From the Void, the Night: A Drawing-Writing Correspondence

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PREFACE

From the void, the night presents an unfolding encounter via a series of letters between two artist/designer/academics as they explore symbioses between their practices and thinking. The correspondence traverses topics that resonate with ideas of darkness, light, time, space, and sensation. Confronting spatial and epistemological boundaries, it begins to carve out a space of practice that embraces dark knowledge, material agency, and the unknown. The conversation begins with the discovery of an already-existing dialogue between bodies of work and thought stretching back to 2003-4, when, in separate efforts of practice that embraces dark knowledge, material agency, and the unknown, the two women made drawings on walls. Unknown to one another at the time, both researchers were employing similar strategies to explore the embodied state, the letters are themselves a statement about resisting the pull of the light (of light-as-clarity). They are not writing-as-explanation but writing-as-drawing; a live material process of thinking-through and drawing-out. Gleefully inhabiting the dark space of not-knowing, they remain a dark, cloudy, lively mass of potential energy and material. The form of a ‘letter’ was taken loosely, considered as an assemblage that might contain writing, images, and other materials – a mode of ‘letter-writing’ that sits somewhere between writing, drawing and performance. Written over the course of two weeks in which they were the only form of communication between the two, the letters are the raw product of an intensive creative exchange. While the authors are colleagues at the same College of Creative Arts, the correspondence presents a genuine temporal journey of getting to know one another’s creative thinking process, carving out a dynamic space of speculation about future practice. They reveal this process to be embodied and situated, with references to cultural events and indigenous understandings particular to Aotearoa New Zealand being entangled in the process of thinking-in-place. Intentionally presented here in their unrefined state, the letters are themselves a statement about resisting the pull of the light (of light-as-darkness). They are not writing-as-explanation but writing-as-drawing: a live material process of thinking-through and drawing-out. Gleefully inhabiting the dark space of not-knowing, they remain a dark, cloudy, lively mass of potential energy and material.

NOTES


BIOGRAPHIES

Wellington based artist Lisa Munnelly works within the context of critically engaged drawing in devising and adhering to strict frameworks in her work, Munnelly strives to eliminate arbitrary aesthetics. This restraint in mark, movement and material is designed to highlight the physicality of mark making and to enact, celebrate and analyse materials’ capacity to both perform and transform. Positioned at the boundary of drawing and performance, recent research highlights include ‘Dirty Edges and Clean Lines,’ a drawing performance for the Performing Writing Symposium (NZ), and her paper ‘Being In-Between’ presented at Drawing: Phenomenology arising lived experience through drawing (UK).

Jen Archer-Martin (of Pākeha and Ngā Puhi descent) is a spatial designer, researcher and educator. Her creative practice draws on design, writing and performance to explore how spatial and material agents contribute to wellbeing through facilitating and performing care. Caring human-nonhuman relationships are positioned as the foundation of healthy ecologies – interconnected networks of diverse agents that look after one other. Care is thus explored as a radically collaborative and open-ended creative practice that challenges ontological and epistemological boundaries. Recent work includes ‘taking note(s), performing care’ (Performing Writing, Wellington, 2017) and collaborations ‘Make/Use’ (Objectspace, Auckland, 2015) and bit-u-men-at-work’ (Performing Mobilities, Melbourne, 2015).
7 June 1987

Dear Lisa,

I was moved by your performance at Performing, writing: 1 Dark, dirty, smoky charcoal lines encompassing clean white space. Outlining the performance leaving black traces, not only on a tired sheet of hooded, marked paper, but accumulated on white lines, crossed palaces and under fingernails.

If you remember, I spoke to you after your work. And you told me about some of your earlier pieces. About how your process-based drawing practice emerged from your postgraduate research, and the moment when your work shifted from drawing charcoal figures on white ground, to drawing the ‘ground’ itself.

I went and looked up your work, The Motherboard. 2 A heap, dark, smoky field of marks, black charcoal marks. I could almost feel the physical resonance of this void, or this place - not an emptiness, but a tangible darkness. I was compelled forward through marks, immersed in its rhythmic materiality.

I went and read what you had written about your work. Another dimension was added to the resonance that I had felt. Did you know that we were doing our postgraduate research at almost the same time, same place? And the connections don’t stop there. The work I read, the area exercise it became.

