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The art of letters: An epic journey of intimate thought and exchange

Keywords

affect
embodiment
form/content
letter writing
performance
storytelling

Abstract

A call was sent out to participate in a writing workshop. Five strangers attended and connected through a shared interest in narrative and storytelling. Inspired by 'Phi territories', an article in the previous edition of JWCP, they formed the question 'How is storytelling an embodiment of performative or tacit processes?' and set about authoring a collaborative article in response. Despite being united by mutual interest, their visions of how to put those ideas into practice would diverge. How to mould something cohesive and impose form and order on multiple approaches to content generated by researchers of different backgrounds? An experimental collaborative process was developed, based on writing letters and replying to the next person in the sequence in a relay of call and response. This experiment would be overseen by an outsider member, who would not be addressed, nor write a letter, but who would receive a copy of each of the letters and create an intervention in response. And so the stage was set for the story to begin ...

Call-response enables the performer and the audience to become one unit as they create and interpret the rhetorical act together. Both the audience and the performer take turns initiating the call and responding. Therefore, the total communal event must be examined.

(Greave 1998: 34)

Five women and the desire to write and receive letters started this creative process, a journey of jumps into the unknown. Writing to an unknown other, receiving from a relative stranger, reading and responding together in a chain of echoes.

1. The call

The initial call came by e-mail. Could we attend a workshop in interdisciplinary creative writing, with a view to participating in a collaborative *JWCP* project? We said yes, and found ourselves sitting in a conference break-out room after listening to several presentations about previous projects. We had all expressed an interest in the presentation of the 'Phi territories: Neighbourhoods of collaboration and participation' project (Antonopoulou and Dare 2012). The challenge was laid down. Could we combine the distinct interests of five writers and researchers, each of us bringing new expertise, different specializations, each of us writers of a different kind? We did not know. We did not know anything apart from each other's names, and had no idea of the direction or challenges we would face.

2. The process

During the workshop we each followed trails of interest that led the five of us to come together around a table, writing down key words from the day's stories in a circular formation and drawing lines to connect the concepts. After some manipulation, these lines eventually took the form of a central question, which was to become the spur of our collaborative writing project: *How is storytelling an embodiment of performative or tacit processes?* We talked through ways of addressing this question and, in the absence of further meetings, decided to write letters to each other. We decided on a structure and timescale for the performative experiment, and before parting, exchanged addresses.

Alice began the process by writing a letter to Kata. Upon receipt of this, Kata wrote to Seraphima, who responded by writing to Emma, who completed the sequence by writing to Alice. Each letter included a visual component – a found image or snapshot – to serve as a trigger. A copy of each letter was also sent simultaneously to Claire, who acted as a silent reader – a tacit audience waiting in the wings – a role created out of her own resistance to the uncertainty of the process. Claire did not escape her call though, for her task was to create a response to all the letters. After all the letters had been sent and received, the five women met again to receive Claire's response and initiate a strategy for a collaborative article generated by the content.

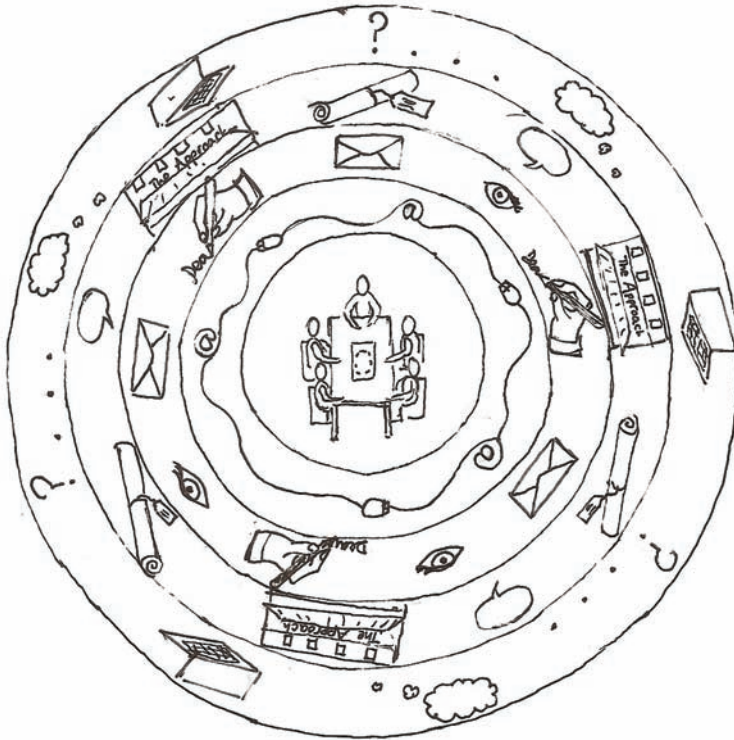


Figure 1a.

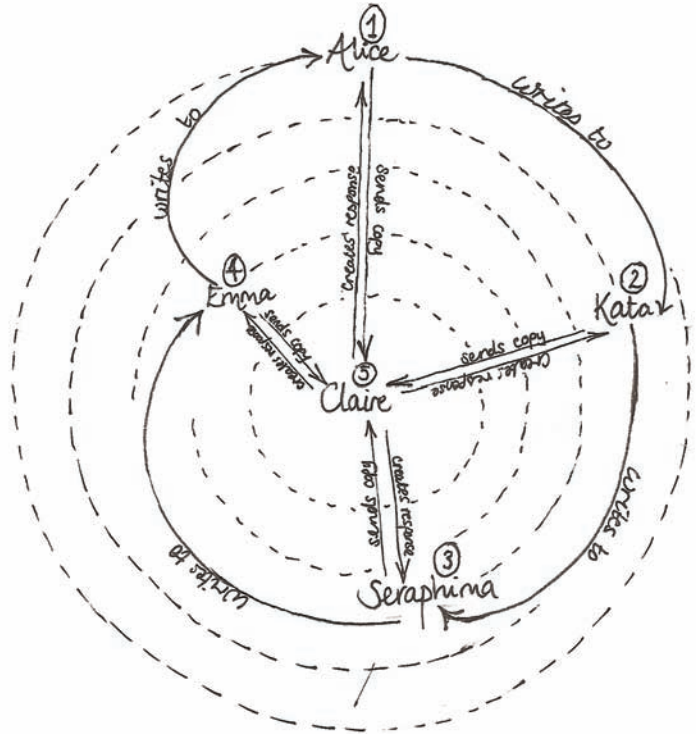


Figure 1b.

