

Lauren Redhead (Goldsmiths, University of London)
Alistair Zaldua (Independent researcher)

l.redhead@gold.ac.uk
alistairz@yahoo.com

Creative Textual Practices as Critical Re-writings

Lecture Recital

NoiseFloor, 13th May 2022

Abstract:

Caroline Lucas, in her graphic score '[Untitled]' (2013), created for Lauren Redhead, employs a quotation from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay 'A Room of One's Own' that addresses the women's literary tradition in the 19th Century as 'short and partial', stating 'it is useless to go to the great men writers for help'. (2001, p64). Performing this piece for voice and electronics ('burn the shelves', 2016) became the starting point for a method of quasi-improvised textual exploration by our duet. This lecture-recital will take the form of a performance lecture (cf Cage, 1961), combining the performance of work for our duet of spoken word, e-violin and electronics, with a critical evaluation of how such performance, and 'creative textual practice' (Kristeva, 1984; Barrett, 2011) might rethink the traditions in which such texts can be considered. We draw on improvised practices and prepared texts that have been created using Oulipo-inspired techniques to derive new meanings from existing texts through critical rewritings, or translations, of work that address historical, political, aesthetic, and gender-based themes, and their relation to art and listening. For example—and in addition to Lucas's composition—about women's work in radio ('feminist pirate broadcasts', 2021) and digital aesthetics ('machines', 2021). There is a deliberate plethora of traditions that this work is in discourse with: at the same time as performing the music, we aim to reflexively examine the methodology of practice research, considering creative practice both as its means of investigation and mode of presentation and communication. The violin improvisation 'plays into' the spaces offered by the spoken word, presenting its own spaces, or responding to the spoken text. This strategy is deliberately non-mimetic and serves as a parallel to the spoken word, oftentimes deliberately tenuous and exploring the extremes of difference within the texts.

0'00": [voice and violin: from *feminist pirate broadacsts*]

[Setting 1]

[Sample 1]

women speaking loudly in public places:
an art form or means of communication.

how do women listen?

voice and space

at the same time heard and not seen;

working behind the scenes.

Frauenfunk

03'00" [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

[images]

The composer Caroline Lucas (who is a different person from the MP of the same name) created her graphic score [*Untitled*] for me to perform in 2013. In this score, she employs a quotation from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay 'A Room of One's Own' that addresses Woolf's perception of the women's literary tradition in the 19th Century:

[spoken quotation with quiet audio clip]

[Sample 2]

'But whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing—and I believe that they had a very great effect—that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty which faced them [...] that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help'.¹

[spoken text, Lauren]

The [*Untitled*] title of this piece is not intended as a persistent ambiguous space, but invites a creative act: one where the performer must intervene to title the piece and the performance. I created a version of this piece for spoken voice and electronics titled *burn the shelves* in 2016, that itself became a starting point for a method of quasi-improvised textual exploration by the duet of myself and Alistair Zaldua.

Lucas has written about how her creative practice demonstrates what she describes as 'a shift in [her] theoretical and personal concern for what Elin Diamond has labelled the "imperialistic and

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London; Vintage, 1929; 2001) p64; quoted in Caroline Lucas, [*Untitled*], 2013.

narcissistic” violence of the “authoritative ‘we’” to the individualised transgressive act of identification.² In doing this she acknowledges that,

‘A central concern running throughout [her] work is the reproduction of frameworks of power and privileged discourses, thereof women as symbolic and biological reproduces, as well as the reproduction of ‘women’ as a collective category.’³

This has to do with the way that she locates her practice in relation to an understanding of socio-cultural and musical traditions. She writes:

‘Whilst I acknowledge that my work is locatable in a wider artistic, historico-cultural context, my concern with the reproduction of power structures required the avoidance of defining (or legitimising) my work within the boundaries of privileged narratives of the ‘composer’ in Western musical discourses [...]’.⁴

Lucas’s framing of her practice therefore poses questions for how and if Alistair and I should try to locate this duet practice and way of working and of what working in this way might mean for the materials we seek to use and critique, and what we make from them.

06’00” [voice and violin: from *burn the shelves*]

[Setting 2]

[Sample 3]

whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing,
and I believe that they had a very great effect
that was unimportant compared with the sheer difficulty which faced them
when they came to set their thoughts on paper:
that is, that they had no tradition behind them
or one so short and partial that it was little help,
for we think back through our mothers if we are women.
it is useless to go to the great men writers for help
it is useless.

