a means to facilitate a space of compassionate hospitality and therefore represent key methods employed in the process and presentation of the practice as research.

**Layering voices: multiplicity and rupture in the persona**

My approach to multiplicity in persona in this work is, on the first level, an interweaving of different voices or discourses, some familiar, close to my everyday professional selves and some less so. There is an explicit trying on of unfamiliar voices central to the thematic exploration of the work, as the performative persona shares with the audience multiple attempts to find a voice for lamentation. In terms of theorising this on a dramaturgical level, I found that it is the relationship between those voices which defines the formation of a multiple emergent self – the interruptions, gaps, discontinuities, echoes and connections themselves create the sense that the self is both multiple and emerging as an entity. This means that although the performance does not use different media in the everyday technological sense, it does create different medialities and it has been helpful to think about this in terms of theories of intermediality in performance because of the way these modes of expression work in relation to each other through counterpoint and interruption.

The concept of intermediality has been described as being defined by the space in-between medialities, but also by the combination or collision of the interwoven medialities, and both of these definitions are useful to clarify how this persona formation works. Peter Boenisch in Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance (2006) defines intermediality as ‘an effect performed in-between mediality, supplying multiple perspectives, and foregrounding the making of meaning rather than obediently transmitting meaning. Intermediality is an aisthetic act’, a perceptual act (103). There are three elements here to note and I would like to start with the importance of multiplicity and being *between* medialities which recognizes that we are not simply moving from one to another in a linear fashion; there is a layering and a collision of perspectives.

In his chapter, ‘The Lost Babylon’ in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010) Russell Fewster comments that intermediality is defined by the ‘both-and’ not the ‘Either/or” (64). Accordingly, we cannot define the in-between as only a space between, but instead we must recognize that it is the collision of these many medialities or modes of perception as well. The implication here is that it is more than the sum of its parts and more than the space between these discourses. Instead it is a perceptual field which in its specific combination is new. Intermediality here is a collision of multiple medialities where the *both-and*, and the space opened up *in-between* voices form part of the perceptual experience - the collision itself and the empty space between.

In *And by the Way the Cat is Dead,* this in-between is manifested as a space between voices in the simplest senses – as silence in hesitation, as physical space which I move through on stage – but also as intermedial collision - ‘both-and’ as I move back and forth between these different discourses layering fragments together. I would also add that the moment of interruption or shift itself is important, as it leaves a thread incomplete (see video documentation, minutes 7 - 9). Alongside the pauses and hesitations, this sense of incompleteness, creates a postponing of meaning or closure. It is perhaps not quite provoking what Lehmann describes as ‘evenly hovering attention’ (2006: 87) because the conversational element of the performance holds these fragments in relation to each other and there is a textual hierarchy in that sense. However, the shifts back and forth between modes of speaking do delay meaning-making in terms of forming a coherent perception of the piece or a set of expectations or anticipation. This gives the audience space through that incompleteness, for their experiences, memories or thoughts to sit alongside those presented in the work (see photographic documentation of postcards and audience feedback page 2).

Writing into the work an incompleteness is also essential to the staging of a kind of visible and accessible vulnerability. The performer is always in process of making meaning just as the spectator is. There is a vulnerability associated with uncertainty on both sides here. This is enhanced as well through the improvisational elements in the music. Though the spoken text has become set, the music and sung elements remain partly improvised. As a non-musician, playing badly in public but doing my best, I attempt to create an environment in which it feels okay to be bad at this (video documentation minutes 11’30 – 13’30). This is one the central aims of the performance: to accept the failure of mourning and lamentation traditions in Western and Northern Europe; to accept my inevitable failure to stage any kind of real lamentation and to be okay with this; to recognize our collective anxieties around death, mourning and ritual in contemporary society. Connecting this back to the main research question for the project, this acceptance of vulnerability and failure as something practiced and shared is one means of creating a space of compassionate hospitality.

The second point Boenisch makes is that the shifts between different medialities foreground the mode of meaning making, as we see them set in juxtaposition. The intermedial in-between ‘communicat[es] gaps, splits and fissures, and broadcast[s] detours, inconsistencies and contradictions’ (Boenisch, 2006: 115) drawing attention to the making of meaning rather than simply transmitting it. For my own work the shift between different modes of expression or discourses is part of an attempt to generate a heightened awareness of the shaping of the voice and text in performance. This process of moving between modes of expression works alongside the fact that I am intentionally performing actions on stage that I am simply not very good at and visibly at risk of failure. Through the vulnerability of this failure and sharing of this struggle I attempt to facilitate an encounter with the audience which opens up a space of recognition, accepting collective anxieties around death, mourning and ritual in contemporary society.

