

# Reading and Writing: the Sites of Performance

**cris cheek**

Performance Writing began as an explicitly pedagogical enquiry in 1994 at Dartington College of Arts, initiated by poet John Hall. Its formative departmental Director between 1995 and 2000 was Caroline Bergvall. Performance Writing tried to provide a handle on emergent practices that made work through contesting productive tensions “between” the terms writing and performance. It sought to destabilise oppositions “between” the ephemerality of performance and the fixity of print, often doing so by exploring trans-generic writing in hybrid media and sites. In 2004 Performance Writing, the academic course, ceased to exist. It is now possible to talk of a decade of research into hybridising writing practices in England between 1994-2004 to which Caroline Bergvall’s enquiry was central and critical.<sup>1</sup> A pedagogical context is from the outset an interpretative community and a discourse network, in which a variance of interpretative behaviours are to be encouraged. This is true if only for the purpose of moving towards some provisional working consensus as an emergent interpretative community. Caroline Bergvall’s work exemplifies an ethic of articulated practice--theory / theory--practice throughout. Writing in 1995 Caroline Bergvall noted that her earlier work, until that time, eschewed the “troubled relation between text and performance which has pervaded the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> Texts would be written, by her, “as if they were never to leave the page.”<sup>3</sup> Ideas as to how such texts might be performed, by which she meant at that point live, public, predominantly sonically-projected presentation, were to be faced later. In the same short article she begins to wonder what it would be, for her, to approach performance, not necessarily live in public but rather through textual performativity “within the textual material itself”: to assemble “a text which very materially provides and actualises the notion of its own

performance.”<sup>4</sup> Those evident skills by which readers exercise their everyday negotiations with their worlds through consensual semiotics of everyday signage add to her sense of what her writing on the page has the potential to perform. In another intervention she asks “does the performic increase the performability of a performance text, decrease it, do neither?”<sup>5</sup> She is then concerned with notations, with the complexities of reading practice and with both herself and her reader as that which I call temporary operators of a text in the role of performers.

Principal themes in her writing had already been apparent through *An Oblique View of a Room in Motion* and *Strange Passage*<sup>6</sup>; potential convergences “between” architectural space, the human body, representations of gender and civic convention. *Flaunt Mine*, subtitled *an installation for readers and incidental movements*, was drafted between July 1994 and January 1995. It is at that time, as she began working for Performance Writing at Dartington, that her exploration and examination of the space of the page and the body of the book as a queer performative space became an explicit pursuit.<sup>7</sup> Her writing in *Flaunt Mine* and *In Situ*<sup>8</sup> approaches the ideological behavioural construction of civic space. The work format apes bureaucratic forms through which aspects of identity, such as nationality and sexual orientation, are codified and filed. Institutional conventions of spatial layout for public processing of private information are brought within easier reach of creative writers by mid-1990s word-processing software. She foregrounds, and she is far from alone in doing so since it is a very contemporary attention, desiring pathways that a reading eye navigates in its passages across, through and around the spatial field of a mapped page. She uses differing font sizes, some of which are small enough to necessitate close inspection, and employs multiple margins that challenge the simplest conventions of reading order. All are techniques associated with enquiries into those very conversations “between” text and performance that she had previously seen herself avoiding. These texts begin to foreground readerly as well as writerly performativity.

The following year Bergvall wrote in her keynote address for the first Performance Writing symposium in 1996:

Everything about a piece of work is active and carries

meaning. Any treatment, any font, any blank, any punctuation, any intonation, any choice of materials, any blob, however seemingly peripheral to the work, is part of the work, carries it, opens it up, closes it in, determines it.<sup>9</sup>

This is a manifesto of both readerly and writerly intent, of attention and awareness brought to every smallest detail through the decisive moments of writing. Assembling a text involves articulation as a necessary moment of closure, and the full play of attention during performances of writing engages a panoply of contemporary possibility, including the resistances offered by motivational grounds and materials chosen for the writing and the siting of that writing. In what follows I am concentrating on two pieces of work that she has made in the subsequent decade. Firstly, by way of a preamble to the sited, *Éclat* (1996); secondly a sited writing *Say: "parsley"* (2001). IN choosing these two texts I am conscious of the fact that explicit references to same-sex eroticism that surface through and beyond materials acknowledging childhood traumas ambivalent to ritual Catholicism in her writing up to and including *Éclat* also begin to render civic imperatives towards linguistic community extraordinarily problematic and more fiercely politicised, a line of enquiry that she was to pursue in *Say: "parsley"* and following work.

