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# Lessons of Decal (Language as Repertoire)

SOPHIE SEITA



■ Sophie Seita, prop for *Vulva's School: A F\*CKING DIDACTIC TAKE ON EXPERIMENTAL FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ART, OR, HOW TO READ*, lecture performance, 2018-20. Gloves: colour print on polyester, showing a photo of Carolee Schneemann (and her shadow) performing *Vulva's School* (1995), wearing a pair of gloves (one is a dog, the other a cat).

For a long time, I've been thinking about performance as a form of translation; or rather: I've adapted things I've learned from translation theory and applied that knowledge to performance. For example, I learned that a text or an artwork has many voices, not just the one 'true' and unchanging original. I learned that any act of translation creates a second original (and undoes that hierarchy). I learned that this dialogue with what has come before, which we copy or follow closely, even as we may resist it, push back against it or surf athletically on the back of it, is something to be cherished as deeply political. I learned how to pay attention to *difference*, which I must *encounter* (not necessarily *identify* with), but bring into my own voice (which is my body) in translation. How do we acknowledge the multiple 'acts of transfer' in our practice? How do we make sense of and make known these major or minor transformations, the things that move around, across materials? For me,

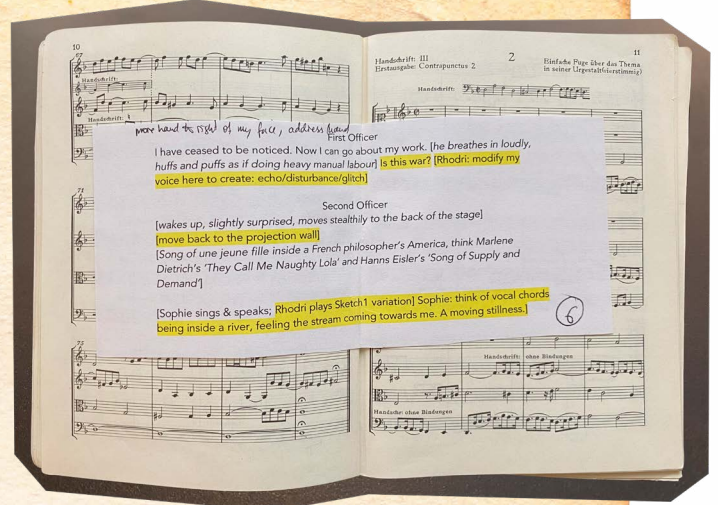
this transformation, this transfer, often happens through reading. And not the kind of quiet, distant reading, but the kind that obsesses over something. A reading that makes itself known, through citation, through recycling other people's and my own (worn) words. I mean 'worn' in the sense of showing its 'use' but also in the sense of literally wearing words. Re-using words, and objects, and words-as-objects, as costumes, as stages, displacing them, misplacing them into a related or unrelated context.

Instead of a repertoire of performances, I've been thinking about - and teaching and performing with - a repertoire of texts. I see language as a repertoire or reservoir or inventory - that can be tapped into, renewed, revived, relayed, reformed. For me, acts of transfer are always connected to pedagogy, because teaching and learning are based on sometimes joyous, sometimes abrasive and sometimes obsessive acts of repetition and variation. Of course, a writer, an artist, a teacher, always has their own ever-evolving or returning repertoire of voices they return to. Some of mine are: Kathy Acker, Sara Ahmed, Laura



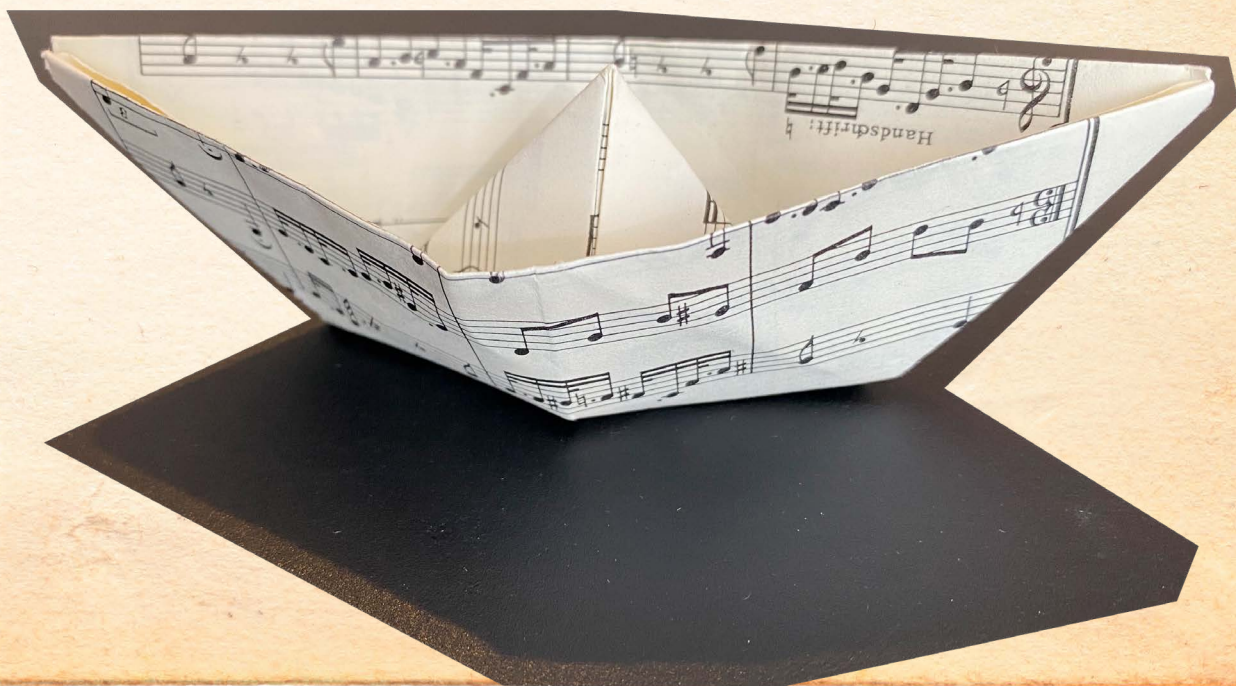
Aguilar, Anni Albers, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Mirtha Dermisache, JJJJJerome Ellis, Renee Gladman, Gordon Hall, bell hooks, Joan Jonas, Fred Moten, Sianne Ngai, Sawako Nakayasu, Pauline Oliveros, Yvonne Rainer, Lisa Robertson, Christina Quarles, Fred Sandback, Mira Schendel, Carolee Schneemann, Eve Sedgwick, Amy Sillman and Gertrude Stein. They're not all my 'favourite' artists per se, but voices I feel I want to grapple with.