Soliloquy

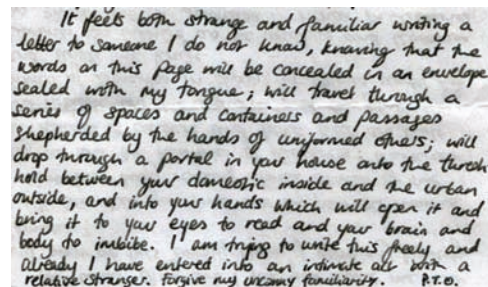
As the five heroes set about their journey, layers of time, media, desire and circulation gathered them together in concentric circles. The inner ring was formed by their first meeting at the workshop; the second one followed their circular flows of communication and planning by email; the third traversed the slower circuit of the letters sent and received by hand; the fourth outer circle takes the shape of their second meeting. In this meeting a surprising intervention took place in the form of a gift. The letters were returned to their authors by their reader in a modified form: each one cut up and rejoined into lengthy scrolls, rolled up and fastened with a quote from Roland Barthes: one scroll per scribe, each gift bearing the name of the original sender. These gifts were received with such joy the writers wished they could end the process there. The collaborative writing of this article forms the fifth ring - perhaps the trickiest - of the process. How to write in chorus? Five minds, five hearts, five voices and fifty fingers with which to write, erase, rewrite, edit, and claim. The prospect of writing a collaborative article is in fact more intimidating to our protagonists than writing individual letters to relative strangers. Nonetheless, they set upon the final ring of the journey, holding on to the desire to preserve and re-tell the material and affective traces of their embodied acts of epistolary storytelling. What follows is a glance into the various stages of our journey, a process that generated a library of fragments of intimate thought, distance and contemplation: an archive of intimate exchange.

3. Responses: Five subjects tell their stories

3.1 Once upon a time (Alice)

It was the figuration of English terraced houses in the 'Phi territories' article that first caught my attention. Antonopoulou and Dare's treatment of neighbourhoods as sites for both fictional and real collaboration made me think about the paradoxical proximity and distance of isolated lives within individual dwellings in the densely populated streets of London. How can we collaborate with our neighbours when we do not even speak with them? It is not so dissimilar in the academic

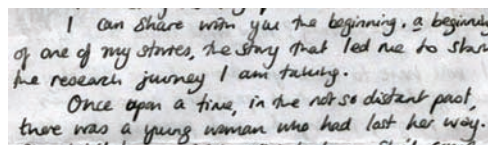
world, in the chambers and corridors of the university. Reading about the figure of the house also made me think about its portals – those spaces and borders that connect inside and outside: windows, doors, letterboxes... Letterboxes: those anachronistic apertures which nowadays get choked with circulars, material ‘spam’, demanding bills; as opposed to carefully handwritten letters from an ‘I’ to a ‘thou’. Yes – I wanted to write and receive letters. Handwritten letters are affirmative: they prove that the one exists towards another across space and time. They are also a mode of address to the self.



It feels both strange and familiar writing a letter to someone I do not know, knowing that the words on this page will be concealed in an envelope sealed with my tongue; will travel through a series of spaces and containers and passages shepherded by the hands of uniformed clerks; will drop through a portal in your house into the threshold between your domestic inside and the urban outside, and into your hands which will open it and bring it to your eyes to read and your brain and body to imbibe. I am trying to write this freely and already I have entered into an intimate all with a relative stranger. Forgive my dreamy familiarity. P.T.O.

Figure 2.

I sat in my house and began writing to Kata. I situated myself by describing my surroundings, the furnishings and the atmosphere of my home. I told her I was imagining her in her home, but that it was difficult without knowing her, without knowing her home. I imagined my letter dropping into this unknown space, being picked up, opened and read. I thought and wrote about the body parts that connect us – hands, lips and eyes – the parts that Walter Benjamin dwells upon in his essay ‘The Storyteller’ (1968: 108). I proceeded to tell Kata the beginning of a story about my journey into the research field of ‘radical libraries’.



*I can share with you the beginning, a beginning, of one of my stories, the story that led me to start the research journey I am taking.
Once upon a time, in the not so distant past, there was a young woman who had lost her way.*

Figure 3.

I illustrated my story with a drawing of a sign in a field and asked her to imagine what a radical library might be. I expressed hesitancy to tell her too much, as I knew I would not get a response from her, only from a deferred other. I left my story hanging, closing the letter with an open door, a provocation for the next performer in the relay.