*Éclat* started as a text-based performance commissioned in 1996 for The Institution of Rot<sup>10</sup>, a Victorian London house become an occasional public space. The first version of her text *Éclat—Occupation des Lieux 1 – 10* was partly drawn from Gertrude Stein's *Rooms*<sup>11</sup> and subsequently configured as a parodic guide-tour, complete with broken English; a carnivalesque gesture indicating that the guide was in fact the foreigner. This tour was listened to on a personal stereo as the invited textual visitor moved through the chambers of the host house "on a journey through the 'actual' spaces of 109 Corbyn Street and the 'fictive' space of the text."<sup>12</sup> Taped commentaries lasted approximately twenty-three minutes, unless the reader intervened. The pace of these commentaries interacted with and partially acted to control the pace of the reader's architectural progress in a domestic environment much as a novelist might attempt to control the movements of a reader's eye within the field of a page through devices of narrative discourse. A reader's eye and mind were placed on a spatially projected timeline as they physically and literally toured the monuments of a textual domicile, through ten texts (ten "sites").

In the wake of *Éclat—Occupation des Lieux 1 - 10* as a textual installation two print versions ensued, both published that same year; one as a journal *éclat sites 1-10*<sup>13</sup> and the other as a book *Éclat*.<sup>14</sup>

The book version explodes the initial ten sites of *Éclat—Occupation des Lieux 1 - 10* across a fifty-five-page sequence of spaces, whilst abbreviating the title. Registration lines abstracted from architectural plans, ghosting through the paper stock, are used to create playful contiguities from one double page spread to the next.<sup>15</sup> Such diagrammatic graphic conventions create partial frames and entrances to semantic blocks and become playful interventions into the body that is this writing.

In an explicit example of how hybridising writings are pushing the envelope of discussion in respect of materiality in literature, what I am pointing to here cannot be adequately reproduced (Figure 1). It is a critical aspect of the writing and yet I cannot quote it in textual form since it is more than simply a quotable word order on a place of storage. One would need to hold the book in one's hands and hold its pages, in the act of turning from one double page in the sequence to another double page in the sequence up to available light. All I can do here is to approximate the phenomenology of that hand-eye experience.

