

My Lazy Laboratory

2021 JANUARY BY SOPHIE SEITA

Sophie Seita is an artist and academic working with text, sound and translation on the page, in performance and other media. Sophie led ‘Rupert Reading Session #3: Sophie Seita ‘Reading with Material’’. More information [here](#). In this text, Sophie writes about knowing as an experimental practice that is situated and relational and how knowledge, understood in this way, is configured by responsibility and interdependence.

glide

I want a lazy laboratory. I want an abstract space and concrete place for experiment without yet knowing where I’ll end up. In many ways that’s the very definition of experiment, from the Latin *experior*, to attempt but also ‘to experience’. An experiment can in itself be an experience, rather than just a conduit for it.

But in writing, in art, in relationships, even Experiment is her own little bureaucrat. And for someone living in fear of its actualisation, laziness has the appeal of diving with sharks. You can be enamoured with the idea of languor but not with its practice. Say, you’re on holiday somewhere sunny and humid and when you ask the owner of your little guest house what there is to do apart from going to the beach, he says: not much; just relax; feel the heat. You might reasonably or not so reasonably panic.

So sometimes you just land somewhere. You find yourself in a place that falls *into* place. Falling into place is an action that requires acceptance. A downward gesture, a drop into cushions, a sound of soft suction, like drawing an imaginary line down your windpipe; or the pleasure when things fit, when the deck of cards glides into its case or a sliding drawer clicks shut.

laziness in a new key

A couple of years ago, I began to fantasise about an alternative school in the form of a lazy laboratory, a languorous salon, in which ‘menopausal she-dandies’ (Lisa Robertson) and ‘feminist killjoys’ (Sara Ahmed) could ‘teach [us] to transgress’ (bell hooks). What would we transgress? — our imbibed desire for order, clear directions, strong work ethic, rigour, and individual genius. Instead, we’d celebrate collaboration, listening, care, and play—of variable rhythms, meandering directions, loops, and returns.

Let me present to you my pitch, my melodic invitation to tune in.

In the laboratory, we would practise a kind of doing that is about responsiveness and openness, about tuning in as a state of being attentive. We would query our impatience and welcome sleepiness, not to discredit the fiery rush of restlessness or the kick of precision but to expand our emotional palette, our vocal range, for thinking and making. As creative practitioners, we often have to justify what we do, be legible, find labels for our practice. In a cultural moment in which we’re under the regime of excessive celebration of self-image, of daily documentation, of either stark or faux-nonchalant professionalism, we might want to get stuck a little, be a little confused, even delirious, like when we’re sick. Give our eyes some soft focus. In a languorous state, we take pleasure in dreaming, inactivity; we let things happen, which is necessary for collaboration and experimentation. Laziness and languor etymologically signal exhaustion, weakness, faintness. So a lazy eye, a sluggish movement, might offer a different organising principle for the body. Sometimes your body doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to and sometimes you actively resist what it means for something to ‘work’. For that not-working to work we need others in the room. We sometimes wouldn’t know what to do, what to say, but we would be reassured by the poet Nisha Ramayya’s invitation to ‘not know together’. We would drum along to Raphael Sbrzesny’s teaching style in the form of a ‘polyphonic studio’, a term he borrows from German theatre scholars David Roesner and Clemens Risi for non-hierarchical co-creation. Polyphony recognises difference. It’s several voices coming together, harmonically interdependent.

I have experimented with some of the above ideas in a number of practice-based workshops, sometimes under the rubric of ‘Reading with Material’. These workshops were driven by a recent inspiration (Pauline Oliveros) and a long-term inspiration (the singing method I learnt at the Lichtenberger® Institute of Applied Physiology of the Voice in Germany), and were focused on movement, writing, and some simple voice work.

Here are some of my questions and prompts:

Voice exercise 1: Imagine your tongue is a dolphin. Your nervous system will know what to do with that image. It will translate it. Now speak or sing or hum with that image in mind.