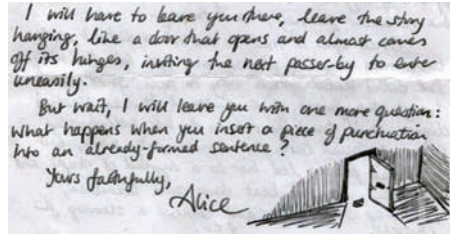


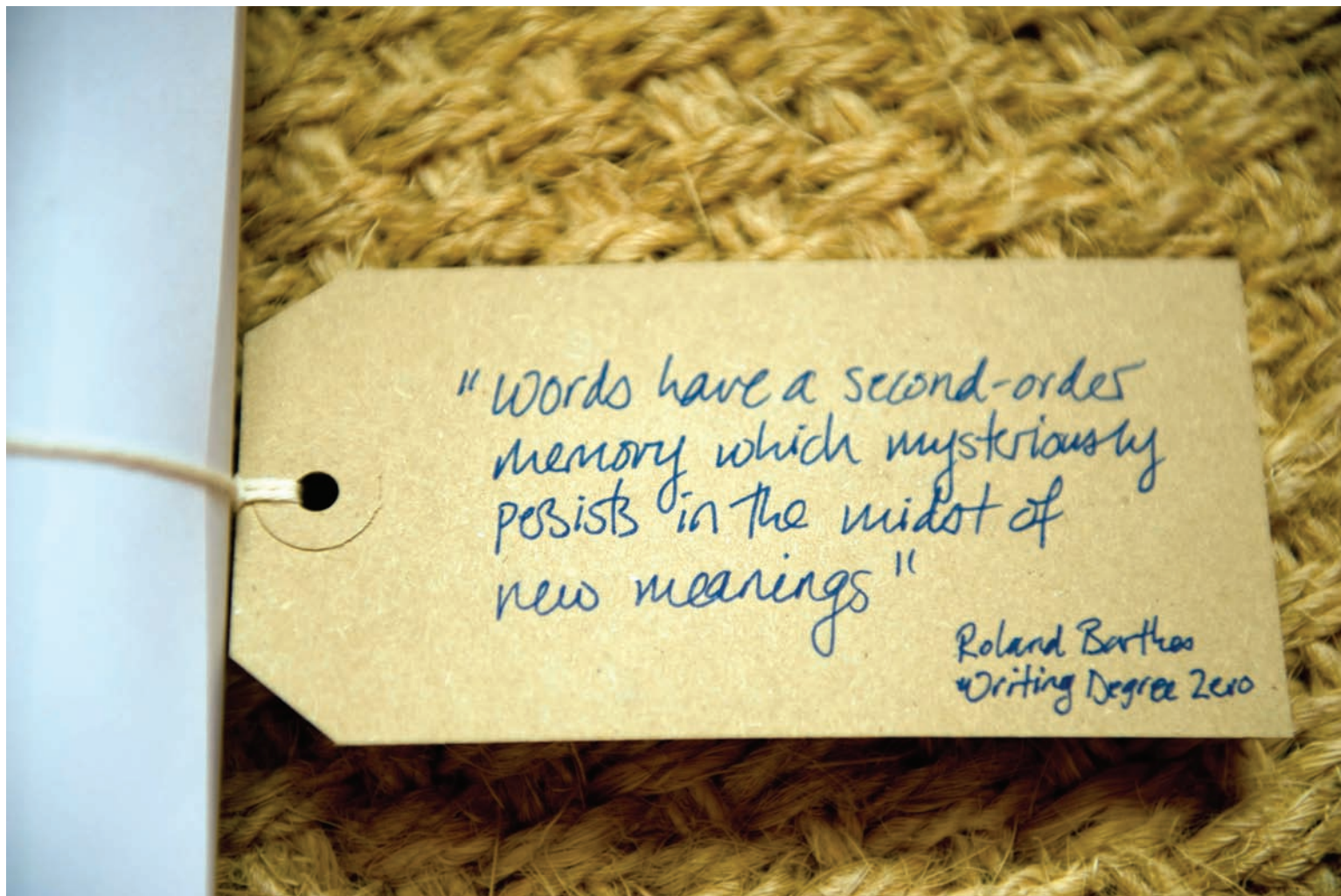
Figure 4.

Little did I know, at this point, that Kata would be spurred into writing her response after unexpectedly encountering me in another university room – A Room of Our Own – which brought us closer to the form of a living radical library than either of us could have imagined.

3.2 Atmospheres of performance and memory (Kata)

Receiving the first letter from Alice, opening up the small blue envelope, reading it, taking in her thoughts and questions, her handwriting and drawings, and letting it sink in for a day, made me question how I could possibly account for all the ideas and emotions she triggered in me in a response to Seraphima; how to describe and recover it in a letter? What would be lost in the records of our storytelling in the form we chose and what new meanings will be discovered?

Through our letter-writing, the documents of the performative act of telling and sharing stories are simultaneously created. Letters are spurs of memory, a gift for memory to become present, to manifest in the 'now'. But once the story, the act, the fleeting sensation, is made manifest, it becomes something other: a record. I no longer know what I wrote about to Seraphima. I only remember stories floating around me, the ones I entered and escaped – their weight and the



"Words have a second-order
memory which mysteriously
persists in the midst of
new meanings"

Roland Barthes
"Writing Degree Zero"

Figure 5.

impossibility of capturing them. In a way, what we are attempting to do here is to capture the stories that unfolded around and beyond us, whirling in ripples. Through the ephemera we have created we are exposing ourselves to openness – to an unknown something we try to get close to.

I received Alice's letter the day before attending a Feminist Genealogies Conference. When I left home for the event I put the letter in my bag, thinking that the re-enacted scene of our first encounter might help me to know how to continue our common thread, how to let the story move along to Seraphima. Here I was, at a seminar at Goldsmiths again, in a room filled with women, in an episode of unfurling stories with their particular rhythms. As the conference proceeded, the lecture room got sticky with stories, memories, with sobs, blushes, snarls, guffaws. Heavy emotions flared and I again felt paralysed when trying to find words – any word to start the letter. And then I looked around and noticed Alice. She was there, in the room with me and with all the collective and individual life stories of becoming, of the potential and the virtual, of the processes of making a difference.

In her letter to Emma, Seraphima commented that my letter 'was all about ghosts'. She went on to write about memories, how we are all of our memories and about the act of forgetting. Perhaps we are also all collectors: capturing our life stories, the living memories sealed in our bodies. Words failed me in fully recording the moments of intensity I encountered when I wrote my response on that particular day.

