

field:

a free journal for architecture

PRINT ISSN: 2753-3638
ONLINE ISSN: 1755-0068
www.field-journal.org
vol.10(1)

WHEN WORDS DON'T WORK: NOTES ON PERFORMING THE UNTRANSLATABLE

Julieanna Preston

ABSTRACT

This essay delves into communication outside of spoken or written language between various material bodies in the context of five live art performances I created between 2011 and 2020 as part of a long-term project focused on apprehensions and interactions with other-than-human material bodies. The essay recollects German artist Joseph Beuys' performance work *How to Explain a Picture to a Dead Hare* (1965) to find synergies between that performance and my own performance practice; ultimately to expand what it is to converse with materials. As a response to this journal issue's theme regarding acts of translation within creative practice research, *When Words Don't Work* questions the value of explanation — a form of translation — to advocate for intuition, subjectivity, and sensation in the use of small gestures, body movements, and vocal tones to replace the reason and legibility associated with textual exposition.

UNDERPINNINGS

In 1965, German artist Joseph Beuys performed *How to Explain a Picture to a Dead Hare* at the Galerie Schmela in Dusseldorf, Germany. As his first solo show, an audience, locked out and watching from a shop window, witnessed Beuys circumnavigate the gallery while elaborating on each of his drawings and watercolours with hand gestures and inaudible whispers to the deceased animal cradled in his arms. The only sound the audience could hear was the percussive tap of a steel plate attached to the bottom of his right shoe, out of step with the muffled shuffle of the felt on his left shoe. Three hours later, the audience was allowed to enter the gallery where they found Beuys seated stoically on a stool like a statue, his back to them, and his head surfaced in gold leaf laden with honey. The hare was laid across his lap, a scene that critics would liken to the Madonna in a pietà.¹

Known for his use of unorthodox materials to contest the conventions of what constituted art at the time, Beuys used shamanism more as a form of activism than for spiritual transcendence and, according to some, for theatricality.² Each material played a vital role in his performance: the honey on his face enacted the creative power of bees linked to the production of ideas; the felt symbolised warmth; the gold leaf referenced the sun and higher levels of consciousness. The most prominent and contentious material, the dead hare, was thought to reference the love goddess Aphrodite, women, birth, menstruation, resurrection, and incarnation.³ In post-performance interviews, Beuys spoke to the value of finding a different relation to the world and one's self in performative actions involving material realities such as animals and art works.⁴ Key to my essay is Beuys' 'efforts to expand the human potential for thought and expression beyond the rational, so as to "communicate" (on some level) with the hare'.⁵ Specific to this performance, he is credited as saying:

Even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality. Human thinking was capable of achieving so much, but it could also be intellectualized to a deadly degree, and remain dead, and express its deadliness in the political and pedagogical fields.⁶

This statement urges me to consider that Beuys employed the dead hare as a prop to wage a critique on the deadness of art, art criticism, and the intellect that was used to keep it exclusive, tame, and passive; in his terms, the core problem with art education. I imagine that Beuys' audacious message might have been lost on the audience who, infuriated by being deprived access to the performance and denied the attention assumed due to them as 'paying' spectators, were distracted by the hare and all the other spectacle-like aspects of the performance. Considering all of the facets of the situation, I imagine that the hare was the first audience to this spoken word performance, perhaps better described as a performative lecture to an array of carefully selected materials heavily steeped in symbolic meaning in the gallery. While the subject of the performance's critique and the lecture's lesson, the onlooking human audience were secondary to the close interactions between the artist and the hare. This speculation will prove important in the later discussion of my own performance works.

At the time of Beuys' performance, I was only five years old and living on the other side of the world in the Philippines. This 1965 work by Beuys demonstrates all the hallmark traits of his practice at the time as socio-political performances shaping a critique against the Berlin Wall, American consumerism, and nuclear power.⁷ I would not learn of this until much later in 1991 when reading his book *Energy Plan for the Western Man* (1991). I watched with curiosity and awe at the way he wielded his art practice simultaneously alongside his academic position as Professor of Monumental Sculpture at the Düsseldorf

1. Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys* (Phaidon Focus, 2014), p. 35.

2. Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 62.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Balzac Takac, 'Joseph Beuys and How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare', *Artsper*, 14 March 2025 <<https://blog.artsper.com/en/a-closer-look/how-to-explain-pictures-to-a-dead-hare-joseph-beuys/>> [accessed 18 December 2023].