Finally, the recognition of intermediality as an aisthetic or perceptual act is also significant. While I can listen to feedback and see how an audience responds, I can only experience the work from my own side as performer. In working in to the dramaturgy a space for reflection and the ruptures generated by collisions of signifying systems, the experience is very much laid at the feet of the audience.

Maaike Bleeker in New Modes of Embodied Interaction in Digital Culture (2010) suggests that ‘the intermedial character of the theatre may also be used to undermine seemingly self-evident modes of perceiving and to draw attention to the performativity of perception’ (38). There is a clear sense here not only of drawing attention to the process of the performer, but in fact drawing attention to the forging of perceptual routes through the material and construction of perceptual fields on the part of the spectator. While on one hand, the familiarity of each mode of speaking allows a kind of intimacy between performer and spectator, the spectator generates their own experience of the work and when the balance is right, the vulnerability of uncertainty in this process does not overwhelm the intimacy of a hospitable direct address and conversational relationship with the audience (See page 1, audience feedback). The ‘response-ability’ of the audience is central to the workings of the dramaturgy in both the sense that Lehmann (2006: 184) and that Ettinger (2005: 706) use the term.

Looking now at intermediality in terms of parataxis, and the collision of discourses as generating a potential ‘rupture’, we also see in the theoretical framing of intermediality, the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis emerging in the description of rupture as a confrontation with the coherent discursive projection of the self. This is significant because the use of Ettinger’s work as a frame for my practical research poses a direct challenge to this framing of the rupture and to the self/other dichotomy as the basis for identity formation and spectatorship.

Meike Wagner in Of Other Bodies: the Intermedial Gaze in Theatre (2006) argues that it is in the interplay between the perceiving and the perceived, the material and the immaterial, the visible and the invisible, the self and other, that intermediality is located by the corporeally involved perceiver’ (125) She adds that ‘Intermediality dwells in the margins between the look and the gaze and becomes perceivable *through the challenging of the other’* (131, my italics). This approach to theorising the emergence of the schism between look and gaze assumes a phallic gaze based on the emergence from the Real into the Imaginary and Symbolic formed only through a series of cuts or schisms. This is the schism par excellence, where we confront the cut at the limit of discourse and selfhood, and this is where my own work seeks to diverge from this approach to defining intermediality.

This rupture which opens up a transgressive jouissance at the limit of the self is one still defined by the ‘Other’ as challenging and the self as individuated through separation and the cut. It does not allow for a set of relations defined by shared vulnerability and shared openness to traces of the trauma of others and it is this which is essential to the dramaturgy I am researching. To this end, I outline below some of the key concepts from Bracha Ettinger’s work on transsubjectivity and co-poeisie.

**Transsubjectivity and co-poeisie: practising vulnerability and ‘bearing’ the text**

As a psychoanalytic thinker whose work challenges the centrality of the self/Other dichotomy at the centre of identity formation, Bracha Ettinger’s work is enormously useful in reconsidering how we think about spectatorship; intermediality and the layering of meaning; and the shaping of different modes of address in performance. This reconsideration is one that needs more time and space than this report can give it, but I attempt to give an overview of how some of the key concepts in her work can open up thinking around the encounters we create in performance. In this project, her work underpins my approach to layering into the work traces of grief as well as framing the research into the dramaturgical means of creating a space of compassionate hospitality.

Focusing first on the layering of voices in the work and referring back to the analysis of the multiple self in relation to theories of intermediality, applying her theoretical framework to thinking around the caesurae generated by the ‘in-between’ and ‘both-and’ of intermedial performance means that this space can also have the potential to allow the unsaid and the traces of loss to play into what Ettinger terms the ‘matrixial aesthetic borderspace’ (Ettinger, 1999: 90): to function as a space for *transsubjective* emergence which sits alongside and in contrast to the emergence of the subject through individuation and the cut. This does not negate the function of the self/Other dichotomy in thinking through how we find our own projections of selfhood ruptured, rather it places a supplementary mode of subject formation alongside it.