Did you know that both writing about sensation and rhythm - the embodied spatial experience of the field, or ground, make tangible in the surface of the artwork? Externalizing the interval, externalizing the external, becoming-material. Did you know that both writing about a line, and about paper becoming-writing? X

For me, it was about dissolving the wall - the architectural barrier - and redefining dwelling as a temporal becoming-interior through materialized rhythms and rituals. X

I have enclosed an image for you of a work I made. 6 It is also a drawing on a wall, also a field of lines.

I wonder if this resonance, this already-existing dialogue, is perhaps a ground that might be materialized through further correspondence. I feel as though there is a rich field of darkness and light, lines and shadow that connect our practices, thinking and the way we use space and materiality. I am curious as to what new thoughts might emerge in this space between us.

I see this exchange as it itself a kind of drawing, or drawing-together, through (form) time and space, similarly to how we both explore drawing-as-writing/writing-as-drawing in our performances, writing works. We could explore how our practices might pull up against one another, creating a drawing through whatever evidence is left behind.

In anticipation,

Jan
Dear Jen,

Thank you for your letter, and invitation for further exchange. I agree that there are many correlations between our practices, and I am interested to explore these crossovers in our work further, particularly in respect to how they may resonate with the idea of darkness.

By your enclosed image entitled ‘Suburban Horizons’, viewing your photograph of the darkened interior it dawned on me that I had personally viewed this installation (interference?) of yours; had stood in that room thirteen years ago and looked through the window as described. For the record here, I note how easy it is to resort to light and its emergence (albeit in metaphor) for perception. Perhaps through this dialogue we will develop a lexicon for the attributes of darkness, be able to offer an alternative to the now well worn copying of light and knowledge.

The second impression I had from your letter was how similar our work looks. The image of your work ‘Suburban Horizons’ is nearly an inversion of my ‘Motherboard’ wall drawing. I’ve enclosed a still from my recent Performing Writing work that points out how this similarity between our practices continues. The darkened space in the image I attach you will recognize as the black box of the Propeller Stage in Bat’s Theatre Wellington.

With the call from Performing Writing to challenge the relationship between written text and live music, I proposed to make use of some of my favourite passages on drawing. To perform a scavenged collection of quotes and terms, stony sentences and magnified words, all coagulating around the act of mark making. A fuliginous foremses mass – yet fulgurant, one such word encompass a collection that I’ve sworn away for future use having the colour or consistency of soot or smoke; like soot in cloudiness or obscurity. You may recall how in the performance a number of voices read these selected excerpts, alongside the drawing performance that presented the foil physically, metaphorically, and as a working process. One of the quotes by Jose Fuster read: You achieve quality of simultaneous simultaneity and visibility is the internal dynamic of artistic vision; possessing an overwhelming depth, it is felt in the subject as the desire of blindness. ‘Fuster’s words on the operations of thought captured what I was attempting to show through the drawing developing as a play of folds, printing/erasing, erasing/printing/erasing. The rhythm of fold as a procedural and perceptual movement of expansion and contraction that at once reveals and conceals speaks. I think that the experimental rhythms you emphasize in your letter, is a and from the interplay between the externalization of the internal and the internalization of the external.

Your letter gave me the opportunity to reflect upon the experience of performing in a theatre. It was a first for me. Yes, my drawing practice has been labeled performative for its tendency to engage both the gallery space and the body, and because I often install drawings over the exhibition period. However, having people come and go through the gallery and witness a drawing in progress is a discovered, completely different from performing a drawing to an audience. The attempt to capture the slightly shifting experience in a poem attached here. Obviously the black box of the theatre is a inverse to the white cubes of the gallery, and standing in the dark at the beginning of the performance was the most intense moment of the piece for me. The dark interior increased my somatic sensitivity to the surrounding audience, I could sense their bodies relax into their seats, and then tense through a delay to their expectation of when the work would begin. The anxiety of darkness left luminous; the contrast of shifting from one mass of the dark, to one alone is the light, and from being a watcher to the watchtelt nearly too much to bear.

Perhaps no more than a mere account of stage fright, but as an experience the effect of darkness here was palpable, tangible and very real to me.

Lisa


Dear Lisa,

Your letter has sent me down such a warren of rabbit-holes that my mind has got all tied up in knots.