7. Joseph Beuys and Carin Kuoni, *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991).

Academy of Art. Every protest was an art work, every drawing was a teaching moment, and every speaking opportunity was a public show that challenged the academy's sanctity as an elitist authoritarian ivory tower. His was a practice deeply set against the materialism associated with Marxism; he waged his protest with the aid of materials linked to history, earth, and culture and with the belief that anyone had the capacity to be an artist. Even with above-average German language speaking and reading skills, I relied heavily on subtitled videos and book translations to make sense of Beuys' lectures. His postures, gestures, facial expressions, and elocutions lured me into to the cult of his thoughts, philosophy, and charisma. How I wish that I was involved in his student protests. I grew enamoured by his notorious and trance-inducing lectures, especially those in 1972 that produced *Four Blackboards*: chalk drawings which vigorously communicate without much definitive reason or legibility. Like giant complex doodles created almost unconsciously in the space-time of conversation, they made sense but didn't. I was a groupie from afar, in the safe comfort of an American middle-class suburban family, soon to launch into the study of architecture, and stirred by the radicalness of transforming the world with art. Like many I was left with the traces, myths, and residue of Beuys' live performances to understand their affect, ethics, and agency.

THE HOW OF IT

The performance title *How to Explain a Picture to a Dead Hare* is revealing. 'How' signals instruction, a method, a way forward — a clear reference to pedagogy directed by Beuys' vision for radical social transformation. 'Explain' is a bit more complicated because its pedestrian meaning suggests that everything, maybe even the truth, will be laid bare. I understand Beuys' use of this word to be ironic given that he advocated for using creative instincts and intuition to understand a work of art through a cultural, social, and political lens. The word justifies and makes clear at the expense of the beauty, the expansiveness of multiple associations, the possibility of getting lost, and of serendipity. For Beuys, explaining a work of art would have denied the freedom and responsibility humans have to make art and art's role to be a liberating agent from capitalism and other ills of society. Following his thought, I consider explanation as an action that short circuits the generative wondering that follows a sensorial apprehension incited by a plethora of contextual cues. Explaining art treats art as a text to be 'read'. It makes its listener and witness passive and uninvolved in its making, too lazy or not confident enough to participate in the making of the work, or, alternatively, immune to the plurality of affects an artwork can provoke.

Forty years later as I write this essay, it becomes all so clear the degree to which Beuys' oeuvre influences my daily practice as an artist and academic. It's evident in what others have described as the queer, quiet, metaphoric, and intimate way that I interact with materials, however with less symbolism than Beuys. It bears itself out in the ways I insert and appropriate public space for performances, with far less heroic

or spectacular drama. I recognise its tentacles in the passionate arguments I make to shape art and design curriculum, when I advocate for creative/artistic research, or when I press students to set their own learning objectives or to push the boundaries of the norms and conventions of what they assume art to be or do. Beuys' drawings, performances, and lectures even underpinned my doctoral project, something I have not owned up to nor recognised the significance of until now.⁸ For example, the durational place-specific performance BALE (2011) was a critical response to Beuys' famous work *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). He lived with a coyote for three days in a gallery and I lived for the same period of time in a gallery with a bale of sheep's wool.⁹ In a search for the agency of materials, this likeness highlights a threshold between the animate liveness of a wild animal and the supposed deadness of a domesticated animal's shorn coat, a product of human industry. BALE marks the point at which my creative practice shifted from architecture and spatial design to live art, performance, and vocalisation. I had become disillusioned by representation of drawing plans, sections, elevations, and details that rarely progressed beyond pragmatic constructed material; translations promising reality. Those forms of representation were bereft of temporal affect and atmosphere. Thinking, talking, and writing about something did not hold a candle to making something that happened at full scale, situated and responsive to place. Using what was readily available — surfaces, rooms, body, voice, materials — proved immediately gratifying especially when taking on long durational scores in large, precarious, and fragile environments. While my performance art practice 'evaded representation by focusing on the materiality of the performers' bodies and presenting concrete life actions',¹⁰ my scholarly practice dove headfirst into the then-emerging discourse on Actor-Network Theory, Object Oriented Ontologies, Post-Human Philosophy, and more so into New Materialism with its defence of all matter's liveness. I was hoping to

disrupt historical assumption about material deadness through works that, for the most part, inquired by way of non-empirical methods. I became an 'artivist' employing my own body as an agent of change towards the assumed inertness of all materials: to perform with other material bodies so to collaboratively exercise our individual and collective liveness.

Beuys' performance *How to Explain a Picture to a Dead Hare* raises numerous questions for me. What can I glean from the traces of his performance about the physical and emotional relationships he built with materials as discrete and specific entities? For example, what was the effect of his whispers and how did the hare, gold leaf, honey, felt (and don't forget the drawings) respond? Who or what was the primary audience? Who or what was doing the performing, 'The Action', as Beuys called it? These questions are at the crux of this essay's inquiry on the communication between material bodies, communication outside of spoken or written language, or better, when words won't work. What ensued was an artistic practice in which the value of explanation as a form of translation — a linguistic manoeuvre usually from one language to another — to a work of art, including architecture, is put into doubt and seriously supplanted by a practice of small gestures, body movements, and vocal tones.

