



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 11, No 1, July 2021

OTHER UTTERANCES

Transformational possibilities of poetry in performance

Emilie Collyer

*In this paper I examine three recent performance works where poetic language has been extended beyond words to evoke the body in unusual, speculative and potentially transformative ways. The works I will reference are: *The Howling Girls* (2018), an opera by Adena Jacobs and Damien Ricketson; *Speechless* (2019), an opera created by Cat Hope; and a series of participatory performances by Catherine Clover. The works all have in common a goal to push poetic language to extreme or unusual places as a way to explore subjects such as loss, trauma and fear, but also possibility, transformation and renewal. The paper will analyse techniques used by the artists; discuss the impact and effect of the various approaches; and argue for the way performance works are uniquely placed to employ poetic language in this way.*

Keywords: poetry; performance writing; poetic language

What can poetic language that goes 'beyond words' offer as a model for transformation? In this essay I examine three recent performance projects that tease at this question. Analysing aspects of the aural, vocal and visual elements within each piece, I propose that artistic works where utterance is taken beyond, or used to extend, the norms of language have the capacity to provide portals to new ways of understanding and imagining; further, that works in performance are uniquely placed to do this, owing to the active listening and interpreting role that audiences engage in.

Two of the three works are operas: *The Howling Girls* (2018) by Adena Jacobs and Damien Ricketson and *Speechless* (2019) by Cat Hope; the third is a suite of participatory performances based on bird song by Catherine Clover. This essay does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis or critique of these works but rather examines aspects of language and notation employed by the artists and the impact these have on audience. I note that there is a rich history of sound poetry that would also be relevant to this discussion, however my focus in this paper is on these works for performance that are written/composed by an artist for others to perform.

I further note that I did not attend any of these performance works in person. My analysis is based on video footage, audio recordings, and written/visual scores, thus my experience and discussion of these works is one step removed from how performance works are intended to be experienced by

audiences: live and in situ. However, I have had an experience of each work. I have not interviewed any audience members for this essay but draw on my own responses and experiences as a way of elucidating my proposition about the potential for transformational possibilities that each work offers.

The Howling Girls and *Speechless* are in close conversation. Both are operas without words. Both were created in response to traumatic events experienced by young people. Both works, as Susan Stewart writes in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, ‘consider the prelinguistic and extralinguistic dimensions of sound embedded in the language of poetry’ (2002: 60).

Jacobs and Ricketson, in the preamble to *The Howling Girls* on the production’s website, explain that the work emerged from an anecdote about five teenage girls who attended Manhattan hospitals in the weeks after the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks, complaining that they could not swallow, and believing this was because they had debris or body parts from the disaster lodged in their throats. Describing how they moved from this inspiration point to create *The Howling Girls* the artists write: ‘the score itself is a kind of proto-language, an attempt to communicate in a mode beyond the rational: a sensory spectacle to bypass the brain and work directly on the body’. The work is performed by ‘a solitary soprano and a throbbing chorus of young voices together with an immersive orchestration of theremin, keyboards and electroacoustic music’ (Jacobs and Ricketson 2018).

My experience is of hearing a solo voice for a long time, and seeing very little. Sound and vision slowly build in volume and intensity; the soloist gradually appears, a body encased in a covering, lying on a slab; she eventually moves to sitting, to standing, to moving, and is joined by the chorus of young voices and bodies. Together they create extraordinary visual and aural pictures and yet the two (solo woman and chorus of girls) are always separate, as if witness to each other in an unresolved world where a kind of alienation cannot be fully bridged.

This raises the question of relationship and position. Is the solo woman — uttering sounds that build from intimate flickers of tongue, mouth and teeth, through to a slow panting, and then to voiced moans — the source of trauma? Is she a conduit for it? She is — literally — in a body bag; an embodiment of death, a death that is pained and restless. Her body and voice seem to offer an attempt to give shape and sound to something unutterable, the things that the girls have lodged in their throats. As audience member, I do not have a concrete way of understanding the woman’s role, or her relationship with the girls. I place myself somewhere in this process of listening and observing, but not acting. In this way, I play a similar role to those who witnessed, but were remote from, the events of 9/11. Because no assignments are given to the woman or the girls, the audience is invited to participate in this question of who they are, and who we are to them. In written works, language is used as a descriptor to evoke person, place, emotion. In this performance piece, the audience must use signifiers other than words in order to make meaning. This suggests that there is always meaning to be found in situations that exist beyond words, and herein lies transformative possibilities.