08’00” [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

² Caroline Lucas *multiple/radical/forms/comma/traces/creativity/of/constraint: a piece for solo voice and various accompaniment*, in *Gender, Age and Musical Creativity*, ed. By Catherine Haworth and Lisa Colton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016) pp185-201; pp184-5; cf. Elin Diamond, ‘The Violence of ‘We’: Politicizing Identification’ in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp 390-398.

³ Lucas (2016), p193.

⁴ Caroline Lucas, *Supporting Commentary*, PhD Thesis, (University of Leeds, 2012), p.3, fn.2.

In this work, Alistair and I draw on improvised practices and prepared texts that have been created using *Oulipo*-inspired techniques to derive new meanings from existing texts through critical rewritings, or translations, of work that address historical, political, aesthetic, and gender-based themes, and their relation to art and listening. The spoken voice, and its ambiguous placement between music and sound, performance and the everyday, is a key part of this.

08'30" [voice and violin: from *feminist pirate broadcasts*]

[Setting 1]

[Sample 4]

women's higher fundamental tone
- 250 cycles per second at the lowest end of the speaking range -
produces only one half as many audible overtones as a man's voice;
the higher frequencies are obliterated by the ear itself.
[...]
Don't cough: you will deafen millions of people.
Don't rustle your papers.
Don't say "was that alright" when you've finished,

10'30" [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

We are examining performative and compositional approaches in their combination through the creation of new texts for performance as a part of this work: by undertaking 'creative textual practices.'⁵ Such practices—that may include writing-as-rewriting, or writing-as-performance, or writing-as-composing—invite not only the re-evaluation of the texts themselves, but the contexts in which they are written, re-written, spoken, heard and performed. It is possible to, again, link this back to Lucas's original intentions in her work, as she states:

'The cutting-up and (re)assembling of text and sound, not only draws out new meanings, but its ambiguity creates a context in which the very process of individualised meaning making (rather than the content) is privileged.'⁶

As composer-performers, Alistair and I have agency to determine which practices we categorise under these labels, and to blur the boundaries between them, whereas Lucas differentiates these roles, stating:

⁵ cf Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans.by Margaret Waller. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984); Estelle Barrett, *Kristeva Reframed*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011) Barrett, 2011 and Lauren Redhead, 'Language as a Material Process', *Contemporary Music Review*, Special issue: Music and Language, ed. by Lauren Redhead, 39.3, (2020) 359-372.

⁶ Lucas (2012), p81.

'the main difference between composing and performing in this context is that as a performer I have more agency to shape the work in action, compared to working as a composer where I am facilitating the conditions that may or may not lead to the action and at that point my ownership/authorship of the work comes to an end'.⁷

12'00" [voice and violin: from *machines*]

[Setting 3]

[Sample 5]

Machines are more like vectors:
polishing the case creates aluminium dust,
some of the materials whose extraction is necessary to make information.

13'00" [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

This lecture-recital takes the form of a performance lecture, in the tradition of those by John Cage,⁸ in which we combine the performance of this duet performance of spoken word, e-violin and electronics, with an evaluation of this work within and through this performance: at the same time as performing the music, we aim to reflexively examine the methodology of practice research, considering creative practice both as its means of investigation and mode of presentation and communication. 'Evaluation' in this case is also not limited only to spoken or written text, as the violin 'plays into' the spaces offered by the spoken word, presenting its own spaces, responding to the spoken text, or reinterpreting it. This strategy is deliberately non-mimetic and serves as a parallel to the spoken word, oftentimes deliberately tenuous and exploring the extremes of difference within the texts. Thus we follow Cage's intentions for his practice, stated in his text on Rauschenberg:

'I am trying to check my habits of seeing, to counter them for the sake of greater freshness. I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I am doing.'⁹

14'30" [voice and violin: from *burn the shelves*]

[Setting 2]

[Sample 6]

within an inscrutable society
my heart had leapt
staring at the empty shelves

15'30" [spoken text, Lauren]

⁷ Messina Marcello Messina (2015) Provocation is My Goal: A Dialogue with Composer Caroline Lucas, *Contemporary Music Review*, 34:2-3, 210-222, DOI: 10.1080/07494467.2015.1094219, p.218.

⁸ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961)

⁹ John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work', in Cage (1961), pp98-109; p.106.