8. Julieanna Preston, *Performing Matter: Interior Surfaces and Feminist Actions* (Spurbuchverlag, 2014).

9. Julieanna Preston, *BALE* (Snowwhite Gallery: Auckland, New Zealand, 2011).

10. Falk Heinrich, 'Flesh as Communication -- Body Art and Body Theory', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10 (2012), p. 3.

THE HAIR OF THE HARE

I look back at the performances that I have created with a focussed attention on those that attempted to build a rapport with a single material or architectural material assembly. What began as trying to make a material 'speak' slowly evolved into languageless haptic encounters; performances in which communication occurred in the presence of, often side by side, in near silence or respectful auditory emulation on my part. This quality of 'being with' another other- than-human material body is what positions my performances as relational, a nod to German philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Mitsein' based on social companionship¹¹ and Finnish art theorist Katve-Kaisa Kontturi's 'ways of following' in which critical distance associated with material art processes are replaced with sensuous and transformative proximity.¹² My performances' emphasis on the event of an encounter between one or more material bodies sets them apart from body art which spotlights a performer drawing upon their unconscious to convey their inner thoughts and psyche in their body's actions. In body art,

The individual is placed at the center of a continuous process that is carried ahead with persistences and repetitions, and with the hardheadedness of insisting upon a sensational event as well as an exasperating analysis of all the possibilities of every moment of every function of every part of the body—with all the activism of incessant movement and experimentation and an enormous expense of energy.¹³

The performances I create are not only or entirely about me. I am not trying to draw out some deep and meaningful thought from my interior. I am but one provocateur meeting another and as such the performances highlight that spatiotemporal bodily encounter. Sometimes the exchange is minimal. Sometimes I become so absorbed into the other body's world, I lose my words, my legs, and my privilege as a human

being; crawling, rolling, or sliding on my belly across a rocky shore to the water or yielding my mass to the force of the ocean waves as it tumbles me to the shoreline. These experiences draw out a heightened awareness of my materiality — how fragile and vulnerable it is in all kinds of weather, how sounds are heard in the belly, how my body leaches salts, how it bruises and bleeds, how fingers can be antennae, how orifices are sophisticated thresholds, how emotions well up unexpectedly because of the porosity of my corporeality. Many of the performances inadvertently put my liveness at risk. They put my body in danger. I know what it is to be parched, waterlogged, choked, polluted, and mistaken for a suicidal mad woman, a terrorist, a siren, a heart-attack victim, a homeless mourner, and a crow witch-whisperer. Through these experiences I have learned to ignore the heckling and surrender to the elements and environment; to become a willing, sensing sack of bones, organs, and minerals. Danger (and concern) is usually raised by onlookers. With good intentions for my wellbeing, they are led by their heads and not yet 'seeing' beyond anthropocentric ways of being. Perhaps they are unfamiliar with my intention to disrupt that anthropocentrism?

Like Beuys, my performances are live, initiated by a score rather than a pre-determined script, unrehearsed, and non-repeatable. They simply proceed as complex contact improvisations or manoeuvres. I recognise in my performance practice attributes of Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare that art critic Caroline Tisdall describes as a complex tableau about problems of language and thought, and about the consciousness of animals versus the consciousness of humans, along with the inherent abilities of each.¹⁴ That these performances engage with nonhuman matter, contingency, and states of unknowing has reaffirmed the foolhardiness of humankind's thirst for control and dominance.¹⁵ Rather than rely on reason, the performances are scored to be 'felt or intuited by a viewer rather than understood intellectually'.¹⁶

11. Dermot Moran, '24. - Being-with (Mitsein)', in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. By Mark Wrathall (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 111–115, doi:10.1017/9780511843778.025.

12. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* (Open Humanities Press, 2018) <<http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/ways-of-following/>> [accessed 12 December 2023].

13. Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (Skira Editore, 2000), p. 8.

15. Sarah Lucie, *Acting Objects: Staging New Materialism, Posthumanism and the Ecocritical Crisis in Contemporary Performance* (The City University of New York, 2020), p. 14.

16. Penelope J. E. Davies and others, *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*, 8th edn, 2 vols (Pearson, 2015), ii, p. 1063.

And, perhaps more significantly, they practice the core tenet of New Materialism in which the border between linguistic and material or bodily sense-making has collapsed; everything is now all material.¹⁷

New materialism takes seriously the idea that all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation [...] It acknowledges matter as discursive, though not linguistic, unsettling the precedent prioritizing of 'language' as the sole or primary means to think about meaning-making.¹⁸

My performances do not abstract the body, nor generalise its sensory proclivities; they call on the body to be a complex sensing organ immersed in a cultural and geographical context laced by untethered subjectivity. They proceed on a different register than the search for meaning, likeness, and naming associated with semiotic analysis or, as is commonly understood, as 'reading' the work as if it were a text, a hangover from a linguistic-centric era. Words, punctuation, citations, and grammar have little credence while communicating with material bodies other than human beings. In fact, as behavioural scientists assert, I have come to work with the premise that human beings rely a great deal on nonverbal/nontextual aspects of communication such as vocal tone, posture, and gesture to reveal feelings and nuance our messages. Without language — the gift/crutch of human intellect, reason, and high-function cognitive skills — one practices how to lean into 'mystery or questioning'.¹⁹

17. Rebecca Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *The Drama Review*, 59.4 (2015), p. 8.

18. Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs*, 28.3 (2003), pp. 801–831.

19. Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 62.

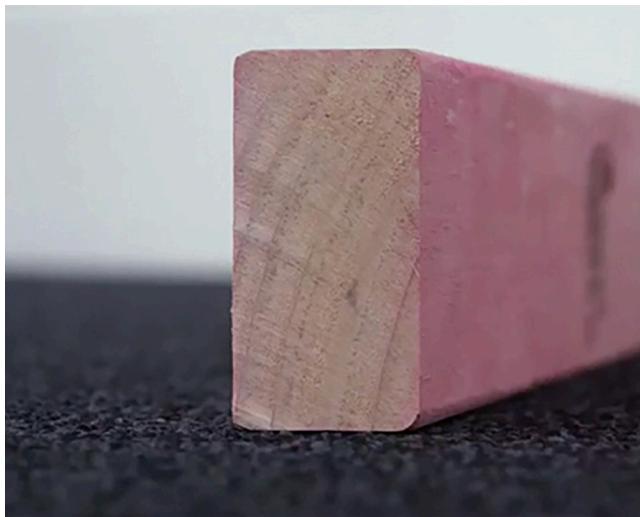


Figure 1. Julieanna Preston, *SPEAK* (2015), 61 x 35.6 cm <https://www.julieannapreston.space/#/speak-matter-speak-2016/>.

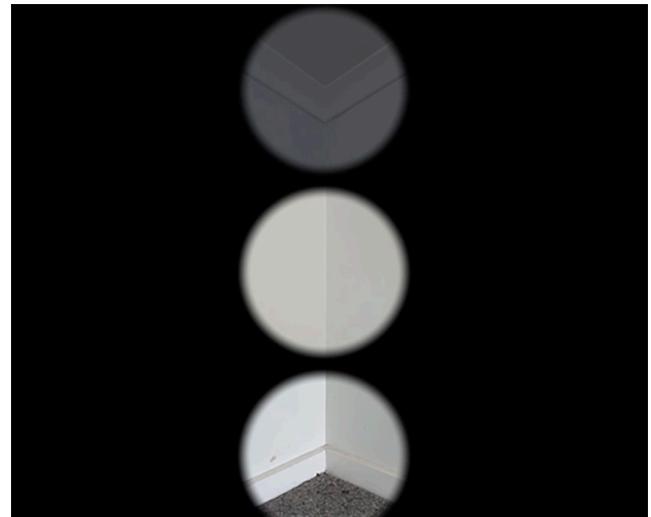


Figure 2. Julieanna Preston, *Meeting, you in detail* (2018), 274.3 x 99.1 cm <<https://vimeo.com/278844210?share=copy>>.



Figure 3. (above). Julieanna Preston and Joanna Lock, *tryst* (2018), 35.6 x 76.2 cm <<https://vimeo.com/309594894?share=copy#t=0>>.



Figure 4. (above) Julieanna Preston and Joshua Lewis, *RPM Hum* (2018), 518.2 x 50.8 cm <<https://vimeo.com/309595402?share=copy#t=0>>.



Figure 5. (above) Julieanna Preston, *murus* (2020), 335.3 x 12.7 cm <<https://vimeo.com/409076771?share=copy#t=0>>

OF ACTION, OF THE DOING

What follows is a collection of links to five performance videos accompanied by notes that track how my performance practice detoured away from translation as a form of explication. The notes reflect on the performance, the gestures, vocals, and improvisations that occurred and the lessons on communication that ensued and how those lessons informed performances to follow. I have included thoughts that arose in the midst of performing and conjecture on the role of the audience when there was one. Here I am trying to resist the penchant to present each work as if it has a singular story or interpretation. I am searching to inhabit that liminal zone between describing minimally to allow readers to become agential witnesses complicit with the work and telling all. I challenge myself to detect when the art work is replace with words which infuse, colour, or spoil a witness' sensorial apprehension of it; to kill it, or to steal the potential plurality of the experience.

