

Stealing Voices
Penny McCarthy
Terry O'Connor

1.

Dear Terry,

I thought I'd send you some images of my drawings as way to open our dialogue. All of these are pencil drawings that are size-for-size copies of the original texts. For a recent piece I copied all of the pages from a short story by Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, a story that is itself about copying and authorship.

Lost in Space was taken from some material in the online NASA archive. It is a script for Nixon to speak in the event of a disaster during the Apollo 13 mission. Part of the script is to be spoken at the funeral of the astronauts. The text seems to imagine a future that didn't take place, or maybe a present that is volatile. The future is there in the script, looking back at us, almost oracular. What is strange is the fiction, both the fiction of history as we know it and the imagined history that didn't happen.

Love,
Penny

2.

Dear Penny,

There is an original to this mail too. It started as a scrap of notes written from inside Forced Entertainment's recent performance of *Quizoola* in Norwich. For the last two hours of the six-hour performance, I am sitting at a desk watching people come and go. It's a marathon game of written questions and improvised, provisional answers. My shift at asking and answering is over. In smudged and sweaty clown make-up, still to the eye a figure in a fiction, I am free if not to move then to think and write to you.

The voices of my colleagues drift down the corridor. You know these voices well.

'Where did you learn to speak that way?' shouts Cathy to Tim.

I can't hear Tim's answers; they reach me as a broken and inaudible murmur. I started to wonder, thinking about this dialogue of ours, about the way in which the active summoning of voice functions as a confirmation of friendship. Specifically, I've been thinking about the way in which your voice is often in my head, as a memory sometimes, repeating something you've actually said, but at other times as a kind of landmark for a tone or position outside the bit of me I think of as me, a voice I can summon for help or for pleasure, often in the course of thinking about work and making. The psyche may fragment into different voices for self-protection but also, in a more everyday register, for the playful advancing of a position or trajectory in the quivering and wavering of thought.

My work as a fellow at Roehampton is centred on the explicit teasing of relationships between conversation and practice in contemporary performance and live art. The ethics and elusiveness of this way of working intrigue me; the implication of this politics of art making. Not least for the way the process mirrors a kind of exchange and flow that occurs and counts outside art, a kind of becoming through conversation; the unfolding and revealing of the present, the wavering of being.

Maybe we could think of this dialogue as a sketch, a series of pencil lines between us, trying to capture in some urgent, unfinished way the shape of an idea; something between the transmission of voice and the transmission of drawing, breath and vocal chords, eyes and hands and pencils, all trying, all wavering, all impulse and reaction, all trying to emerge, (by way of some original object), making, in the present.

Love,
Terry

3.

Dear Terry,

Lately I have spent more time looking out across the street towards your house than writing to you. This is a setting you know well. It is grey and rainy and early on a Sunday morning. In the house, time seems to move slower over the day. My room is silent and lacking in structured activity, while outside is an on-going story, plot-filled and busy. I can hear birds and occasional voices. The voices are a cut-up of free association: a mother patiently explaining something to her child, a gang of students laughing, a man talking to his dog.

I was thinking that our email conversations are another oddly fragmented narrative, more like clues in a word puzzle than anything complete. Language itself is made artificial, uncertain, as if we are trying to report on acts that words have never described and never will. So this dialogue can only be an offering, a way to reflect and refract ideas, rather than an explanation. Easy for me to conjure your voice in response to this – throaty and very deep, a little exotic, always as if you have just disentangled yourself from some fascinating situation. But writing – writing fixes things in ways that undermine the melodies of speech.

I wanted to write to you about the performance of drawing-as-echo because I guess it parallels your own experience of voicing texts.

I am slightly ashamed of my practice of echoing. My clandestine commitment, the rigidity of the drawing, the insistent repetitive labour. As time passes, ever-increasing layers of minutiae and process have been revealed that have tightened the knots even further.

In my studio I have stacks of drawings, transcripts really, of manuscripts, book pages, maps, and diagrams. Often the texts are from obsolete textbooks offering the outlines of theories or technologies that are now redundant. Sometimes the original point of reference no longer exists or the design is incompatible with contemporary material. Yet I think of them as the opposite of wastes. I want them to last forever.

Hand starts here 7.55

When I draw from an appropriated source (it may be copying a book page or drawing from an image), my mind is overflowing with a kind of indistinct lucidity. It has taken a while for me to understand that the communication comes through my hands. I know I mustn't think, that my brain must be emptied, that I must only act. It is pure present tense. Often when I look down I have already covered an area of paper. The thinking makes me falter, so I empty my mind and return to my hands. There are awful moments when I feel I am inching along a precipice, heading towards disaster. If I think too hard, over I go, falling down through the complexity and into the untidy room where there is stillness and silence, and daylight pours on to the drawing.

Love,
Penny

4.