In his book *Memoryscopes* Ross Gibson names a particular quality some artworks have, of restlessness in how they:

can activate your imagination by offering to your mind a system of artful imbalances and implied possibilities that are available for patterned completion inside your own imagination

with reference to what you already believe to be tested and true in reality. Memory supports speculation. (2015: 54)

Via the non-language-based utterances, the haunting visual pictures, the relationship in space between the woman, the girls and the audience, *The Howling Girls* provides such an 'artful imbalance'. It opens speculative and transformative possibilities as the audience is compelled to complete their own patterns of imagination and thus create meaning. I am not suggesting that audiences will make new meaning of what happened at 9/11, rather that there is an invitation to understand various kinds of trauma, loss and sorrow in different ways.

The attempt to put some kind of shape around what is unfathomable also lies at the heart of Cat Hope's *Speechless*. Hope describes the work as 'a wordless, animated notation opera intended as a personal response to the 2014 Human Rights Commission report "The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention"' (Hope 2019). The work is performed by '4 soloists, community choir and bass orchestra' (2019). The piece begins with orchestration, creating a state of tensely held sound. The four soloists and the choir enter and from there, are present in various formations throughout, both in body and voice. The soloists each manipulate large pieces of fabric and this, along with the vocal and musical score, creates a space in which questions of boundary, access and power are raised. Questions that I noted while watching include:

Are they held or contained?
Protected or incarcerated?

I am interested in this process of adaptation/translation. Both works take lived experience, as documented either anecdotally (Jacobs and Ricketson) or formally (Hope) and construct a new text. The reason I use the word 'translation' is that both works create something of a new language via the written/visual scores. This language is then interpreted by performers, vocalised, and received by an audience who make their own translation.

I name the language(s) as poetry is because they are utterances. Although the sounds we hear in *The Howling Girls* and *Speechless* are not in a recognisable language, they have about them a quality of speech. The figures who sing and sound them in our presence are trying to articulate something. The language in these works takes place, as Jane Hirshfield suggests poetry does, in a 'border realm where inner and outer, actual and possible, experienced and imaginable, heard and silent, meet' (Hirshfield 2015: 11). Further, it is language that offers newness: 'its seeing is not our usual seeing, its hearing is not our usual hearing, its knowing is not our usual knowing, its will is not our usual will' (11).

In preparing for this essay, I watched the works and made my own notes about the language, as I interpreted it. Thus, I engaged in a further process of translation: trying to capture in written language what was, in both instances, a vast aural world where the usual signifiers of meaning were absent. I often got this 'wrong', by which I mean that, when I compare my language to that which is notated within the scores, the two are vastly different.

For example, the notation for the soprano at the start of *The Howling Girls* is written in the score:

Exhalation Inhalation (Ingressive)

Constrictions: back-throat

(Ricketson 2018)

The notes I make as I begin listening are:

Mouth sounds

Like a whistle but not

Saliva

Like a pant but slow

Long dark still dark

Builds in pace and more varied pitch

Hiss like steam

These two versions of the 'account' are different. They do not 'read' the same. And yet they are part of the process Cole Swensen describes, when writing about translation, as 'a single system, one which also incorporates the writer, translator and reader' (Swensen 2011: 101-102) within which 'no message is ever received precisely as sent' (102). Swensen sees this phenomenon of as rich with potential:

the translation can afford to lose something, and in fact must lose something, for a translation that loses nothing will not gain anything either. If, however, we regard difference not as loss but as augmentation, we can argue that translation is always an additive gesture, a mechanism for gathering increasing meaning to an ever-expanding text. (102-103)

It is in this notion of 'increasing meaning' that I see the potential for transformation in how audiences might experience both of these 'wordless' works.