The performance SPEAK (2015) began by recording successive acts of sawing, surfacing, drilling, and nailing a standard 4x2 timber stud, a common process when building an interior partition wall.²⁰ Captured via contact microphones attached to the stud, the sound recordings were run through a specialist software application designed to translate sound into language, in this case English. Open access voice-to-text software produced a written version which was read aloud by the avatar 'Victoria' on Acrobat Pro and re-recorded. With somewhat odd, unfamiliar, and yet humorous points in the audible version, the resulting text makes no logical semiotic sense. It is as if it has assumed asemic properties; it draws resemblance to Caroline Tisdale's reflection on Beuys' performance with the hare: 'Beyond language as verbalization lies a world of sound and form impulses [...] without semantic content, but laden with completely different levels of information'.²¹

Blinded by the privileged airs of the English language, its structure, punctuation, and idioms, I foolishly thought that the material might show promise of communication. I thought it might literally speak! I had neglected to pay attention to the squeaks, screams, and squeals of the timber's resistance, what seemed like torture when I relisten to the original sound file. The timber, violently abducted from a faraway pine forest, proved impervious to the various domesticating processes geared to diminish its wildness and individual qualities — to make it behave as a mass-produced industrial material or, in other words, suppress its inherent voice. Despite all the technological machinations, the stud refused to comply and I proved not capable of, or willing to listen to, what it was saying as I plodded on with instrumental wilfulness. A huge gulf of anthropocentric ego divided us.

The six-hour performance Meeting, you in detail (2018) was the scene of reciting a love poem to an interior wall on the verge of being demolished.²² Unlike SPEAK, Meeting, you in detail employed a special form of written language found in professional architectural and construction practice known as material specifications. These specifications describe assemblies and product properties to ensure quality standards and their equivalencies. The performance focussed on the seductive use of vocal elocution, volume, pace, and enunciation akin to ASMR to mask the matter-of-factness of the dry scientific language. The site of the performance, a corner where all material surfaces converged — floor to wall, wall to wall, wall to ceiling — stood vigilant, stationary, as if eyes closed; an object of scrutiny to the close proximity of my stares.

I was using spoken word to woo as well as to subdue the wall; I know now that I wanted to believe the wall corner yielded willingly even if reluctantly. We were both materials in an intimate (post-human) relationship. This was a practice of what performance artist Chris Braddock calls radical public silence or

20. SPEAK was originally performed at *Transversal Practices, Studies in Material Thinking*, Victorian College of the Arts (Melbourne, Australia, 2015), <<https://vimeo.com/277409617>>. 'SPEAK matter, SPEAK' was later published in 'How Matter Comes to Matter through Transversal Practice: Matter, Ecology and Relationality', *Studies in Material Thinking*, 16 (2017), pp. 2–10.

21. Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, p. 210.

22. *Meeting, you in detail* was performed in 2018 in Otaki, Aotearoa and subsequently featured in the essay 'You are embued with tolerance...', *Spaces of Tolerance: Architecture and Culture*, 7.1 (2019), pp. 31–43, doi:10.1080/20507828.2018.1551050.

23. Chris Braddock, 'Radical Silence in Performance Art: Kalisolate "Uhila's Maumau-Taimi"', in *To Find a Place / The Occasional Journal*, ed. by Louise Rutledge (2018) <<https://enjoy.org.nz/publishing/the-occasional-journal/to-find-a-place/radical-silence-in-performance-art-kalisolate-uhila>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

muteness: 'these modalities can outweigh what we sometimes perceive to be the importance of communication in language'.²³ Serving as a ritual and an apology before sacrificing the wall, the love poem acknowledged the provenance of the construction's material body and the details of its making. Here, affect was noticed in the extra-discursive, extra-textual moments where bodies are reacting as immanent matter.²⁴ While the wall was bathed in numerous tinctures of changing natural light, my observation became tedious and my posture shifted from sitting upright to a languid horizontal repose as I resisted falling asleep in the heat of the day. At this stage, we seemed more like equals when my breath took in the dirt and pollen of the carpet. The sound of a blowfly alighting on the architrave was amplified by the spatial proximity. Like many culturally based sacrificial rituals, I was begging for forgiveness for taking the life of this material assembly. It was my hope that this dynamic of passivity and extended face-to-face duration would practice French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' notion of a sayable and inexhaustible ethical response to the differences of neighbours and strangers.²⁵ And yet the sledge hammer was in arm's reach ready for the undoing of this wall.

The wall's silence, or rather muteness, left space for me to practice empathy to its material constitution. I found the performing of the poem to transcend the words that it was composed of. The way the words were spoken approached a cross-sensory transfer between sound and touch; I imagined the sounds as haptic energy landing on the material surface. Here I draw on American scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's view: 'the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word "touching"; equally, it's internal to the word "feeling" [...] that even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact'.²⁶

Throughout the process of producing this video, I was conscious of the vicarious nature of its future watching/witnessing audience. I considered whether the video provided a view of a quiet, mundane everyday renovation leading up to an atrocity in the guise of soft porn. (Here I recall the movie scene in which hunters shoot Bambi's mother.) When showing this video, I often watch the audience fidget and recall how unflinching and stoic the wall had performed, as most walls do on a moment to century basis.