Voice exercise 2: Remapping organs. Walk around the room and imagine your feet have ears. The larynx and the ears are twins; both vibrate at high frequencies. Can you imagine your larynx with ears? Do the ears have a larynx? Can your ears give up a habit?

‘The ear is a faithful collector of all sounds that can be gathered within its limits of frequency and amplitude. Sounds beyond the limits of the ear may be gathered by other sensory systems of the body.’ (Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, p. 19)

Movement or voice prompt 3: The tongue, the tips of our fingertips, and the soles of our feet have a tendency to become soft. All sensory organs want to experience softness. There are floral principles in the receptors of our finger tips. Now allow these receptors to be oriented towards resonance, towards vibration. The vocal chords have a similar sensitivity to our fingertips. Can they have an encounter that resembles the receptivity of our sensory organs, a sort of self-touch? Our habits and our drive towards discipline and achievement limit our sensory awareness, bodily experiences and expressions of ease. Instead, let’s ask ourselves: What happens when nothing happens?

pliable

In each of these exercises, I asked myself and the participants to observe the experiment with curiosity, free from judgement.

I also invited participants to bring a material and to explore that material's characteristics, its textures, what response it asks of us.

Here's Anni Albers in *On Weaving*:

'Concrete substances and also colors per se, words, tones, volume, space, motion — these constitute raw material; and here we still have to add that to which our sense of touch responds — the surface quality of matter and its consistency and structure. The very fact that terms for these tactile experiences are missing is significant.' (chapter on 'Tactile Sensibility', in *On Weaving* (Middletown/CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965; repr., London: Studio Vista, 1974), p. 45)

What adjectives would we use for our material? Is it chewy, bendable, pliable, or wiry, or perhaps brittle, or permeable; is the surface burnished or grainy or dull? Suddenly we're in the realm of poetry. What kind of knowledge can this encounter, this touch produce?

In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Sedgwick suggests:

'To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?' (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 13).

To touch is to perform, to trouble what it is that we do, but it also sets up a relation, a dialogue, with someone or something:

'to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object' (p. 14).

For Sedgwick, feeling can be grasped, in both senses of that word: physiologically and intellectually. Touch is thus something we can actively do. As such, it's connected to agency.

One of the materials I've worked with in workshops is clay, playdough, which appeals to me for its easy pliability. If writing were

playdough, then... then we could see where that too-easy metaphor would take me by trying it with our hands; by getting little bits of green-red-yellow dough under our nails, as evidence of some material engagement; a sticky trace of a sticky process. “Think of a sticky object; what it picks up on its surface ‘shows’ where it has traveled and what it has come into contact with” (Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 40).

All these exercises were about the capacity to receive, to let the body respond and self-organise, to imagine what’s possible, to not-know and not-plan the experience in advance.

not planning

In 2018, I attended an artist workshop on ‘not planning’ at the Southbank Centre, funded by the Live Art Development Agency, and organised by the late Katherine Araniello (who harnessed humour in her engagements with disability, agency, and queerness), and Teresa Albor (who connects feminism and questions around ageism in her work). Nothing was planned, or hardly anything, and so I and the other artists and workshop leaders practised and performed our not-planning, spontaneously, irreverently, comfortably, for ourselves and for the public, as part of Unlimited, the Southbank’s Festival celebrating the work of disabled artists. Before the workshop, my control freak heart couldn’t quite imagine how such a weekend would ‘work’. Well, it worked, precisely because we didn’t work hard, and had permission not to.