Fragments of sticky sentences mark the exits:

- "A sense of the attributes of darkness - the 'desire of lightness', the 'afright of darkness', the 'effect of darkness', a 'framework to illuminate the uttermost', materials called upon to [enact]..." (emphasis added)

- "and so if I have been privileged to do some knowledge of my own, some of which I hope will coalesce or become manifest, here is my attempt to follow these threads into the dark..." 

Toward a lexicon of darkness...

- Timothy Morton, dark ecology: ecological awareness, dark-depressing, dark-uninhabited, and, the third darkness, dark-sweet.

- "ecopoetics (Morton again): that which thinks dark ecology - a weird knowing that knows itself; more like letting be known.


- dark knowledge: "knowledge which may exist, and may be relevant, but has not yet been discovered because the boundaries of the topic under analysis have not yet been identified.

I also had a framework for eliminating the arbitrary.

1. Immersing myself in the experience, noticing what's not.

2. Particularly addicted to small acts of care performed by people, places, things, and materials.

3. Take note of what you notice, using whatever is to hand.

4. Select three moments of note and archive each one as a note — one page of Base 1 index card per note.

5. Perform actions 1.5 on each day of activity leading up to the event, and on each day of the event (3 notes/day).

I noticed a couple of ways in which darkness performs care; in particular, it seems to care for light, and for colour. It has a kind of effective magnetic pull that, on the one hand, draws one's intensity of light and colour, and on the other, consumes, ingests or inhales it, sometimes absolutely.

...and it turns our lights off. Time to go.

I am starting to wonder at some things bubbling up from these black depths...

- a posthuman, materialist, ecological understanding of dark knowledge
- a way of thinking that allows for the emergence of the unknowable
- a way of seeing that facilitates this practice

Waiting for further rabbit holes, I remain

Wandering in delightful obscurity,

Jen
25 JUNE 2017

Dear Jan,

'Vef creator is the one who agrees to venture forth with no certainty and follow this thread unwinding ahead of him like Arachne's thread and falling behind him like a spider's web.'

- cast off
- cutting
- marking
- measuring
- reading
- dark
- foetonic
- deep

With all that you offered in your last letter, which thread to pick up and follow? Which line to cast off into the deep?

Te Po... these words I need to record... these words do not reflect the poem... I repeat and it repeats and it repeats...

Te Po... these words I need to record... these words do not reflect the poem... I repeat and it repeats and it repeats...

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In contrast,

our terminology of day and night, of black and white, of dark and light, are only the names of productivity

blind us to the nuances of right.

As I write this letter, Sunday afternoon is looking into Sunday evening, the day has been overcast and the light is fading quickly.

Today the 25th of June, marks the start of Matariki*, a week-long holiday in New Zealand, to celebrate the Māori New Year.

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Narrative environments, whether staged or not, function a lot like that. They are like clusters of stars.

There is always more than we observe and an unknowable poetic potential holds the elements together, waiting to let a thousand and one tales flow.

Indeed even the narrative that has unfolded in this short letter has delivered me to a place I didn't know Fiction.. at the outset.

Well, from the void and through eleven degrees of night, guided by seven sisters on a swell of a thousand and one tales, may this night take us...

Les.

* Matariki is the Māori name for Pleiades, an internationally recognized galactic cluster which can be viewed from anywhere in the world. The rise of the Matariki star cluster is an important time in the Māori calendar as it signifies the Māori New Year.


3. Frank den Ouden, Space, Time, Narrative. The exhibition as post-spectacular stage (Dahlgren, 2011), 101.
26 June

Dear Lisa,

I feel like I am being guided by a force...

"Can you not find the thread where the narrative?"

The very notion of the singular narrative or thread feels too close to me, to an ideal of a pure truth or ultimate destination.

I don't think we're going to reach one, however long our correspondence continues.

There are many stories of Te Kare and Te Po, the void and the night, and many of Māori - the Māori one year named for the cluster of seven stars. These are narratives that have unfolded through time, along the lines of generations of whākahuapu, the lines forging, the stories emerging in plural lines, multiple but no less true.

None of these stories are more to tell, in that they have been passed down to me, the thread of my whākahuapu being broken as it is by time, colonization and geographic dislocation from the place of my ancestors.

So I am searching for my story to carve out from the void.