The performance murmur (2020), later featured in the video murus (2020), found a group of women attending to an ailing sixteenth-century town wall originally built to regulate the town border, a mechanism of taxation and the site of violent battles.²⁷ Despite its historic status, its maintenance and repair is an ongoing financial burden regularly debated at local council level. Guided by ethical and moral conscience, much like nurses caring for a patient who has committed a horrendous crime, our actions ranged from humming, cooing, whispering, cleaning, caressing, climbing, tapping, and breathing.

Unlike the dancer who crafts their body posture and gestures as amplified expressivity in rhythmic pulse and tempo, we attempted to blend into the everyday environment with the use of less-than-graceful gestures that gathered, swept, pushed, pulled, and settled as well as micro-gestures to make full use of fingers, toes, elbows, wrists, and shoulders.²⁸ Responding to the wall's physical state, the gestures served as unconscious actions that are proprioceptive and, therefore unlikely to qualify as a body schema or body image associated with dance.²⁹ In short, murmur was a performance of spontaneous, non-predetermined, unannounced impulses. We were merely doing the work associated with the service of cooks, caretakers, guards, guardians, cleaners, vagrants and vandals, and doing so amongst all the other work going on around the frail wall such as building restoration, restaurant cooking,

24. Simon O'Sullivan, 'The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking art beyond representation', *Angelaki*, 6.3 (2001), p. 126.

25. Braddock, 'Radical Silence in Performance Art'.

26. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 17.

27. *murmur* was performed at the Town Wall, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK in 2017 by twelve women. Video and sound footage was then edited and presented as *murus* and premiered at 'Bodybuilding', an online exhibition hosted by *Perfoma's Radical Performance Broadcast*, curated by Charles Aubin (Perfoma, New York) and Carlos Mínguez Carrasco (ArkDes, Stockholm), 15 May–15 July 2020.

28. Eric C. Mullis, 'The Image of the Performing Body', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 42.4 (2008), p. 71.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

rubbish pick-up, street sweeping, and police enforcement. We performed for as long as it took us to traverse the length of the wall fragment. Our primary concern was for the wall's wellbeing. This took priority over what a spectator experienced from afar, not so very different than the audience that was held at bay from Beuys' performance with the dead hare. The event that occurred was intense and tense as haptic and auditory interactions between live flesh and vibrant, not dead, ancient stones. It is interesting to note at this point that one account of the Beuys' performance tells of the way that he extended the hare's paw to touch each of the various drawings.³⁰ Perhaps the hare was not dead after all? Our caressing, whispering, rapping, pummelling, patting, and soft singing gestures sought to rouse the stones at first light and served as lullabies in the last light. We put ourselves in the service of the stones, unthwarted by any judgement of its history. Our actions inverted the typical human-to-material hierarchical relationship that often regards material as instrumental and open to the consumption of human needs. This performance also taught me about the irony of building maintenance as I slave to keep my hundred-and-twenty-five-year-old Victorian villa from falling into a heap of rotten timber and rusty metal.

As preparation for this performance, I visited this section of wall at least twice a day for three weeks, sometimes walking past, sometimes lingering. I got caught up unintentionally in unsavoury fights between drunken men, cut by broken glass from bottles thrown at the wall for amusement and dares, fouled by the heavy stench and texture of cooking oil spewed from the Chinese restaurants in the alley behind the wall, photographed by obvious tourists, and questioned by the police as to why I was frequenting this place so regularly. Why was I making rubbings of its surface, they asked. I found it curious that the local historian I met at the wall one morning was flummoxed that I wanted to know about the stones, their origins, and the methods used to construct the wall, as if it was

not worth knowing. My attempts to get permission to access Morden Tower, a room known to be the place of poetry readings by famous English poets, were met with silence. I took note of how the west fragment of the wall commanded public space and the way the wall sliced through the extended city fabric. Its imposing mass diminished my own figure; it did not budge or groan even when I threw myself full force at the spraypainted tagging on its face.

In post-performance reflection, I was struck by the public's level of disinterest in the performance. This was surprising because, at the time, various debates were occurring around the world about unwanted migration across borders. Many of the debates were sparked by proposals to build, reinforce, or militarise walls to segregate and keep 'undesirable' people out. It all seemed so relevant. At the writing of this essay, those increasingly contentious social and political debates continue.

RPM Hum (2018) was a performative hunt for the hum emitted from the copper coils of air ventilation motors under a national museum.³¹ It was created in the spirit of sound as 'intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having a profound effect'.³² Recalling Irish poet Oscar Wilde's popular phrase: 'imitation is the sincerest forms of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness',³³ I tuned a complementary sound to each hum I found to make its presence known, and more so, felt. For Wilde, imitation was neither a negative nor a crime, but instead a creative act that resonated honourably with the sources from which he borrowed.³⁴ While adopting Wilde's position, I also employed performance theorist Laura Levin's concept of embedded camouflage known for the value of being inside

30. Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *The Felt Hat: Joseph Beuys, A Life Told* (Charta, 1997), p. 28.