The matrixial borderspace as Ettinger describes it is a ‘psychic sphere which is trans-subjective on a sub-subjective partial level’. (2005: 703) and it is ‘perpetually retuning’ as the subjects in relation with each other on this level are in a process of shifting and transforming (2006: 19). The matrix here is ‘a concept for a *transforming borderspace of encounter* of the *co-emerging I* and the *neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I’* (2006: 65).It is important to emphasise here the nature of this sphere of encounter as one which shifts our thinking from intersubjective to partially transsubjective on a psychic level. In theorising a form of subjective emergence outside the phallic model,

Ettinger’s matrix goes further than Kristeva’s notion of ‘chora’ for example, because Ettinger theorises a passage into the Imaginary from the Real that is predicated on something other than the absence\presence lack model. She draws on the late intrauterine encounter ‘as a model for a *shareable dimension of subjectivity* in which elements that discern one another as *non-I,* without knowing each other, co-emerge and co-inhabit a joint space, without fusion and without rejection’ (2006: 65). This is a fundamental shift in thinking about the nature of subjectivity and emergence which has implications for wider analysis of spectatorship, the politics of encounter and witnessing, beyond the scope of this report.

The significance of the concept of ‘matrixial borderspace’ for my work however is that the performer and the spectators, in fluidly emerging relations with each other, are exposed to and responding to traces of each other’s psychic threads and are not only engaging in a process of self-production in relation to the Other but can become part of a process of partialised co-emergence. As a means of theorizing a performative-I this offers more than the sense of the multiple emergent self, discussed in relation to Spry’s work, because in addition it recognizes mutual emergence on the non-perceptual level.

If we are thinking about the interruption or the rupture in intermedial dramaturgy, this also means that rather than fracturing or rupturing the projected wholeness of the subject through a disturbance to the psyche, in the matrixial model, this interruption or rupture becomes a space where (partial)subjectivity-as-encounter might surface, neither as fusion nor as rejection, but as ‘differentiation-in-co-emergence’ (Ettinger, 2005: 703).

Ettinger describes these emergent relations as “trans-subjective webs of co-poiesis composed of transformations along psychic strings stretched between the participants of each encounter-event” (Ettinger, 2006b: 219). That is to say that co-emergence brings several partialised subjects in trans-subjective, not just intersubjective relations, into a process of becoming-together.

On the dramaturgical level, the difference in the quality of the intermedial encounter is in the staging of partialised voices rather than seeking to build up a set of discourses in collision. I seek to allow uncertainty and incompleteness into the material and this is where *practising* vulnerability - the acceptance of vulnerability and failure as something practiced and shared is also important. Through working and reworking the performance, it became clear that the more I was able to work into an openness with spectators - to share a sense of the process of trying to play or sing and to share the act of speaking once more, writing once more or reading once more together, the stronger the work was.

This idea of co-poeisis recognizes the performativity of perception but goes further, drawing us into a co-emerging process in-between spectators and the performer, as a ‘metramorphic’ transformation occurring through the perceptual act of constructing and responding. What this means in real terms is that in opening up spaces which allow traces of grief or trauma to surface, a space of compassionate hospitality to the audience can be generated. The most significant and visible space of hospitality is at the end of the work because there is an explicit invitation and shared period of reflection, writing and sharing. However, this is set up as hospitable through the dramaturgical approaches outlined above in this report – through the explicit vulnerability of incompleteness, the risk of failure, uncertainty and processual actions; through the exposure and intimacy and the balance created by *practising* and preparing vulnerability. Artworking according to Ettinger is ‘sensing a potential co-emergence and co-fading and bringing into being objects or events, processes or encounters that sustain these metramorphoses and further transmit their effect’ (2005: 710).

When we talk about the unsaid, the traces of loss here, we are talking not about intentional omissions as discussed in relation to Bobby Baker’s work, or in the decisions to omit specific details in my own work, but rather the unsaid which sits between and behind the text as it is written or performed - traces of trauma or pain which are not expressed on a conscious level. In order to open up spaces in which they might emerge, the layering of materials offers gaps and interruptions to a coherent narrative that might otherwise disavow these traces through narrative completeness. At the same time, there is a layering into the texture of the work on the level of traces of grief laid down and never fully erased through the structuring of the process. The traces of the more raw process poetry hover in the spaces where they were erased from the poetry or song finally included in the performance (see process poetry document). I used words from my initial writing as starting points for improvisation and these elements still sit underneath the surface of the work.

As outlined in the methodology above and in the timeline, the decision about structuring the process in order to include a phase of process writing was key in facilitating this. One of my main questions here was how might these be allowed to emerge without over-exposing either the performer or the audience: still sustaining a dramaturgical distance from the material that places the work in the category of art not therapy?