Of course affect is a difficult thing to write about, the exposure of the intimacies of selves in public gets to you, gets to your body. My inability to convey my experiences to others in a language in which I am always going to be only a curious visitor drove me to find other ways of expression. After the conference I rushed off to see Gillian Wearing's *Self-Made* (2010), her recent film screened as part of her show at Whitechapel Gallery. The film offered participants of the project 'to discover something about themselves through performance' (Wearing 2010) and offered us, the viewers, to travel alongside them, not unlike the way the five of us did in this experiment. I included a picture from the exhibition flyer for Seraphima, concluding my letter by writing on the sign in the image and inserting myself in to our story.

3.3 Of ghosts and desire (Seraphima)

There were two ideas resonating with me after our workshop. The first was that writing can push you into another learning space because when you see the words they usher you into other connections. The second was that if you know exactly what you are going to write then it probably won't be very interesting.

When we left the table we were in a blank space, with no idea of what we would receive or in turn write about. We had received our call to action, but had not yet been given the materials to

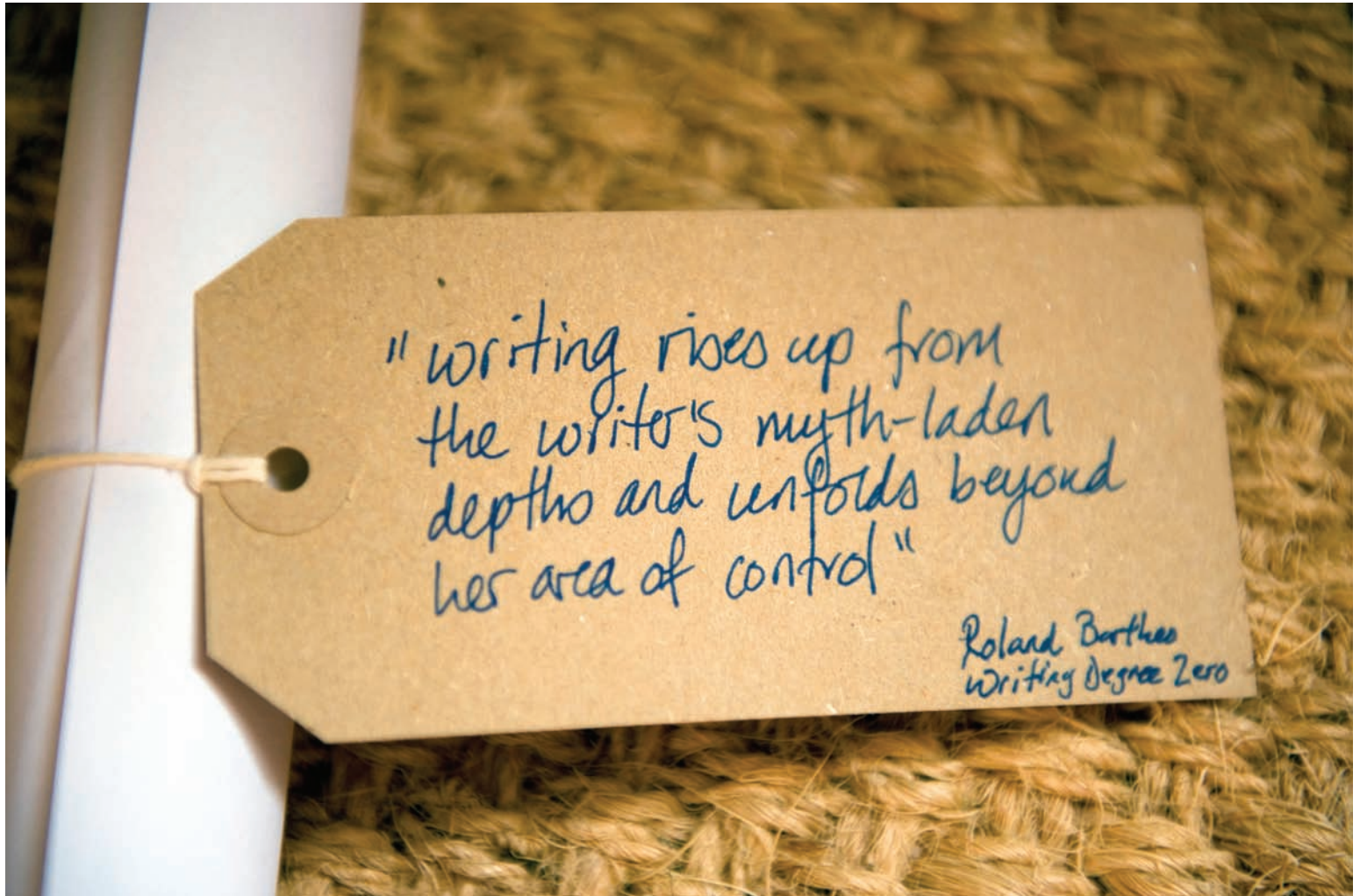


Figure 8.

make the journey. I could not help linking the process we were embarking upon to the idea of the writer's journey, or the hero's journey, which is so common in the world of fiction. I was also unsure about what my contribution to an academic journal could be, since my practice is primarily creative rather than critical.

When Kata's letter arrived, I was busy reading other people's invented stories, so I placed the letter on my desk. I left it there for a few hours, the brown envelope quietly simmering in the back of my mind. I waited until I had space to consider it, and, making a cup of tea, opened it as if it were a gift. Kata had been playful. The mundane office envelope was decorated with a large stamp celebrating the *Dandy* comic, with an image of Desperate Dan's chiselled, green-shadowed jaw. It made me think of childhood, of sitting on the stairs reading a neighbour's borrowed comics. I turned the letter over, opening it carefully along the short side, and pulled out a sheet of green paper. This was wrapped around another sheet with an image of a man holding up a sign that read 'I'm Desperate'. This made me laugh.