For my part, I engaged in a cerebral process whereby I 'invented' words in order to capture what I heard. I had to admit to the limits of the everyday language I use and rather than step away from this problem, try to move towards it and stay with it. The process demanded that I destabilise my understanding of language and, in doing so, keep alive the awareness that all language and the meaning we make of it is unstable and therefore open to new interpretations and modes.

In my notating of *The Howling Girls*, I tried to capture what I was seeing and hearing in much the same way I would do with any performance work I was watching with an aim to write about it. These extracts are from early on:

Ohoh eh

Ohoh ohoh oh eh

Ah

Ee

Unison

Echo

She rises
 Slowly
 AhooooAh
 Reverb
 Cry
 Breath
 Chorus
 Eeeeyeeee

These, from later in the show, where the vowel sounds have developed into something more like an uttered language, shaped by consonants:

Ba ooh
 Lowra laokey
 Eloelloo
 Unison
 Something like a hymn
 They float in black space
 They are ulneeNek
 Her voice
 Something like a hymn
 Etonbawa
 Stickuw
 Lowra

I am trying to make sense of something nonsensical, but this does not mean my experience of the work lacks meaning. Swensen writes of how we limit the paths of texts ‘by our fetish for semantic meaning’ (2011: 105) and that we have a tendency to ‘consider a text as meaning couched in sound, and not the other way around and not an equal collaboration of the two’ (105).

The sound-based texts of *The Howling Girls* and *Speechless* disturb and broaden the function of mimesis within sung/spoken performance works. Typically, as Bruce Andrews notes, “‘mimesis’ feeds off the ‘content’ side of sound’ (Andrews 1998: 80). That is, the listener, or audience, makes sense of what the artist is constructing, and the performers uttering, by language, often narrative-based. Where words are absent, the audience is thrust into a more open and actively interpretive role, engaging in ‘a self-analytical noise that can develop its possibilities of social framing within itself (on behalf of the reader/listener)’ rather than having imposed on them ‘some externalized social wilfullness’ (80). By offering performance texts where there is no discernible semantic meaning and where mimesis is an open gesture, creators such as Jacobs, Ricketson and Hope offer new possibilities for what texts can do.

Hope takes this open gesture further via her technique of visual scoring whereby she uses a combination of graphic notation and written prompts as the basis for her performance works. The scores can be placed within a lineage of writers experimenting with how poems and scripts are presented visually on a page. Russian poet Ilia Zdanevich (known as Iliazd) created a series of

dramatic scripts in the early 20th century where he used his skill as a typographer to create unique visual versions of his works. Johanna Drucker, in writing about Iliazd notes that he ‘was clearly convinced that the page is a space of performance’ (Drucker 1998: 139) and that ‘the visual quality of the typographic work had become a performance in its own right, meant to impact the eye through the expressive effect of the page’ (139). I don’t know that Hope would name her graphic notation process as poetic but the score of *Speechless* absolutely impacts the eye and works as its own performance. I read it as poetry, thus expanding what I see as possible within the form.

There is also an overt gesture towards destabilising hierarchies of language and expertise in Hope’s scoring technique, as scholar Kate B Milligan observes: ‘In the absence of a traditional libretto, Hope avoids the semiotic medium in which structural imbalances are so often perpetuated and reinforced: language (Milligan 2019: 17).

I cite here samples of ‘instructions’ to the vocalists in *Speechless*. The font size and type also vary, indicated here by (my assigned) font size:

erie; as if from

nowhere

Free Improvised Screams

ghost like, solos (each take one)

All Voices

Soloists

Fragile

until your breath runs out

(Hope 2019)

These are remarkably open offers that give significant agency to the vocalists (similar notation is also provided for the musicians). Milligan notes that this openness is a deliberate strategy on the part of Hope in how she ‘recognises a need to subvert the traditional position of the composer as superior to other bodies involved in a musical experience’ (Milligan 2019: 22). In reflecting on the development of this unique form of graphic notation, Hope refers to it as ‘a tool for freedom and accessibility’ that ‘is inherently inclusive for musicians of every genre’ (23). Milligan concludes that *Speechless* acts as an example by which artworks can function as ‘an appropriate political metaphor for the enablement of plural subjugated voices, as they are lifted up and simultaneously legitimised in this act’ (22).