Dear Penny,

I could claim that my absence was deliberate, a theatrical ploy to shine a bright circle of attention on the voice of the reader; that the fact of your speaking for me has focused the relationship between the text and the reader's voice with greater urgency.

But it was by chance that you are left alone here, Penny. A double-booking. Here in Fribourg with Forced Entertainment's *Void Story*; my voice will be:

pitched up to sound like a child's,
down to sound like a man's,
layered with echo for the voice of a ghost,
and reverb for the voice of a fortune teller,
thin with treble for the voice of an old lady,
bass heavy for the voice of a security guard.

Barthes calls reading an act of love. To read is 'to desire the work, is to want to be the work'.¹

I'm not so sure about originality. I feel more pulled towards the marginal, the incidental and compromised. The work I want to *be* is far outside of me (I remember Cindy Sherman saying that she chose for her self-portraits those shots where she did not recognise herself.²

In my work you might think that improvising, with its implication of 'making stuff up', is an opportunity for those 'great vistas of self-expression' you describe. Actually, through all these years, our improvisational games have been perfected for sliding in and out of different selves, for stretching our voices to anything that falls into mind. This is our empty-headed walk along the precipice you describe; a filling up with borrowed voices, borrowed sayings, less giving voice to something original than trying on another voice for size.

For me, reading to an audience raises similar questions around origin and reception. The path you walk now is another way of being with words, both reception and interpretation, a temporary hosting, a thinking out and thinking through, an auditory sketch.

In another symposium, I once had to read out Gertrude Stein's quip that:

Intelligent people, although they talk as if they knew something, are really confusing, because they are, so to speak, keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking.³

Public reading contains this collision of times: a looking back to the hidden time of writing (all edit, revision, stops and starts) and the actual time of reading (a quivering illusion of unity).

In your drawing there is the same collision, the moment of retrieval from past to present.

There was something you said the other day about words fixing things. What if our assimilation, by hand or by voice, renders up the unfixity of words, their temporary and partial fit, their different shaping through hand or mouth?

Love,
Terry

5.

Dear Terry,

I've been thinking about the impulse to copy the text. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it. Elaine Scarry writes how beauty brings copies of itself into being, giving rise to replication again and again.⁴ So a beautiful face glides into the line of vision and is replicated over and over in Leonardo's sketchbooks, and he does the same thing with a rose or a violet or a tree. Wittgenstein speaks not only of beautiful visual events prompting the hand, but also about music prompting a ghostly sub-anatomical event in his teeth and gums. Like biting down on foil.

I have spent a lot of time in archives, both actual and virtual ones. It's an odd lonely activity as much of the time you are talking to ghosts. The best moments are those of discovery, when you come across a scribble or scrap of marginalia, the trace of something was never meant for you to see that seems to bring you closer to the ordinary humanity of the author.

The drawing is a representation – strictly speaking it has no authenticity. If this isn't a contradiction – it may also be that our sense of the value of the original text increases in relation to the value of the time I invest in copying it. That the source material seems more significant, more textured, richer through repetition and close scrutiny. I am drawn to particular source material quite intuitively. It is an act of veneration or love and maybe also a kind of submission. It seems to revolve around the disclosure or desire for something to which I can only get close in this way. There is an intimacy, an intense proximity that is almost clinical.

My drawings focus on the detail of typeface, binding, marks and marginalia. Often I copy something that I can perhaps understand aesthetically but not technically, such as Francis Crick's draft texts for his DNA theory.⁵ I like the frozen traces of marks and scars in the paper. It is a meditation on the life of the artefact, a dialogue between stationary and transient time. For me this is a way of contemplating time, loss and retrieval.

When we last talked I asked you if you think the voice a manifestation of the idea of a soul?

I have considered this when I fake someone's handwriting or drawing style. There is something of soul-sucking about it. Tim Etchells and I talked about the soul delay of jetlag, how distance travel often means that you leave your soul behind like a piece of lost luggage. But I don't really think I have a soul.

Love,
Penny

6.

Dear Penny,

Since we talked about soul I saw a piece by Bruce Nauman in Berlin called *Room with My Soul Left Out, Room That Does Not Care*. Perhaps you know it. I felt that something in the word 'soul', even now, could do a job no other word could do, to suggest the abysmal absence of the room. But like you, I'd find it hard to use this word about any part of myself.

In place of the soul-sucking model of copying you describe, I like the phrase Wordsworth used to describe poetry: 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity'.⁶

The outer shape of some emotion or event is drawn in tranquillity and held aloft, perhaps as invitation.

About disruption: the voice has its own marks and marginalia, its traces and marks and scars, the human slips and stutters, half-utterances that mark private paths of thinking/not thinking behind the act, the event of comprehension, the event of teeth and gums and breath and fear and emotion. The voice has history.