Kata wrote about sitting in a lecture theatre with Alice's letter in her bag, writing to me 'joyfully and curiously, inserting my punctuation into our common sentence, or story'. She described letter writing as an 'intimate act'. The letter had a stream-of-consciousness feel to it, and was an account of Kata 'Look[ing] around lost and desperate to hold onto something in this whirl of emotions ... I turn to you, and the paper and the pen'. The paper and the pen – and me/Claire – acted as something stable, substantial, something that could be held on to. Kata had not known what she was going to write, but she had already been pushed into another space.

When reading Kata's letter, I was struck by the links already being made by the act of undertaking the project. I was sitting at my desk surrounded by work, but I could imagine Kata and the building she was in, I could imagine the letter from Alice blazing a hole in Kata's bag. Alice was, to some extent, actually in Kata's bag, and Kata was, to another extent, still in that building as I sat at my desk and drank my tea, and I was, to some extent, thinking about Kata and Alice and the building, but also lost in my own reflections about my own creative practice. I had been pushed into another space, but at the same time I had, in the back of my mind, recollections from my own visual and gustatory library. I sat and drank my tea, and, like Proust with his madeleines, felt the flickering links between absence and presence. What was Kata looking for? How did 'turning to' the letter, to the paper and pen, help her? What meaning could I take from her letter?

I felt like a detective – where would I go next? Kata had been lost and she had written me a story. I had to respond with my answer to Emma – a woman I did not know – and was conscious of the fact that Claire would also be reading our correspondence. I could feel myself being pushed into another space through the act of writing a letter to an unknown reader. I could not help linking this to my own writing practice, and my own research. The act of writing letters

began to reflect that quest for meaning undertaken by the autobiographical subject. Always looking, exploring, writing – though by the time you reach a point of understanding that desire has passed.

In the days before receiving Kata's letter, I had come across a video by the artist David Raymond Conroy which summed up this feeling, so I was surprised that Kata's letter re-created it almost exactly. The video, titled 'Hauling/It's not the past but the present that determines the future', traces the creator's experiences with Internet image searching or 'shopping', as he calls it. 'I don't know what I want, but I'll know it when I see it' he says (Conroy 2011–2012). Like the researcher, or the writer. Like the autobiographical subject, who hauls memories around with him or her. Like Proust with his madeleines.

What do we do with these composite images, how do we resolve the tension between them? This is part of the challenge, and I can only think that the story-writing is the link. The story is everything. The movement from searching for meaning to being presented with an artefact, which contains a story.

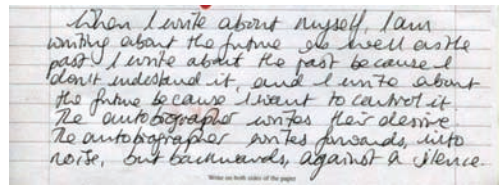


Figure 9.

In her work on storytelling and autobiography, the critic Adriana Cavarero mentions a necessary other required in the telling of stories about the self ([1997] 2000: 82). There was a lack of relation among the group because we did not know each other and had purposefully not revealed information about our interests or backgrounds. This lack of relation seemed to enable a frankness, but also seemed to engender a creative practice. I could not help noticing that Claire, who was supposed to sit apart and think critically, became an actor in this piece, and wrote personally about her experience. She told us her story so that it could be included in this narrative, so that the narrative would belong to her also, and so that we will be able to 'tell it for her'. Cavarero describes this as 'reciprocal biographical activity', or, 'put simply, I tell you my story in order to make you tell it to me' ([1997] 2000: 63). We have gone through this meandering process of writing collectively, as actors without scripts, knights without a battle, writers without a subject; yet in this case the story was the journey. The journey was the purpose. So we put pen to paper, to tell our stories to others.

Intervention: The anxious rottweiler (Claire)

We were requested to choose an ‘authorial metaphor’ for ourselves during the creative writing workshop, so I introduced myself as an ‘anxious rottweiler’; as having the skill or habit of asking critical questions. I half hoped this introduction would be a way of procuring permission for myself, from the group, to say the things I might come to say, and the reverse of permission: a warning.

I have formed a role in this experiment of the outsider, the receiver, the editor, the watcher, the monitor. The one who does not write but who reads instead, the one who is hoped or presumed or assigned to be forming opinions, responses, even insights.

Much art is committed to placing limits on imagination. When we accept such crashingly low standards for artworks, and find ourselves amazed at banalities, we debase ourselves. This question of standards is hard to negotiate socially, and this level of honesty is hard to articulate. But through it there is understanding that is worth having, and so I am committed to sensing where my standards are and where they should be, despite the obscurity of the process. This is the ‘anxious’ part of ‘anxious rottweiler’. The ‘rottweiler’ part is the critical voice I attempt to bring to the project. The response I offered in my capacity as monitor was to remake the letters I had been sent into scrolls.

I scanned and printed each page of each letter, beginning and ending with the front and back of the envelope, respectively. I kept the salutation with its envelope; the rest of the letters I cut up along the lines of the sentences, one side of the page to the other, everything remaining legible. I reassigned these strips to other letters in no particular order, trying to keep the endings at the end, and taped all the strips together to form four new letters in long sheets. I rolled them into scrolls and tied them up with labels, with the name of the recipient and a quote from Roland Barthes’, *Writing Degree Zero*. My wonky, taped-up pieces of paper, complete with fluff from the carpet, were received with real pleasure. They were given in the manner of gifts and I think they were received as such. But more was happening than that. I had dismantled, or dismembered, or violated, cut into pieces, the letters I had been sent in a spirit of giving. I gave back something wonky, not because I cannot tape pieces of paper together straight; something crude, not because I don’t know how to make objects carefully and with subtlety. This violence has not been identified as violence in this project; it seems to have ended up as just one more opinion that I hold.

Academia thinks it is a place where critical thought is enabled and brought to flourishing, and it may well be that. It is also (and it knows it), is a place of egos, of careerism, of sycophancy, exploitation, laziness and callousness. I have willingly entered into this cold matrix to develop and to challenge my thinking. In this project, I established a role for myself that allowed me to remain apart, to wait and see what I was given, to judge and violate what others had carefully made. Violence is not necessarily always present in an act of appropriation, but it



Figure 10.

very often is. It seems to me that violence fails when the violence given is not received as such; when it goes unnoticed.