On one hand, Ettinger in her article Copoiesis, states that ‘[i]n the opening to an unconscious matrixial event-encounter, the artist can’t not-share with an-other, she can’t not witness the other. The I and non-I are wit(h)nessing one another, and by that they become partialised, vulnerable and fragilised. The artist doesn’t build a defense against this fragility but freely embraces it.’ (2005: 704) This suggests we begin from the impossibility of not sharing on some level, but also need to have a willingness to embrace fragility, to open ourselves to the ‘kind of encounter that perhaps we are trying to avoid much more then aspiring to arrive at...’ (712).

In order to open up a relationship with spectators based on co-emergence and fragility, the relation of wit(h)nessing is crucial. ‘Without wit(h)nessing, the openness to this unconscious level becomes very painful – a dangerous event … The artist in the matrixial dimension is wit(h)ness in com-passionate hospitality’ (709-10) This idea of bearing wit(h)ness holds within it the original sense of bearing witness but also facilitating a shift towards co-emergence where a traumatic event can be transformed ‘into a subjectivizing potentiality’ (Ettinger, 2005: 709-10).

To be clear, what we are talking about here is not just accessing and triggering personal memories to do with grief, but accessing and triggering a co-emerging, a connection which allows us to be with grief together on a level we are not conscious of. The work of the performance is not to position the spectator as witness to my ritual, but to position me as wit(h)nessing host to the audience. The process I stage and the stories I tell for the audience are intended to create a space of safe fragility where the balance of vulnerability through opening up and the safety to do so through compassionate hospitality allow us to be together. It became clear in working on this material however, that what Ettinger suggests about the artist not building a defense against fragility but freely embracing it is rather more complicated in the context of performance because of the real shared presence in space and time. What I wanted to do is to consider ways in which as artists, we can allow the possibility of ‘co-poietic moments of exposure’ specifically in performance.

It is important to consider here both the approaches that worked well and also, the moments in performance where this didn’t work so well as these helped me define and clarify how the dramaturgy needed to be altered to find this balance. In one of my performances at FaB, two people interrupted me, argued with me while I was performing and then left. One of the problems in this situation was that the performance took place in a festival where people could come and go, and where the programme did not contain clear information about what the performance was about. However, it was clear to me as a performer that in that performance, I did not have enough distance as a performing persona from my own material in the work. In that audience, I also had a friend whose sister had recently died. It was the first time I performed the work knowing someone in the audience who had recently suffered a bereavement and being more aware of their pain and loss as I performed. This significantly affected my presence on stage. The jokes felt sad. The singing was more painful. The performance was less safe.

Unlike in the visual artwork which Ettinger creates and discusses, in performance, the artist is present in a shared space with the spectator as well as being present as the voice of the text itself. This means a greater proximity and fragility is risked in the act of speaking, singing or enacting something on stage and this does not simply apply to the performer. It is a encounter of direct emotional risk that is offered to the audience in shared space and time, not just in the psychic sphere with a temporal and spatial distance between the artist creating and the viewer encountering the work. As Ettinger points out, in visual art, ‘[t]he viewer is challenged by the artwork to join a specific anonymous intimacy.’ (2005: 710), through ‘*[r]elations-without-relating* to the other’ which she describes as ‘based on attunement to *distances-in-proximity’*  (2006a: 65). However, in performance and time based art the challenge to join that ‘specific intimacy’ loses some of its anonymity and the speaking voice and body always risks giving away more than is intended. The potential direct confrontation with someone else’s pain whether a shared pain or not, is more easily experienced as a threat or dangerous, so there is a necessity to reinvest the work with different kinds of distance from the trauma being explored.

It was at this point that I returned to the work with a greater consideration for the practising of vulnerability and worked on how I might bear the text to the spectator. The repetition in setting the piece more concretely coincided with the translation into French for the subtitles in Paris and this reinforced the sense of taking responsibility for a text, rather than sharing personal stories.

In his article, When is a Play not a Drama?, David Barnett introduces the idea of performers as ‘text-bearers’ which demand ‘the divorce of the speaker from the spoken’ (2008: 18). This sits almost at the opposite end of a spectrum in relation to a traditional perception of an autobiographical voice on stage and in a sense I would argue that a ‘text-bearer’ is anyway an impossible construction. However, I am drawn to this phrase by the potential of the multiple meanings in ‘bearing’ the text. It simultaneously has a suggestion of finding a way to bear (to stand) the text and also the sense of bearing the text to the audience, bringing it forth as an offering, and then finally, with Barnett’s discussion, the separation of the speaker from the spoken even if that is only ever a partial separation rather than a full divorce.