31. *RPM Hum*, performed by Julieanna Preston and recorded by Joshua Lewis, featured in *The Performance Arcade* (Wellington, New Zealand, 2018) <<https://vimeo.com/user11308386>>. A chapter entitled 'mouthing' in *Voicing Materialisms* (Routledge, 2026 – forthcoming) expands the theoretical aspects of this work in relation to Irish playwright Samuel Beckett's play 'Not I'.

32. Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (A&C Black, 2006), p. ix.

33. 'Oscar Wilde: Quotes', *goodreads*, n.d. <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/558084-imitation-is-the-sincerest-form-of-flattery-that-mediocri>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

34. Mark Cunningham, *Imitation and Parody in the Works of Oscar Wilde* (University of Kentucky ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1992), p. 17.

'the sensory frames through which we comprehend the world'; I gained access to that inside by virtue of mimicry.³⁵ It was an act of behaving and sounding to fit in or, at the very least, to not stick out as a foreign body. Taking what I learned from murmur, I was led by the sound emanating from the motors rather than directing, dominating, or scripting the performance according to my own will and preconceptions.

The inability of a human body to mimic the chorus of those motor's hums and the near impossibility of maintaining a mechanical tone repetitively showed the limits of my body as an apparatus. Though I came to experience subtle shifts in the motor's pitch over time due to the nature of copper expanding as a result of rotational thermal gain, my hum was an imperfect amplification of their constant unrelenting energy. I struggled to keep pace and to heed slight shifts of pitch when the hum of multiple motors collided. And despite my imperfect aim to blend in, the performance allowed me to cross the threshold between being foreign matter and not. The performance became a spatial negotiation between a body and its immediate setting.³⁶ I came very close to feeling as if I was humming in concert with an ever-morphing hum emanating from the rotations of a mechanical spindle wrapped in charged copper. I willingly (and temporarily) gave up my personality and identity. This mode of imitation is otherwise known as 'informe', which 'challenges dualistic Cartesian thinking: the positioning of the human as a delineated figure standing outside of an environment in a relation of disembodied and vertical mastery [...] figure and ground distinctions, self and other, is lost'.³⁷

During the multiple performances of this work, I often traversed the parking garage with closed eyes to maintain concentration, a dangerous action given vehicles coming and going. My actions vacillated between stalking and being lured into the clutches by almost imperceptible sounds, yearning to swallow

the air that they ride on and speak as they do, while completely unaware that an audience lurked in the shadows of building structure, cars, pipes, wires, and vents. At one point, I lapsed into a worried state about the visual apprehension of the performance when I put my lips on a dirty vent and opened my mouth wide to take in the air it was depositing. Only then did I worry about what microorganisms I had inhaled and tasted. More concerning was what happened on the last night of the performance when museum security ushered us off the premises because CCTV cameras had captured what was interpreted as 'potential terrorist actions'. Apparently an unpublicised gathering of high level international visitors connected with the contentious Petroleum NZ Conference was taking place in the upper gallery that evening. It seems the security guards were watching from the inside to a performance on the outside; they were witnesses to the performance in the same way as Beuys' disgruntled audience except that the guards held the power to stop the show.

While making the work *tryst* (2018), Joanna and I spent the better part of four days in a hospital room that was kitted out with beds, tubes, pressurized air, a stainless steel trolley, audio recorders, video cameras, and two old-school mechanical respiration ventilators. There were no instructions as to how the various knobs on the ventilators served to regulate a patient's exhale and inhale. The ventilators were found on the trolley with their tubes, bladders, and accessories entangled, which suggested they were already substantially entwined in each other's life and embrace. There was no human patient, merely two linked mechanical patients. Our days were spent trying to play the two ventilators as if they were musical instruments and as if their continued lives depended solely on our responsive actions. On leaving the sanctity of the hospital room after eight hours on the third day, Joanna and I noticed that our breathing rhythms had altered to those of the ventilators. Our sympathetic nervous systems, which are known to regulate the

35. Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending In* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 38.

36. Ibid., p. 38, 138.

37. Ibid., p. 39.

human's 'fight or flight' response, had been seduced by the ventilators' heavy rasping, choking, sighing, wheezing, purring, and gasping air exchange. Our human bodies had been invaded by virtue of sound's porous boundary-crossing nature. We had become the subjects of a kind of reverse empathetic affect that was threatening our lives, literally. We caught our breath. How could this happen? The interactions between these bodies acknowledged a vulnerability that resisted semiotic translation, in which the gestures couldn't be reduced to a subject/object relationship.³⁸

Akin to Beuys' performance of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, tryst had an intensity which asked us to consider it outside of thought models based on rationality.³⁹ Here I am reminded of the closeness of my baby daughter's slumbering body lying on my chest as our breaths found synchronicity.