In terms of my own research interests, the commodity exchange operates on this surface level, with its attendant rituals and expected behaviours. This surface level obscures the operations beneath, as capital works to produce mystification, which operates to obscure the exploitation, appropriation and alienation on which the commodity exchange depends. These characteristics are obscured in the form of the commodity, which bears no sign of its production process, a process which generates mystification through a surface of appearance. The production of value continues, regardless of where we look.

This is perhaps a transposition too far, but it gives me a way to say that as with capital, in the midst of which and with which we make and re-make our social relations, what interests me here is the operation that is obscured.

3.4 Style over substance? (Emma)

After reading initial responses to the fifth stage – the collaborative writing up of our experience – I was immediately struck by the realization that others’ reflections centred almost exclusively on questions of form and process. I thought it important to pay some further consideration to the content of the letters themselves, much of which I found stimulating and rich. Themes such as ghosts, legacies, genealogies, intergenerational dissemination of biographies and stories emerged. I particularly liked Alice’s theme of libraries and what she wrote concerning ‘fiction in libraries and fictional libraries’. The concept of libraries could be seen as a link between the letters themselves. The autobiographies that Seraphima wrote about would be housed in libraries, the griots and oral historians I mentioned in my letters are living, breathing libraries.

Throughout, the content often seemed marbled with, or infused by, a somewhat ghostly or otherworldly sense. My emphasis on these elements could be the result of my own particular bias and interests. When we were asked to choose two autobiographical words to describe ourselves I selected ‘magical realist’. I do not mean for these terms to be analysed independently of each other as Claire does with her ‘anxious rottweiler’. They work in tandem and to separate them may suggest that I am referring to myself as a ‘realist’ – term I find limited in its futile attempt to assert authority and categorization upon the chaos of opportunity and chance. To be clear, I do not subscribe to the myth of the ‘real world’.

The Barthes quotation fastening Kata’s scroll read: ‘Writing rises up from the writer’s myth-laden depths and unfolds beyond [her] area of control’ (Barthes 1977, emphasis added, original ‘his’). For me, this quote conjured images of invocation and led me to consider the magic and power inherent both in the act of writing and in the manipulation of written forms.



Figure 11.

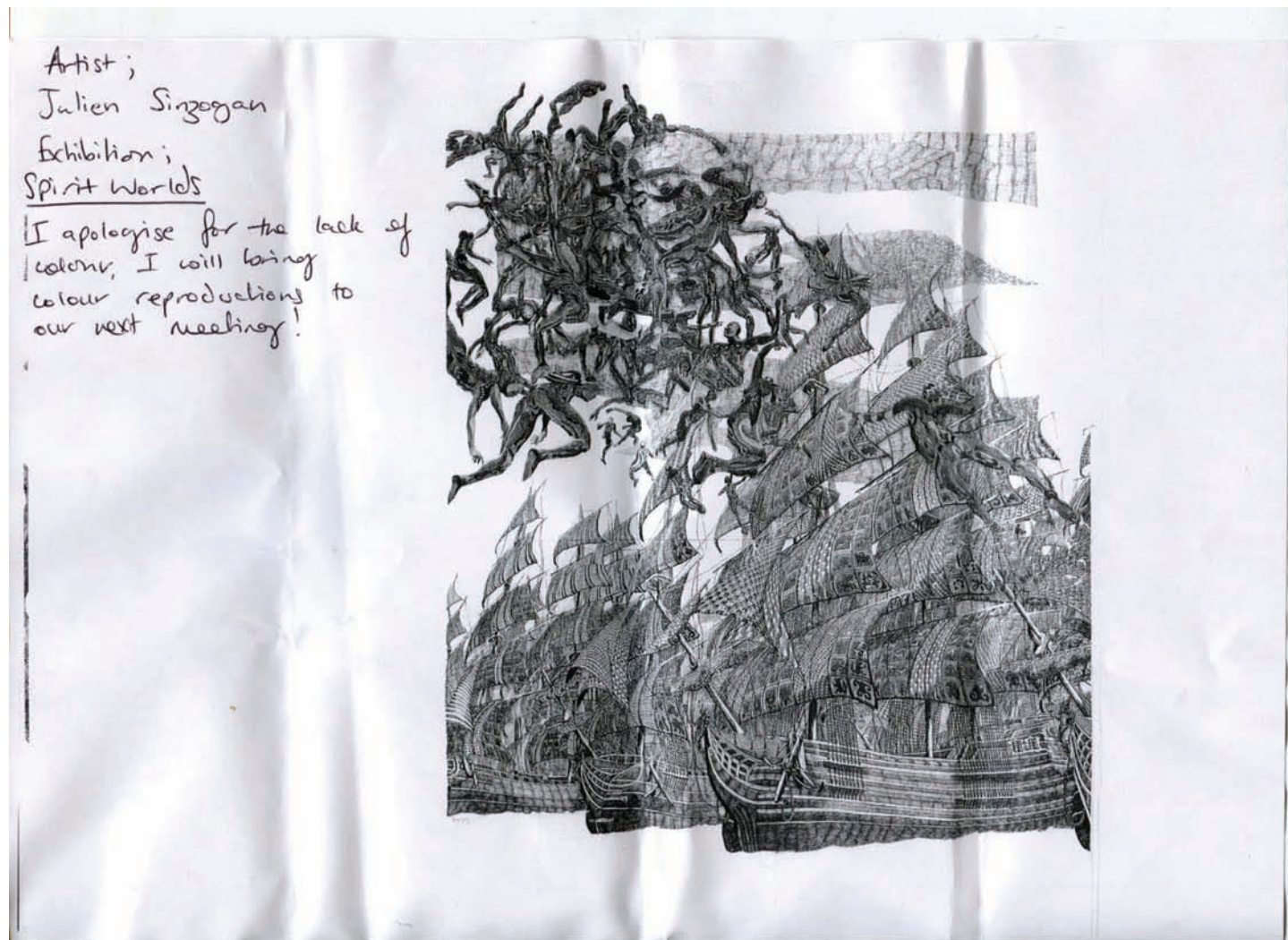


Figure 12.