To this point, neither Jacobs and Ricketson nor Hope are making verbatim theatre. Nor are they devising works with community members who have experienced trauma. They are taking accounts of trauma and re-imagining these into poetic form which then allows audiences to engage in a range of ways: interpretive, cerebral, visceral and emotional.

In this way the works dwell in the poetic territory of what Hazel Smith refers to as ‘afterimage’ poems,

where:

an afterimage is an image that continues to appear in one's vision after the exposure to the original image has ceased ... an overhang or delay, an involuntary trace from the past that nevertheless presents the possibility of transformation in the present. (Smith 2013: 306)

Most people have a visual memory of 9/11. Jacobs and Ricketson add to the framing with the anecdote about the teenage girls. Similarly, with Hope's work, many people have seen images of children in detention. The losses of these events do not belong personally to the makers of the works. Perhaps this is why they are made and uttered beyond language. The makers do not claim positionality of having experienced these losses; the works function, rather, as witnesses and holders. They are a way to try and account for the resonating impacts of such massive losses: how does humanity hold them, how do we, as individuals, make sense of them?

As to whether the existence of the works leads to any direct social or political action, that cannot be answered in this essay. However, it can be acknowledged that awakening a sense of political agency in audiences, and in what artworks can speak to, is an overt aim for Hope, as she describes the work as a 'homage to persons rendered speechless through political means' (Hope 2019). Milligan concurs, writing that by 'blurring a multiplicity of voices, or identities, Hope steps beyond the barrier of difference between identities, and acknowledges the connectedness of the collective human experience' (Milligan 2019: 17).

Although my experience of engaging with the performances of both works was limited to video, I found both had a significant visceral impact, affecting my breathing and the way I was holding my body while watching. There was a sense of having inhaled, to contemplate and spend time with a particular sequence of sounds and images, and then exhaled. But nothing is resolved. Instead, the works function as an offer about irresolution, fulfilling one of Hirshfield's criteria for poetic language whereby 'the last thing language must know before the day's work begins is the burr of discomfort' (Hirshfield 2015: 44).

What comes next, I found myself asking, for the figures I had encountered in the works? Not only that, but what might come next for me? The fact that neither work explains itself easily means I am left with that task. Every audience member would be similarly charged, to make their own meaning of the work. As Hirshfield notes: 'it is by suffering's presence that we know there is something we need to address' (45). The evocation of suffering and struggle in these works, transmitted via sound, breath and gesture, but without narrative explanation or resolution, functions as a small provocation towards transformation.

Encountering these works, audiences encounter unfamiliarity. I propose that this can act as an exemplar of how we might encounter unfamiliar languages and stories more broadly; how we might stay with, and navigate strangeness and difficulty. The works also remind us that in any encounter there will be multiple interpretations and perspectives. Jacobs talks here, in conversation with sound artist Roslyn Oades, about both audience perception and her own shifting sense of *The Howling Girls*:

Some people read it as utopian and some read it as a kind of entrance into death, or sort of an annihilation of some kind. And I sit between all of those things.

When we first made it, I saw it as a kind of fantasy or a speculative future where they were imagining their way out of it. And then a year later, when I watched it, I thought, oh, no, it's not a fantasy. This is right. And then it felt like a clearer political gesture second time around.

I don't know how I actually read it myself. (Oades 2021)

This turning over of the work, reflecting on what it holds and what it 'does', resonates with Smith's concept of afterimaging: 'the active rearranging of the past through memory, the interconnection and reinterpretation of a multiplicity of traces' (Smith 2013: 314) and in this process as 'a kind of archival and cultural scavenging' (314).