This is a personal search that I did not anticipate coming up in this conversation, however it is all, obviously, interconnected, entangled, enmeshed - the desire to reach back through time, through kinship, to follow the threads that lead back to homelands - to places of belonging, where the dark ecological knowledge of the land and the people were one.

To draw upon a metaphor - Papatūānuku - the earth, not as inert resource but a life force - the life force that was once enmeshed in such a close, dark, embrace with Rangi - the sky. The world we inhabit - the world of light - te ao mārama, is merely a pocket of space in the web - an inside carved from the dark.

Your 'Drawing Upon Mother' again draws me in, much like the first Motherboard, but this time it tells me the story of another place, carved out, the space delineated by the inclined frame, reaching at once down to, and up from, the horizontal plane of the ground.

As drawn in but kept out - this space is no longer for people to inhabit.

This is the space of material, of the dark abstinence of the ritual labours performed by woman-body-charcoal-ground-wall in the process of drawing the field. Floor-standing woman-body and wall-clinging ground-wood wet through the aegidic medium of charcoal, and this is what was left behind: a fullness, booty, demo-cloud of carbone - embalmed memory of long-died life.

This vision of a possible future work is compelling. Yet it frustrates - this sense of being held back from stepping in, from allowing one's field of vision to be completely filled by the dynamic, mystic, liveliness of the black field.

But maybe holding back is what is required...

...to stand back and let dark, perhaps non-human, knowledge be known...

...to stop talking and instead listen to what materials have to say...

...not to always try to see the figure but instead pay attention to the field...

...to carve an interior of darkness from the void so that we may sense it, but to know that we might never, should never, really know it

I am not sure when I will next be able to write, but I remain

unknowing, yet grateful for your thoughtful correspondence,

Yea

Words emerging from the void

An inversion of enlightenment binaries of light/knowledge, dark/ignorance

A different kind of knowledge - a dark knowledge

Barely-perceptible but real, nonetheless.

That knowledge is always there in the background

Making sense of the noise

Manifolding a field of perception from the void

Before becoming something in becoming itself

Before becoming-field is becoming nothing

From nothing - the horizon of stories emerges, deep field of the unknown - that which is yet to be known

The field of the unknown is constantly shifting

Not a homogeneous mass, but richly textured with the varied qualities of not-knowing

The dark knowing that is not-knowing is a mode, a sensation

A vibration; a shiver

A deep pulling of a breath, haptic or dissonant

Te pōkaka - the night of feeling.

Before te pō, to kore-te-rano - the void in which nothing is felt

Te kore-te-rano - the space without boundaries

To move from the void to the dark that is night is to introduce boundaries, to carve out a space of sensation

Not by erecting walls

Not by becoming-temporal - the birth of the moment

A thing that is distanced through its very intensity and resonance in time

Rather that its discrete delimitation in space

The boundaries are fuzzy - limits emerge through the accumulated density of instances that almost reach them

Or through being at such a distance from a centre of intensity that it is no longer perceptible

Multiple truths are possible in this not-knowing

A Leghepith - a gutter or parting path - in which truth is not binary

Only a thread of narrative can draw a singular linear truth from the field

But there are other ways to find one's way that is follows the thread of the architect-spider

Ways that replace the plurality of partial truths - of different intensities of not-knowing

In order to experience these intensities as sensation we must immerse ourselves in the darkness

Must attempt to sense the still beyond space.

But in order to avoid the void beyond the dark perception we must attack the field

A way to act - to move through not-knowing, rather than succumb to its depths completely

Through ritual action we build our human wet - a field of our own

A dwelling-place through which the darkness becomes visible

A set of choreographed instructions, a rhythmically looking to the stars, a practice, an orientation

Creating a space for not-knowing, for the recreation of dark knowledges, dark perception

From which all other knowledge and perception emerges

That comprises the phenomenological field

And sets the mood
28 June 2017

Dear Jen,

Until our next correspondence...

...some words and an image.

-lee

"[When] the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished,
our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality without things.
This is what happens in the night.
Night is not an object before me; it swallows me and infiltrates through all my senses,
stifling my recollections and almost destroying my identity.
I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out
from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance.
Night has no outline; it is itself in contact with me and its unity is the mystical unity of the 'mana'.

It is pure depth without foreground or background,
without surfaces and without any distance separating it from me."