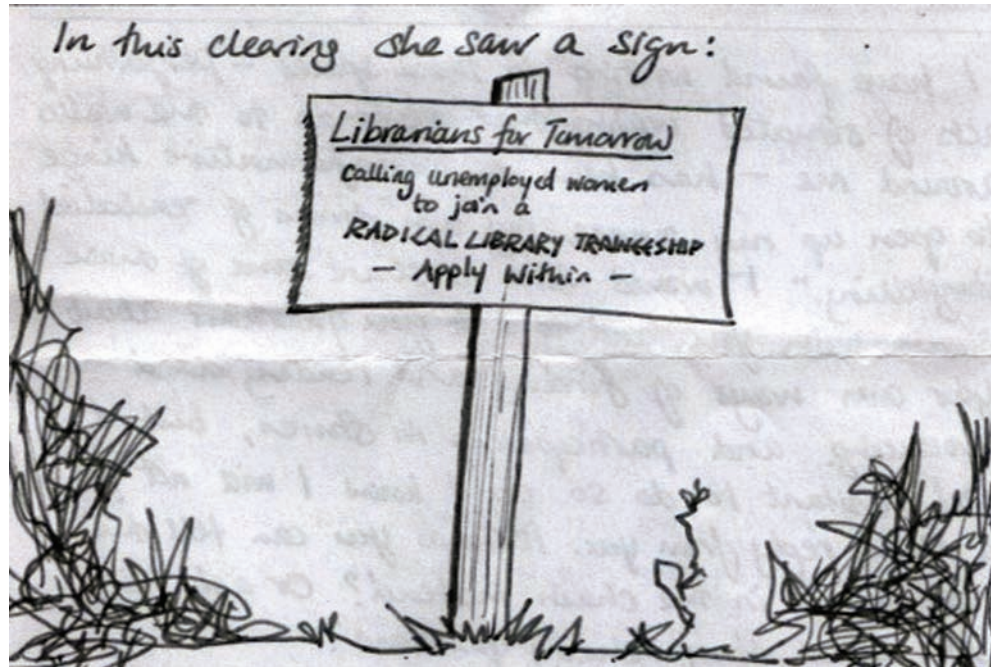


Figure 13.

Can we be affected + influenced by things we have never directly experienced ourselves but, that our forebears ^{might} have? ^{or instance} what of 'echoes in the bones'?

Figure 14.

When combined with the discussion of performance, I found myself thinking about the Ethiopian Dabbara: a community magician, musician and healer. Alongside his use of herbal remedies, he is proficient in the preparation of dagams: incantations or charms. These are often written down and sewn into katabs or talismen (Shelemay 1992: 250). While most of the power is derived from the words themselves, 'unusual graphic elements such as text deployed in a circle or talismanic drawings may be utilized to enhance its power' (Shelemay 1992: 251). Liken these to Alice's diagrams if you will? The text in this Ethiopian example is written on parchment and rolled up. I could not help but draw comparisons between these scrolls and the scrolls Claire presented us with.

Alice's drawings also very much reminded me of the illustrations that augment one of my favourite novels from childhood: *The Hounds of the Morrigan* by Pat O'Shea. The cover bears the question: 'Whoever would have thought that the old manuscript in the bookshop could have led them into the journey of a lifetime?' (O'Shea 1985). The story is a re-imagining of some of the central myths of Irish folklore, where two children set out on a journey to conquer an ancient evil. Throughout the text is interspersed with magical signposts, not unlike the one Alice drew to illustrate the story in her letter.

This experiment led Claire to discuss surface appearances under capital, and me, to magic. I had not expected to, but I found myself reminded of, and subsequently referring back to, my areas of interest in African and Irish literary arts and magic, not the topic of my doctoral research (as the others thought after reading my letters) but rather, parts of my Irish and Nigerian heritage.

Finally, I want to address Claire and her notes on violence. I find her idea, that the violence she subjected the letters to went unnoticed by us, a very interesting concept. I most certainly did not pick up on violent intentions. Through her further explanations of the matter, I can now see that her actions could be interpreted as violent. However, I do not feel a sense of violence was conveyed through what we were originally presented with. Perhaps, it was subtly attempted but was subtle to the point of going completely unnoticed. Also, perhaps it could be the case that in this age of endless digital copies, characterized by scanning, the original letters lost something of their value.

I found our process to be a refreshing and novel approach to writing. The communal nature of the project generated ideas and directions we may not have otherwise taken as individuals. It was stimulating and enjoyable as a creative endeavour. In the writing of this final draft, the most truly collaborative stage of the project, some issues have unfolded that would perhaps not have occurred when following a more typical, independent writing model. The absence of discussion of content in the first submission of this article, led me to frame my arguments in a particular way, and to question why we wrote about what we chose. Was it merely a means to an end? The

thought that went into the letters makes me think otherwise. However, upon reading this latest draft I discover that my concerns have, to an extent, been addressed, with sections on content now inserted. Does this make the section I wrote earlier, appearing here, now, seem perhaps somewhat disjointed? Is this one of the challenges of collaborative writing? Might it also be a strength? Is collaborative writing characterized by a tacit responsiveness and reflexivity that is perhaps less present in more individualized writing processes? What might be the implications of this for the methodologies I employ in my own future research? Did my writing about lack of content, engender responses that incorporated content? Should these behind-the-scenes processes be made explicit?