Where did you learn to speak like that?

My voice was tuned away from its previous shapes and sounds in elocution lessons from the age of nine. Sometimes, when tired, I hear my home accent in my voice. I think of friends who've told me about their parents' reversion to the patois of childhood as their engagement with the world shuts down, speaking to people no longer in the room, in a patois that has mostly died in the world, but remains stored in the private, anarchic archive of memory.

Deleuze, after Proust, urges us to 'be like a foreigner within our own language'.⁷

Certain texts, read for an audience have folded into my memory, my language, like foreign bodies incorporated by a host. It may be, as you say, for their Beauty or, to follow Keats, their Beauty and Truth.⁸ Or as you said of the Crick work, because the texts themselves remain only partially understood, a puzzle of language still and difficult to say.

Earlier this year I read for your colleague Becky Shaw in a radio version of her piece *A: The Christmas Party*. We met to discuss how to perform it. The original form is a book, a transcription of encounters between Becky, a care worker, and a woman A, whose language pool had been transformed by Alzheimer's so that she could only really speak in fragments of rhyme and song, repeatedly slicing these into new formations.

Rather than rehearse this reading, we made the broadcast a first encounter for the performers, a sight-reading of the text. It took five hours. It was imperfect, a provisional act, a crash with language like the visits to A.

Do you know of the French documentary filmmaker Dominique Cabrera? She uses the term *être avec*, 'being with', to describe her witnessing of subjects through a de-authorised camera. Sight-reading was our strategy for 'being with' A's words.

You pointed out a photograph of Wolfgang Tillmans' *Anders pulling splinter from his foot* in Saturday's *Guardian*. They say the original statue, *Boy with Thorn*, was one of the first Roman antiquities to be copied. The popular, secondary name for the statue, *Il Fidele*, came from an anecdote that grew around the work: the story of a shepherd boy who had faithfully delivered his message to the Roman Senate, only stopping after its delivery to remove a painful thorn from his foot; a heroic act of word-carrying.

I thought of you in this story.

Where did you learn to draw like that Penny?

Where did you learn to speak like that?

The labour of your pencil, the labour of your voice,

Did it go well?

Here in Fribourg we're playing in the open air, our electronically altered voices drifting up into the crisp Swiss evening to the point of inaudibility.

Love,
Terry

7.

Dear Terry,

You mentioned the hallucination of voices at times of distress. Do you remember the Konstantin Raudive audiotapes of *Electronic Voice Phenomena*, listening for the voices of the dead in radio broadcast interference? *Apophenia*: the spontaneous perception of connections and meaning in seemingly unrelated things. I wonder if that's what we've just done.

It's evening now, a light rain just beginning to fall. I'm in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil.

Over the time we've been talking in this odd, disconnected way, I've been thinking about disembodied voices. How the often scream is represented in visual art, the attempt to render visually something that should be vocalised.

My father once told me about working in Russia in the 1960s and how he always secretly wanted one of the KGB's listening devices. I was only ever able to imagine them as delicate clock-work instruments, I know now that they were often simple glass jars that caught voices and often quite random pieces of conversation.

Elaine Scarry remarks on how often beauty is described as a 'greeting': the presence of beauty reaches out to welcome you.⁹ In Homer's *Odyssey* this greeting is played out as Odysseus hears Nausicaä before he sees her. Her voice is green: mingling with the sound of water rushing through a lush meadow or as it is described 'a meadow starred with flowers'. The greenness of the sound is emphasised when she directs him to safety through her father's meadows and blossoming orchards towards the 'welcome city'.

And thinking of Nausicaä, thinking of voyages, makes me think of the asteroid *192 Nausikaa* to which she gave her name, and from this my thoughts go on to space travel. The *Voyager* spacecraft travelling across a solar system flowered with stars with its recorded message 'Hello from the children of the Earth'.

And now it's late and the stars are coming out. In the sticky darkness of my room I can hear the somehow liquid sounds of a party down the street near your house. When will you be back? Maybe you are here already, listening to the same voices... anyway, I'm going to close here, shut the windows and try to sleep.

With love,
Penny

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes (1987), *Criticism and Truth*, tr. by Katerine Pilcher Keuneman, London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 38–40.
2. Cindy Sherman, 'A Portraitist's Romp Through Art History', in *The New York Times*, February 1990.
3. Gertrude Stein, *Portraits and Repetition in Lectures in America*, Beacon Press: Sussex, 1985.
4. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty*; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 3.
5. Francis Crick Archive, Wellcome Trust, London.
6. William Wordsworth (1798), 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, London: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 2.
7. Gilles Deleuze (1977), *Dialogues II*, tr. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London: Continuum, 2002, p. 4.
8. John Keats (1819 [1820]), 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p.127.
9. Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 26.