In other words, by attending to the past, to multiplicity and interconnectedness and reimagining, artists such as Jacobs, Ricketson and Hope provoke the questions: who are we — how did we get here — and further — who do we want to become?

Questions of becoming and transformation are woven into Catherine Clover's various performance and participatory projects that draw on birdsong. Clover writes here about her project 'Guyup-Guyup: Scores for Eight Songbirds Cycle Two' as part of Posthuman PUBLICS 2020 with Woi wurrung translation by Auntie Gail Smith, in which she notated the songs of four native Australian and four introduced songbirds, presented as both an exhibition and performance at Yarra Sculpture Gallery in the suburb of North Fitzroy (Melbourne):

The eight scores that make up the artwork consider the vocal meeting point and communicative interruptions that both groups of birds may have experienced during 1860s Australia. They consider the devastating impact of colonisation from a posthuman point of view and how colonisation not only decimated Indigenous life in Australia through forced assimilation processes, but how it affected all species. (Clover 2019: 3)

Clover reflects on the speculative nature of the project, how it invites consideration of the many ways in which transformations take place:

As the introduced birds would have worked to find their sonic niche — the frequency or bandwidth at which their sounds can be received and transmitted — their voices would have threaded their way through the local biophony causing ripples of sonic change, adding birdsong frequencies previously unheard in this place, on this continent. (3)

Present too, is reflection on the negative aspects of transformation as enacted and experienced by colonisation, both the mass loss of life and also the devastating loss of language:

Wurundjeri Elder Auntie Gail Smith provides me with the names of the native birds in Woi wurrung, her mother tongue and the original language of her country now known as Melbourne. Auntie Gail is able to give me four words, three are specific bird names, Barrawarn, Dit-Dit and Yan-Guk, and the fourth word, Guyup-Guyup, is a general word for all

bird species. She does not know one of the bird names, the word for Little Raven, and cannot find a translation, illustrating the loss from which so many Aboriginal Australian languages have suffered through colonial eradication practices. (2)

It is evident how much care Clover takes with her decision-making processes, her development and curation. She provokes reflection about positionality and situatedness. I consider how, as a non-Indigenous person who has lived my whole life in Melbourne, I do not know any Woi wurrung language; as a settler, with Anglo-Germanic roots, I am part of the history of ‘communicative interruptions’ and ‘forced assimilations’ Clover writes about. With her close attention, and selection of native and introduced bird species, she expands my awareness. In her book *Unruly Visions: the Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Gayatri Gopinath, citing Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E Milton, notes that ‘the root meaning of the word “curate” is “caring for”’ (Gopinath 2018: 4) and goes on, in regards to her own process, to ‘suggest that the “caring for” the past that is at the root of curation can take the form of carefully attending to aesthetic practices through writing’ (4). Clover is offering a unique contribution to such aesthetic practices via her written scores.

I read the eight scores for this work, provided to me by Clover. There is a profound, child-like joy in reading these aloud. Letters, formed into word shapes, are marked on the page. Clover employs white space, punctuation, line breaks and formatting to create a unique visual poetry which doubles as verbal poetry that sits somewhere between rhyme, incantation and song. These scores/poems, that may look, to some eyes, bizarre on the page, provide a remarkably ‘workable’ guide to utterance.

Dit-Dit (Magpie-Lark):

trrrrt-trrrrt trrrrt-trrrrt
trrrrt-trrrrt trrrrt-trrrrt trrrrt-trrrrt trrrrt-trrrrt
trrrrt-trrrrt trrrrt-trrrrt

The text looks deceptively monotonous and yet, when uttered, following the rhythms of the line breaks and white space, a sense of speaking something like a bird call is immediate and palpable. There is a transformative aspect to this activity: getting one’s mouth around sounds that are unfamiliar to us as a way uttering and communicating, yet also deeply familiar as versions of sounds we are accustomed to hearing.