My own process of devising the work was one which necessitated improvising, repeating and rehearsing stories which at the beginning of the creative process were difficult to talk about. Through the process of creating this performance, *And by the Way the Cat is Dead,* I have discovered that in order to facilitate a compassionate hospitality on a deeper psychic level, much of the emotional rawness on the surface of the work needs working out of the material. The vulnerability of the writing voice of the text is staged but the performer is on some level divorced from that, taking on and *bearing* the text. The emotional rawness would otherwise risk putting my own grief at the centre of the work and excluding that of others.

The postcard I write and read out to the audience towards the end of the performance for example, contains the story of a ritual of mourning that emerged for me after the death of my friend, and in the final sentence, it is the only time in the performance that I say that he killed himself. The processes of practising writing that card and speaking those words are not visible on the surface of the performance but were necessary to transform this into a dramaturgical device and not simply an expression of my own grief. The choice to switch to writing and reading aloud for this moment rather than direct address both created another layer of distance between the composing and performing self on stage and heightened the affective quality through the perceived necessity of this dramaturgical choice. Nevertheless, the traces of the emotional work of the creative process are layered into what I do in performance and are perhaps accessible on an unconscious level. What is important to note here is that vulnerability in the work is presented on two levels – as a representation of grief and mourning which is a staged performance of a text and which offers space for the spectator by creating an objectifying distance from trauma or grief, and as a means of facilitating a space of compassionate hospitality that allows and offers traces of that fragility on a non-conscious level (see the writing and reading sequence in the video documentation, minutes 29 – 39).

While this is only one small example from the work, it is possible in this way, to conceive of a ‘transsubjective borderspace’ in which the borderlinking of a ‘fragilised’ self is momentarily accessed, in a space defined by co-emerging ‘partial-subjects’ (Ettinger, 2006a): a matrixial jouissance defined by ‘co-poeisie’ as opposed to a phallic jouissance. This allows me as an artist to reconceptualise the moments of vulnerability in performance to include the potential for a connectedness which goes beyond the surface of the manifest address of the performance and it frames my analysis of specific dramaturgical elements which contribute to generating a kind of vulnerability defined by ‘compassionate hospitality’ (Ettinger, 2005: 707).

In addition to specific moments where the processing or practising of vulnerability facilitates a relationship of trust with the audience, the wider framing of the work as theatre performance is significant and this was most evident in the Paris performances. As I have discussed in an earlier section, the mode of address I employ in the work is one of ease; as if I am speaking off the cuff in the autobiographical and literature review elements. However, in all the spoken sections the text is now set. It is only in some of the sung elements that I am improvising. In general, this wasn’t always explicitly visible, but in Paris, the whole show was subtitled so for any audience members who spoke both English and French the theatrical quality of staging my voice as a persona was much more visible. In the artists’ feedback session, I received the following comment:

‘It is actually theatre. It is not performance art. It is acting. I was reading the subtitles and listening to you speaking and you’re saying exactly what is on the subtitles. They match perfectly, even though it looks like you are improvising. I couldn’t believe it. I don’t think it would have to be you performing this piece. You could have someone else act it and it would be the same.’ (Feedback session in Dreams Before Dawn, Paris)

Based on the theoretical material I have introduced and my experiences of people’s personal responses to the work, I don’t agree that it would be the same with someone else acting it necessarily because the process of writing is woven in to the emotional grounding of the performance. However, this comment does make clear the split between the voice of the text and the performed persona, and between those voices and myself as performer. It made me consider the ways I might want to deauthenticate the performing voice for future audiences.

Also connected to this distancing of the performing voice from the textual voice, I worked on the delivery and address to give the work a lightness, humour and calm, to perform as a persona who is happy to be sharing these fragments and happy to invite you in to see them, as can be seen in the Tommy the Cat sequence and in the story about my mother. The traces of grief and the pain of loss are primarily located in the processes of devising the work and in the voice of the text which are primarily sustained in the performance moment through the textual voice rather than through an emotionality lent to the text by the performer. By delivering my own words as if I am taking responsibility for them, I attempt to generate a caesura between the voice that speaks and the location of the voice in the text. This allows the work to feel safe - for the audience to be in a place between safe and risky vulnerability.