The week following the workshop, I attended a voice seminar at the Lichtenberger® Institute in Germany on the concept of hysteresis. In physics, engineering, and biology, hysteresis describes a state of belatedness when something has an effect *after* we expect it, and possibly not where or how we expected it. It’s an effect that retains potency long after the cause, to the extent that the cause becomes untraceable. We were asked to apply this concept of lag to singing and learning. Systems with hysteresis are nonlinear. You see where I’m going with this. For our voice to function healthily we cannot

over-plan. Our nervous system reacts much better to stimuli that are playful, that induce rest rather than tension. The singing method I learned—which I now also consider a much broader pedagogical method—is about openness, patience, responsiveness, and resisting the urge to do something quickly and reaching a particular ‘goal’.

folding

Artists can often become overly goal-oriented, and as such, like athletes, unstoppable, tireless, competitive. An effective piece of advice you might give the artist-as-athlete: become the best at resting.

In January of this year, I went to a class at Movement Research intriguingly titled the Athletics of Intimacy, with the dancer K.J. Holmes. What was athletic about the class was the rigorous dedication and discipline in letting go. A discipline of discovery. We became disciples of slowness.

To be moved and touched by strangers in dance demands and bestows trust. It felt gentle and soothing. My body became material. The class focused on improvised movement with K.J.’s prompts as invitations for internal physiological experiences rather than external athletic demonstrations.

These kinds of exercises and somatic experiments rubbed something in for me, namely that touch *is* knowledge—a non-linguistic form of knowing. It’s a physiological toolkit that you can learn through your body.

One prompt was to allow our body parts to move like magnets. A play with resistance for which we occasionally turned up the volume. You move the other’s body and let the other’s body move you.

What are the support structures that allow you to rest? The dancers became my support structure following a tiny panic earlier that day. Small panics can accumulate in your body. And the skin tightens and reddens; the lung collapses. One singing prompt given during a seminar at the Lichtenberger® Institute was to imagine the collapsing lung. A fellow singer panicked. At the time, I did not see the threat

that the collapsing lung posed. I understand it now, but I also sense the promised liberation when we let systems collapse, when we surrender to an image or an idea that your body translates. A paradoxical freedom emerges when we let go of all that holding. That holding onto. Which gets under your skin.

‘MAKE IT PITHY’, proposed K.J. Holmes, in another prompt for movement.

The pith is the spongy white tissue of the orange, the bit under the skin. You have to get under the surface to be pithy, that is, to be concise in your expression. But pith is never pithy. An orange pith in its spread of interlocking parts of tissue is always excess. Surfeit. Abundance.

The theme of this movement class was wandering. I wanted to get lost in the wandering of my thoughts and I wondered how the wall and ground could support my wandering. How could other bodies?

Or did I want to interrupt, intersect their path? Follow a path and then bend away from it before a possible collusion. Like a tangent.

*

And, of course, despite or amidst all this magnificent malleability, you sometimes get stuck. You fall out of place. You find that things don’t fit. Perhaps something is jabbing out, is askew, is wobbly, slant, careening. And then you do or don’t realise that this is where the learning takes place. When the foundations are a little shaky.

*

If I had to picture the lazy laboratory, my idea of collaboration, as a room, it would look like this:

My collaboration is an attic with a big window seat with seats for innumerable bodies and with cushions with flowery patterns and bobbles and tassels. My collaboration is a room full of soft furnishings for lounging, for following the languorous trails of our thoughts, for fumbling, for movements without fear of edges. There

will be no sharp edges. No cold corners for a corner can be turned. My collaboration is a miniature paper theatre with paper clothes and paper tea cups and paper beds and paper lanterns, easily made with our hands. In my collaboration there is never a shortage of paper. My collaboration is a disco ball full of language, a bathtub full of language, a fridge full of language, and my collaboration is a room that vibrates with the molecules that are ideas that are invisible, but perceptible, when you listen carefully, when you feel into your feet. My collaboration has underlying pipes that give it structure, history, a past. My collaboration is one gigantic veranda swing, always in motion, or always already containing the possibility of motion. This swing, which is my collaboration, is airy and the air on my skin is the same that blows through the window in the attic, through the chimney, the pipes, the paper... A polyphony of objects, of bodies, that loll around, with language.