As Clover points out, her method is not one of translation but of ‘homophonic transcription’ (3). The technique is ‘inspired by the phonetic words that naturalists use in bird field guides’ (3). There is also no attempt on the part of the artist to ascribe meaning to the sounds. Susan Stewart points out the urge for humans to seek for meaning in poetry: ‘sounds in nature will be framed for human listeners by human expectations. Robert Frost, in “The Oven Bird,” reminds us vividly that we hear even bird songs in terms of human phonemes — the robin’s “cheer, cheer, cheer”’ (Stewart 2002: 79).

Clover is striving for something different in her projects. They are not attempts to describe or situate humans within nature, or even to imagine the voice or thought processes of an animal. They are, for the most part, an act of imitation. The framing is usually a local, lived context in regards to where the project is situated. The act of reading and sounding is framed as just that. In viewing some of

Clover's videos where she works with non-performers in a workshop or participatory setting, she does not use language such as 'imagine being a bird'. She simply asks people to read aloud the 'words' they see on their score, in whatever way that makes sense to them.

In 'Pigeon Choir' (2020), Clover gathers with participants at the Brooklyn Arts Hotel in Fitzroy, Melbourne, just before its sale to a new, private owner. In her verbal introduction, she talks about the ubiquity of pigeons, wonders about the reputation they have (perhaps unfairly) earned as 'pests' and then frames the event as one to transition the building from one state to another; a way of marking transformation and, to an extent, loss.

It is a beautiful video to watch. The people gathered are ordinary folk, not performers. They are given guidance by Clover and then all join in a short, choral work, each person reading from a small card where the scores (a variety of a few) are written. These ordinary folk become performers for and with each other. They each react and perform differently. They are variously earnest, giggling, embarrassed, serious and keen. The performance is short. They are not expected to 'become other' for very long. The spontaneity of the action and the genuine immediacy of emotions and physical gesture, body language and vocal qualities produced makes for a remarkably compelling and moving few moments. The group does indeed sound something like a gathering of cooing pigeons. The work brings to mind questions around why birds gather and where; what does it mean for birds to be in cities; how do they respond when their adopted homes are moved, destroyed or repurposed? The result is a strange, brief communion between human and bird but also between individual and group.

The invitation itself contains transformative possibilities. It echoes something of this definition from Iris Marion Young (quoted here by Joy Wallace) of a society as "a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense" (Wallace 2013: 374). The participants who gather for Clover's works are often strangers to each other. And certainly they are strangers to the birds whose calls they imitate. The act of coming together, of being with, of making language strange, in communion, provides an experience whereby new ways to be together are posited. Decentring, or at least problematising the notion of humans as the centre of experience, are part of this offer.

Clover's works speak to notions of posthumanism and ethical questions about the more-than-human entities with whom humans share the world. Rosi Braidotti defines posthumanism as 'a working hypothesis about the kind of subjects we are becoming' (Braidotti 2019: 2). There is that word again: becoming. I am not suggesting that a project such as Clover's is about humans 'becoming' birds. Rather, the act of reading and uttering something that is both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time may contribute to a greater articulation and awareness of what language is and how we use it to communicate and to understand. Clover's participatory performances evoke enjoyment. People take pleasure in 'recognising' the sounds that 'look' unfamiliar. At a very basic level, this action reminds us we do share the planet with other creatures and entities, the majority of which do not share our language. How then, should we, or can we communicate?

Braidotti writes:

Posthuman thinking is a relational activity that occurs by composing points of contact with a

myriad of elements within the complex multiplicity of each subject and across multiple other subjects situated in the world. Thinking takes the form of cartographic renderings of embedded and embodied relational encounters. (123)

Clover's provocation is simple but effective in composing new points of contact with a myriad of elements. It meets Braidotti's exhortation to approach posthumanism 'as an experiment and ensure that it becomes the focus of public discussions, collective decision-making processes and joint actions' (44). A further key element of posthumanism Braidotti identifies is to challenge 'the binary distinctions between nature and culture, humans and non-human have been foundational for European thought since the Enlightenment' (Braidotti 2020) and to look instead to 'indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, postcolonial and decolonial thought and African philosophy', many of which 'pose a "multinatural" continuum across all species, all of which partake of a distributed idea of humanity' (2020).