In a personal exchange of emails and feedback with artist, Cath Clover after the first showing of the work (see audience feedback), she wrote to me about her experience of watching the piece, saying: “the struggle you displayed – to share your difficult and untimely loss, to play bass, to sing, to be fully present in front of an audience with your story – was very compelling, even though you seemed grounded and at ease, an intriguing dynamic.’ This for me is at the heart of what I am trying to do – to be at ease and thus to be hospitable on the level of conscious exchange, so that for the spectator, I do not appear to be at risk although I also take risks in the ways I have described. Just as the emergence of vulnerability works differently on the conscious and psychic level, hospitality works on two levels as well.

To conclude, working with Ettinger’s concepts of transsubjectivity, co-poeisie and compassionate hospitality facilitates a reframing of how vulnerability and the performative persona can be staged and in this project, provides a strong underpinning for the exploration of how specific dramaturgical and methodological approaches can facilitate a compassionate space for sharing difficult encounters.

One of the key findings of this research project is that the building in of dramaturgical distance between the writing and experiencing self, and the performing persona, is essential to that hospitality. It allows intimacy and exposure that invites an audience in and this was evident in the moments of failure in this endeavour as well as in the success of the work. The intimacy of the stories, words and pictures shared as well as the feedback are a testament to that and it has been very moving to open up that space for sharing and conversation with people.

During the process, I identified specific approaches to building in this dramaturgical distance within the frame of practised vulnerability as I discuss it above. These approaches were staging the acceptance of failure to voice grief or pain as something practiced and shared; the visible staging of a *rhetoric* of sincerity or authenticity combined with real sincerity in the purpose of building that rhetoric; staging silence including where the act of writing the postcard is a refusal of a level of greater vulnerability in that I choose to write and read rather than speak the material directly (this makes visible the process of making my work safe, of *practising* vulnerability rather than experiencing and performing it raw); and finally, multiplying and fragmenting the voices in the work in order to stage the sense that we actually express and share our experience and the traces of them in and between multiple attempts to speak through different discourses.

These approaches contributed to facilitating an encounter which opened up a space of recognition, accepting collective anxieties around death, mourning and ritual, and the many conversations with audience members about personal loss following performances because a secondary space of compassionate hospitality where experiences were shared in response to the work either with me or between spectators.

Returning briefly to Ettinger’s work, I have also found that her thinking allows us to theorise relations and connections that as artists we know are there in our work on an instinctive level: that traces of our experiences, our trauma, are able to find their way into an encounter that is defined by more than the defensive castrating subject/object relationship. The idea of trans-subjective co-poiesis is transformational for how we think about our experience as collaborators making together, and as artists and spectators sharing work. It provides a framework for the kind of slow sometimes invisible transformations between and amongst us that are always taking place, and it allows for a different rendering of shared vulnerability where we can shape a process which does not assume necessarily defence and rejection, ‘something that is created by concession or surrender, in a transgressive laying down of a transferred gaze.’ (Ettinger, 2006: 50) In the same way in performance, the laying down of the weapons of the othering gaze can be invited through the dramaturgies I have discussed, which open up a space accepting vulnerability and partiality to create a model for shared becoming.

In talking about artworking, Griselda Pollock suggests that in Ettinger’s framework, the artist ‘lends herself to her material in transforming it into art and the viewer in turn lends herself to the artwork to animate its potential to bring about affects or even new knowledge’ (Pollock, 2007: 261-2). In the live performance context, the parameters for a willingness to lend yourself to this work require a good welcome, but perhaps also a means of committing to an action and having agency within the frame of the piece. The invitation to write postcards is an element of the performance I worked on and adjusted throughout the sharing process, because of the desire to create both a shared ritual action and to ensure the audience could participate or not, in whatever way was comfortable for them. It needed to be genuinely hospitable.

The postcards which have been left with me contain stories, little drawings, sometimes just a word, and in each performance, I go through a process of laying these out on the stage beforehand. This is a careful, attentive process and it is at this point that I read the responses from the previous performance as I prepare for the next. The traces of other people’s experience are carried into my performance along with my own as each spectator who has given their story, offers their experience as ‘wit(h)ness’ to me and to the next audience.

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1. In *Appreciation,* Brian Lobel invites several members of the audience on to the stage, gives them a shot of whisky then asks them put on a surgical glove and feel his testicle. He then asks them to give a word in response. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)