[Setting 0]

Lucas described the notion of practice-as-research within her own practice as,

'ideally placed to examine the workings of cultural power [...] it does, by its very nature, resist and reimagine dominant forms of knowledge [...] the reflective necessity of practice facilitates a 'dialectical movement' between self and the wider frameworks of power [...]'.¹⁰

Indeed, while the creative research we are undertaking forms a method of practice research, it is also an example of performative autoethnography, described by Denzin as a discourse that 'simultaneously writes and criticises performances'.¹¹

16'00" [voice and violin: from *machines*]

[Setting 3]

[Sample 7]

Open a file using your software:
computers turned out to be malleable.
Trying to update some part of the software,
it is hard to know what an actual practice might be
about packets of information rather than circuits of transmission
left to their own devices.

17'30" [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

There is, further, a deliberate plethora of traditions that both the duet practice that we are performing, and our performative evaluation of it, is in discourse with: I have mentioned those of Cage and experimental music, and of the *Oulipo* group and experimental literature. We might also mention free improvisation, sound poetry, feminist and digital aesthetics, performative writing and perhaps still others. Our aim is not to situate this practice only within these traditions, but by touching on and drawing from them to create new forms of making, writing, and knowing that themselves offer further opportunities for re-thinking, re-evaluating, and re-writing what we are doing and making, even as we are ourselves doing and making.

18'00" [voice and violin: from *machines*]

[Setting 3]

[Sample 8]

It was supposed to be the end.
It's an ongoing, rather than prior, condition,

¹⁰ Lucas (2016), p.201.

¹¹ Norman K Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2003). [ebook]

excluded from a political economy.
It is impossible to quantify.
A key to thinking this process is its abstraction:
What is attended to, what is measured (?)
It won't last and we know it.
Now humans are just part of the landscape that machines picture for other machines;
the perfect counterpoint to the old cyberculture:
an ensemble of images,
a sonic production universe,
that part of the inner ear that senses the tilting of the body.

[Violin keep performing to link 2 fragments]

[voice and violin: from *feminist pirate broadcasts*]

[Setting 1]

[Sample 9]

I put an aerial on my roof
and found a free airwave:
a leap into the unknown,
a grand finale, alternative health, aromatherapy, and a 'Mussels and Wine Party'.
Helping to build small-powered transmitters,
ignoring the censorship,
not caring whether anyone listened to us or not.

21'30" [spoken text, Lauren]

[Setting 0]

Caroline Lucas situates her practice within what she calls,

'the radical emancipatory potential of experimentalism'.¹²

In this presentation I have deliberately situated our work in relation to her practice and thought, taking the creative challenge of engaging with her work for me as the starting point for imagining a way of working and performing. But even though her composition *[Untitled]* is a relatively recent work that I have performed a number of times—including for broadcast on BBC Radio 3—and even though I have cited examples of her thinking from academic publications in books and journals, perhaps you are unfamiliar with her work as a composer. Perhaps you are wondering why we did

¹² Lucas in Messina (2015); p219.

not seek out more familiar examples, traditions, and jumping-off points. Perhaps it is clear that to do so would be to situate this work within the...

'power and privileged discourses', 'defining (or legitimising) narratives' and 'dominant forms of knowledge'

...that Lucas states her creative process aims to question and to avoid.

To situate our work and our evaluation of it within a critical context that feels unfamiliar or overlooked within the institutional frame in which we are here articulating it also causes us to question whether it is possible for us, too, to avoid those discourses, narratives, or forms of knowledge; to become, as for Cage,

unfamiliar with what [we are] doing:

23"00 [voice and violin: from *machines*]

[Setting 3]

[Sample 10]

Crossing the border,
rather than the sublime and the beautiful:
the paradox about the project of knowing the world.

[Violin keep performing to link 2 fragments]

24'00" [voice and violin: from *burn the shelves*]

[Setting 2]

[Sample 11]

Discouragement, criticism, writing, effect.

Unimportant difficulty, paper, tradition.

Partial help, think, mothers!

Women, useless writers, useless.

Discouragement, unimportant, partial women.

Criticism, difficulty, help: useless.

Writing, paper, think, writers!

Effect: tradition, mothers, useless.

Useless mothers, tradition, effect.

Writers think: paper, writing.

Useless help, difficulty, criticism.

Women: partial, unimportant, discouragement.

Effect: writing criticism, discouragement.

Tradition: paper, difficulty, unimportant.

Mothers, think, help, partial,

Useless writers, useless women.

25'00" [End]