That poetry such as Clover's can play a modest role in this ambitious project is suggested by some of Cole Swensen's accounting of research into the 'neuroscience of aesthetics' (Swensen 2011: 110) as it relates to the impact engaging with arts has on the brain. Swensen speculates that poetry in all its facets (writing, reading, reciting, memorising) 'may help the brain carry out a wide range of functions, from recognizing patterns, managing balance, and dealing creatively with imbalance to coming to terms with time' (110). It is, equally, purely speculative to wonder about the impacts on the brain of reading, sounding and listening to Clover's transcribed birdsongs, but similar functional benefits may well apply. Engaging with such poetic texts may offer transformational possibilities not just for how humans perceive our relationship with non-humans, but how we perceive and nurture relationships with ourselves and each other.

Each of these three projects, by Jacobs and Ricketson, Hope, and Clover, are constituted by paying close and careful attention to both the limitations and possibilities of language. Susan Stewart contends that poetic form offers a particularly open relationship between poet and reader because the 'effects of meaning ... cannot be taken up completely in any single moment of reception' (Stewart 2002: 12).

For audiences experiencing these performance works live there is, in a literal sense, a single moment of reception. Where archival material can be accessed, it is possible to revisit works (as I have done) but performances themselves are 'one-off'. This creates a unique relationship between maker and audience. The openness of poetic form, Stewart argues, is made most meaningful by the fact that it is ultimately presented as a closed artwork, in which dwells the 'task of recognition in the light of the other. The poet *intends* toward another' (12); and further, that 'the poet speaks to another in such a way as to make the communication intelligible to more than one person. The communication is not simply intimate: it is constitutive of the social, mutual, intersubjective ground of intimacy itself' (12-13).

I would argue that the offer from artists in making performance works is even more open than with written texts because the 'effects of meaning' are received in such a fleeting manner. The audience has just that limited time and space within which to forge an initial meaning. This of course then continues to evolve as a memory, an association. It is in this ongoingness, in the absence of the

original work, that audiences play an active role in participating in the openness of the poetic offer. They carry its meaning forward.

As for how this manifests as transformation in the world, I agree with editors Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel who write in the introduction to their book *We Want it All: An Anthology of Radical Transpoetics* that expectations are best kept modest: 'We don't hold that poetry is a form of, or replaces, political action' (2020: 2). The question of what poetry can or should 'do' is perennial, as articulated in Auden's oft-quoted line from 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats': 'For poetry makes nothing happen' (1977: 241). And yet, he reiterates twice in the same stanza: 'it survives'. There may be something salutary here in the kind of transformations that are suggested via the three projects under discussion in this paper. That it is in the adaptive 'survival' of poetry, in projects 'that attempt a continual and creative rediscovery of their own arrangement, language, composition, and collaboration' (Abi-Karam and Gabriel 2020: 4) where new ways of making language and therefore identity — and being with others — are turned over, teased out, observed and suggested.

In this essay I have attempted to articulate my personal experience of engaging with these three projects, where poetic language is stretched beyond many of its usual boundaries. I hope I have conveyed something of the transformative possibilities I found via this engagement. It is my assertion that encountering poetic language in this way can contribute to how we as individuals and as societies may speculate, imagine, and even move towards cognitive, emotional, social and political transformations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emilie Collyer

Emilie Collyer lives on Wurundjeri land, where she writes across and between poetry, plays and prose. Her writing has appeared most recently in *The Blue Nib*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Rabbit*, *TEXT*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Imagined Theatres*, *Witness Performance* and *Cordite*. She received a 2020 Varuna Publication Introduction Fellowship with Giramondo Publishing. Award-winning and nominated plays include *Super Perfect*, *Contest*, *Dream Home* and *The Good Girl*. Emilie also works as a dramaturg and text consultant. She is a PhD candidate in creative writing at RMIT, researching feminist creative practice.

URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-11-no-1-jul-2021/other-utterances>

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Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973