I recently finished a book called *Lessons of Decal* (87 Press, 2023), based on some of my lecture performances, lyric essays and performance workshops, all centred on these acts of transfer, of learning, of what I've learned through reading, through performance (both other people's and my own). A decal is a copy, a transfer of forms and knowledge, something that sticks and leaves a mark. I still can't fully wrap my head around my infatuation with repetition, with re-using language or repurposing bits from one performance in another, or one prop that appears in multiple performances (otherwise unrelated), or to respond to or translate something from a historical text or literary material into a performance.



■ Sophie Seita, prop for *Don Carlos, or, Royal Jelly* (2016-19); prepared book, in homage to John Cage's prepared piano, in the form of text pasted into an old school library copy of a score book of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (The Art of Fugue), BWV 1080. *Don Carlos, or, Royal Jelly* formed part of an extensive project across publishing, performance, installation, sound and video, called *My Little Enlightenment Plays*, which responded to and corresponded with various Enlightenment writers, thinkers and (pseudo-)scientists.

■ Sophie Seita, prop for *Don Carlos, or, Royal Jelly* (2016-19); paper boat, made in performance, out of the same old school library copy of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (The Art of Fugue), BWV 1080.





In school, we figure things out through repetition. We repeat verb endings or the declensions of nouns in different languages, which I used to memorize diligently, even pleasurably as a child.<sup>1</sup> Does the same apply to repeating text in writing or performance or playing with the same sculpture, prop or image again and again? What does this repetition teach us? Sometimes the repetition of material is effectively invisible. At other times, repetition can enhance presence - in the classroom, on stage, in the gallery, in our minds, our memories. Recycling ideas can be a form of fixation, dedication, homage, commitment. Leaving things open, active, provisional. But also more theoretically and idealistically: repetition as a potentially queer or anti-capitalist act, against progression, constant (re-)production, forward propulsion.

■ Sophie Seita and Naomi Woo, postcards from *Beethoven Was a Lesbian*, lecture performance, radio opera, mail art project, responding to Pauline Oliveros's and Alison Knowles's 'postcard theatre' from 1974 that playfully and critically deconstructs the male canon of classical music, through postcards such as *Beethoven Was a Lesbian*, or *Brahms Was a Two-Penny Harlot*, and *Chopin Had Dishpan Hands*.



In my lecture performance *Vulva's School* I say or sigh, 'I'm citing myself again. Some would say, I'm running out of ideas. I call it recycling. Or being in analysis. So language can become modular. A form of transference. Which is all about knowledge.' Using language as my repertoire, in this conceptual and embodied gesture, is a mode of transmission that acknowledges detours, ways of repeatedly not getting it, whatever this 'it' is, this knowledge-thing, or memory-thing. Or maybe getting it always means, getting-it-with-someone or thanks-to-someone; the repertoire is multiply mediated.

To return to translation, with which I began: translation (in the conventional linguistic understanding) is all about cultural difference but it's less bridging and more revelling in the gap, the gutter; it's less virtuosic bravado and more mundane acts of misunderstanding. That's a lesson for performance. And for writing. And teaching.

It's perhaps for all these reasons that the format of the lecture performance is firmly in my repertoire because it allows for this revising, returning and repeated questioning and transformation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This idea is taken from my piece 'Poetry's Phantom Limbs', originally published in *ON FIGURE/S* (Ma Bibliothèque, 2021), and also included in *Lessons of Decal* (87 Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> To understand my long-term fascination with lecture performances, a form I first experimented with in practice, before looking into its history, I eventually wrote an essay on the subject for *TDR*, titled 'Playing with Knowledge: On lecture performances', *TDR/The Drama Review* 66(3) (September 2022): 78-95.





■ Sophie Seita, *Fingers are for Feeling* (2022) is a performance for camera inspired by and in close proximity to the Schaum Keyboard Touch Finder, a vintage learning aid used to teach aspiring pianists to sight-read without looking at their hands. Photo Laura Cobb

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