4. Journey's end

Each of us, in different but overlapping ways, was on a personal quest. Alice wrote about radical libraries, Kata wrote about meaning and affect, Seraphima wrote about desire, Emma wrote about oral traditions and magic, Claire wrote about value. We were talking to each other without hearing each other's direct responses. In some ways this was a kind of interrupted, unsatisfactory communication; in others it was this *lack of relation* which unlocked the process. Intimacy was a word used several times in the letters. The letters were a surprising stimulus, and provided us with a call to which we responded.

Alice ended her opening letter with a question, so too do questions resound at the end of Emma's closing reflections. Many of the oral conversations behind the scenes of this written journey have included remarks on the way in which the creative methods used produce more questions than answers. This could be read as indicative of Claire's focus on the mystification of surface appearances, or in terms of the mystery of magic embedded in Emma's narrative. What Claire described as an act of violence can also be perceived as an act of creation, of engagement, of inserting herself into a narrative from which she had been excluded by choice. The product of the labour of this collective journey has shifted in the many hands of its authors, but it has also been held together by common threads of language and desire.

As Adrienne Rich states in her poem *Diving into the Wreck*:

The words are purposes.
The words are maps.

(1973)

Words are not just a means to end; the journey was far more than this. The journey was the purpose. This purpose has generated a map tracing the process of collective thinking, and of the

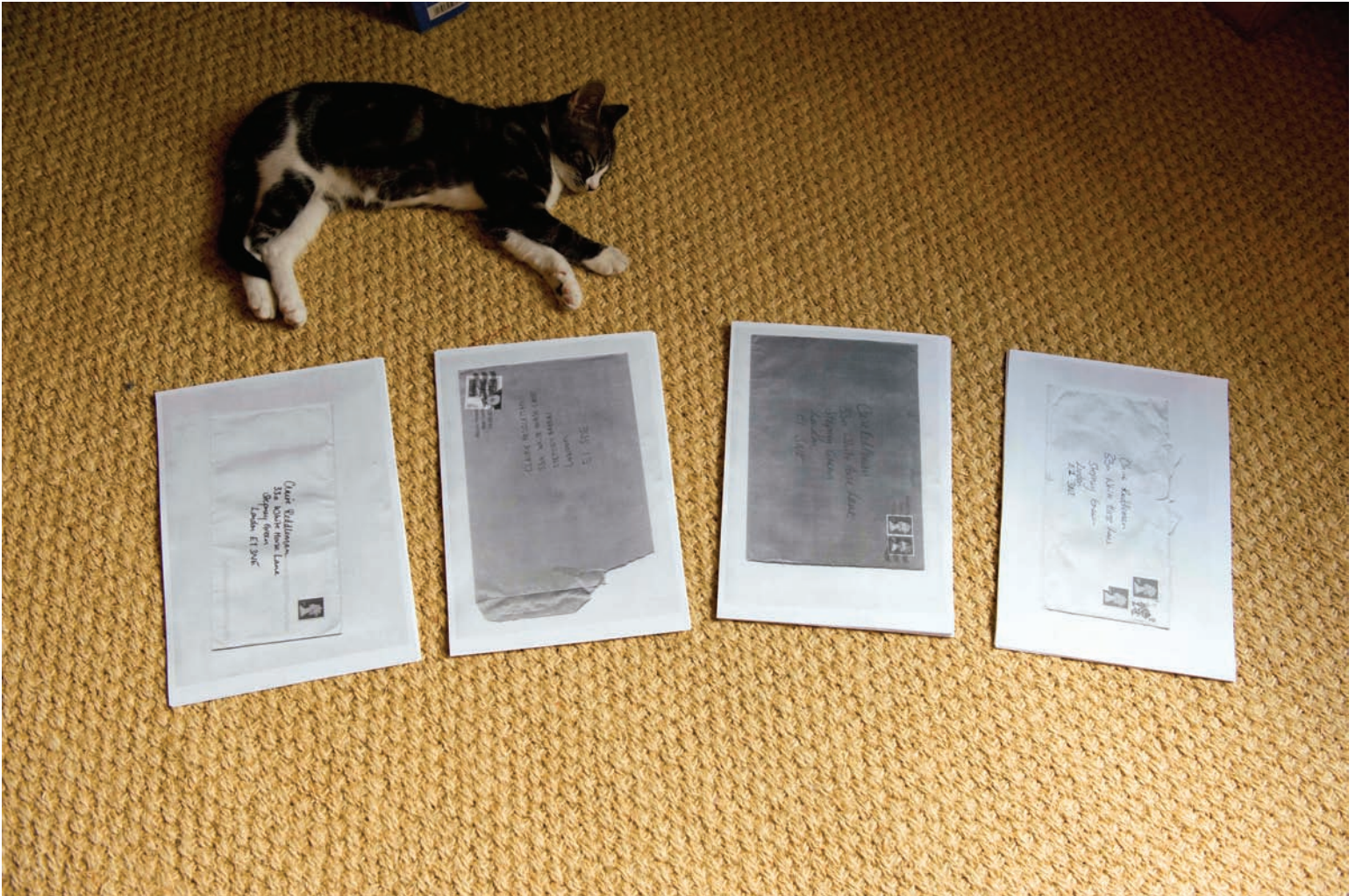


Figure 15.

importance of narrative, of story and story-ing. The end brings us all back to what we already knew, and takes us in new directions. There should be radical libraries with stories for the desperate. We do not know what we are writing about, but we will know it when we see it. We tell you our story so that you can tell it to us.

Storytelling, and indeed letter-writing, concerns a relation between an 'I' and a 'you', via an exchange of the 'we'. Feminist theatre theorist Peggy Phelan describes performative writing as a form which 'enacts the death of the "we" that we think we are before we begin to write. A statement of allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, this writing pushes against the ideology of knowledge as a progressive movement forever approaching a completed end-point' (1997: 17).

Has our collaborative hero met her death at the hands of epistolary and epistemic violence? Or has this experiment instituted the birth of a new way of working and travelling together?

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