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces — visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion — that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability.⁴⁰

These are too many words. Simply said, we were not feeling like the ventilators, we were feeling for them and they were feeling us. It felt threatening. An emotional contagion had overtaken us.⁴¹ (I had similar visceral responses the first time I watched the video of artists Maria Abramović and Ulay performing the 1977 work *Breathing In – Breathing Out* as they succumbed to the exercise until they collapsed, out of breath, with complete commitment to their craft.)⁴² By the time Joanna and I had completed the long bus ride back to the city, our hearts had recalibrated and the realisation of 'having been taken over' by machines, machines

that we had inadvertently anthropomorphised as lovers, was decidedly idle dark humour. And yet the experience was the most profound communication with a non-human material body for me to date.

I am uncertain if the video we composed from this experience has the same affective resonance for its listening audience. I would imagine that the depth of our unnerving was heavily influenced by our journey through the warren of corridors to a space without natural light and wrapped with the ambient sounds of other ailing bodies in emergency mode and the building's systems beeping, grinding, tracking, locking. In this performance, words have little productive purpose. Communication occurred because of breath, even in the circumstance of an increased level of distress. Here I am reminded of the often-unacknowledged role of the soundscape for films in which sound is an essential and crucial force towards building, resolving, and inciting emotion.

38. Heinrich, 'Flesh as Communication', p. 3.

39. Adriani Gotz, Winfried Konnertz and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys Life and Works* (Barron's, 1979), pp. 131–132.

40. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. By Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Duke University Press Books, 2010), pp. 1–25 (p. 1).

41. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2008), p. 23.

42. 'Breathing In – Breathing Out, Ulay' Stedelijk, 1977 <<https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection/9990-ulay-breathing-in-breathing-out>> [accessed 21 May 2025]

ON CLOSING

Several lessons have been revealed to me in the process of writing this essay. First, I think that there may be a book waiting to be written by a scholar knowledgeable about Beuys' work and on its potential relation to New Materialism and/or Posthumanism. I do not find any existing sources that explore that connection.

Second, the irony and utter contradiction of writing this essay as a means to preface performance works is not lost on me, especially as I am attempting to swerve away from representation and textual or verbal explanation. And it does not elude me that watching/hearing a performance video is a poor substitute for being there, with us, in the place. I am hoping that the visual and the audible will solicit some degree of 'feltness' and affect akin to a full sensory experience, and this essay will swerve away from merely reducing a performance to words, or, with reference to Beuys' work, to further deaden a dead hare.

Even as I prepare to send this manuscript for publication, I question if the words of this essay teeter on the edge of exhausting the artworks or usurping a witnesses' due diligence to understand the works, more so, to feel the works. This observation may be a sign that there is more work to be done on the relation of affect to the evocative nature of live, place-responsive, durational works, in particular what happens in the space of not-words.

Setting aside self-criticism of hypocrisy, I reflect that while these are works of an artist, they are also embroiled in the terms of what is research in an academic setting and how it is evidenced or justified. This fact shines light on the years I have championed creative practice as research. My advocacy has raised ire and eyebrows from many colleagues who doubted the value and efficacy of creative practice research despite many of them being active professional artists

and designers. It seemed like a written explanation was an assumed and absolute given; the creative work was an accessory. More often than not, creative work is augmented by an exegetical text that takes an authoritative form of a disembodied neutral voice (often in third person) waging an argument as if creativity could be litigated, proven, disputed, or demonstrated to be rigorous, reliable, and repeatable.

More than twenty years later, so much in this space has evolved to temper these hangovers of models of research associated with science; many exemplars specific to creative arts have emerged. For example, most of my written scholarship has tried to pry open how to reflect critically on one's own creativity and how one might employ voice, tone, and the qualities of a wide pool of writing genres to stay close to the original work. This essay is part of that oeuvre. Now that creative work is normalised (to a greater degree) as research 'output', in academic speak, and advanced creative or artistic research degrees have proliferated worldwide, similar hackle-raising reactions follow my current mention of a dream when creative work does not need words to explain it. When will we as artists be brave enough to dig into our embodied intelligent intuition and aesthetic vocabulary to criticise, assess, or converse about that creative work directly? Could a painting draw a response in the mode of another painting, a poem, a song, or a VR installation? Could we as makers acknowledge how materials speak to us in ways other than what textual language affords and, more so, how do we listen? Could we abandon our heavy reliance on words, texts, exegeses, and theses and acknowledge the crutch that they are and the possible harm that they do? How might we revel in the creative work in its own material liveness? Could we come to know and trust our own intuition and subjectivity? This is the real underbelly of my performance works and this essay. There is still much more work to do.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Julieanna Preston

Julieanna Preston's transdisciplinary creative practice research is concerned with the agency and ethics of materiality, its relation to place, ecology, and ways of becoming in the world. Her practice engages place-responsive live art performance, vocalisation, and performance writing. She currently teaches and supervises postgraduate students across art, design, and architecture in Aotearoa/New Zealand. www.julieannapreston.space