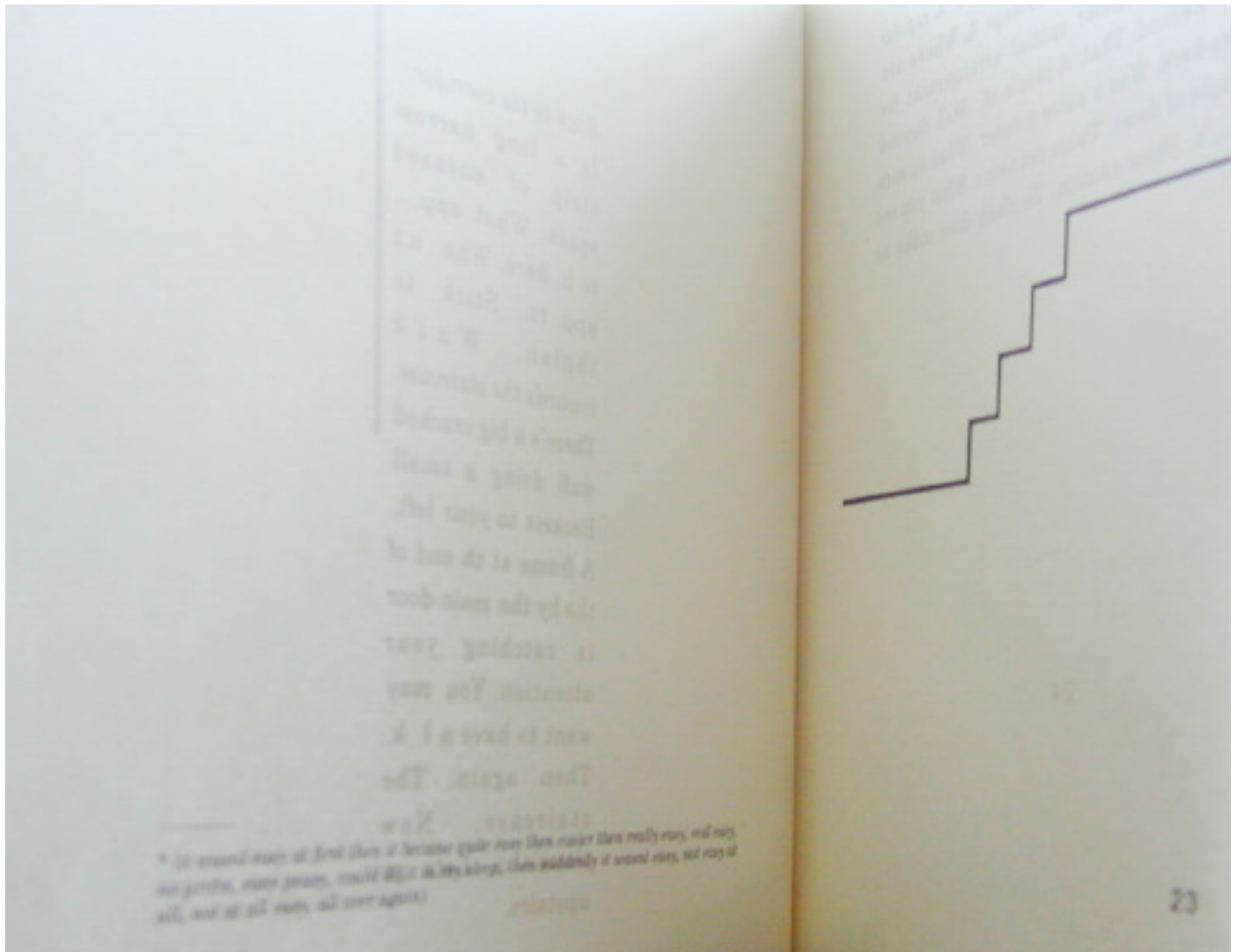



Figure 1. Caroline Bergvall, sample spread from *Éclat*, pp.22-3.

I cannot show this in reproduced image form well, since it relies on the view through from one side of the page to the next or through from one verso to the following verso. However something of the ghosting of paginated texts into each other can be apprehended in the photograph above. It is a highly stylized and considered part of the overall writing and demands to be appreciated. Writing is no longer experienced as a prosthetic presence overheard as mediatized from a controlled recording but is reversioned as an endophonic performance from spatial notations installed upon the page. Pages, closures in themselves built from the openness of pulp, are treated as material onto which further closures are written. The conversational disclosures “between” building as book and book as a sequence of rooms is extended in the book version.

By comparison the Performance Research journal version is tightly compacted. Each of eight pages has been designed into three interconnected areas. There is a framed text at the top and bottom thirds, with an adjoining passage. In each of these “between” spaces (a diagonal line conjoins the lower right corner of the top third frame with the top left corner of the bottom frame) are one or two photographic documents from the house installation. So this version is partly a documentation of occasion, a re-articulation, showing that the body of the house itself when walked through was a site of textual interventions emphasising the house as body. The lone word SURGERY on a sunlit door is one clear example (Figure 2), introduced by Steinian textual imputations (see footnote 11 again) and amputations that meditate on genetic modification; Sally being a partial modification of Dolly (the cloned sheep). The body of the house and the body of writing being cast together into positive and negative spaces as a sequence of implicative chambers. Multiple textual differences exist between the book *Éclat* (literally translated from the French as “fireworks” or a “showpiece”) and journal *éclat sites 1-10* versions of some of these variations sizeable; often necessitated in response to exigencies of format and context, once again seeking a dynamic imperfect fit with site in the sense that both book and journal can be understood to be sites.

As you can see, there are another two (two) doors on the second landing. One to your left, one in front of you. To your right a large wall surface, behind you the staircase.

Intersections which might occur here are of a more intrusive kind. Wonders of artificial light. My silicons take me a long homeward way. Beyond that. Wa  s a sist a mist & a tsim a tsis. yes no yes no. This 3rd arm of yours. Was a Sally a Sally. What app.... to b. .ere. That's how we like you.



You've pushed the door to your left, the one marked surgery. You enter the room.

Its vastness surprises you, takes you aback. Its ornate decoration, red deep carpets seem much at odds with the rest of the house. A wide sofa, covered with a selection of cushions, not animals like cats and dogs. There's champagne in a silver cooler in a small side-table, crystal glasses and conversations. Feathers, hats, bare shoulders. "Welcome, we were expecting you, make yourself comfortable". Someone is coming towards you smiling, holding out their hand. You can't help but notice are you seeing straight through it. Everything's what it seems to be.

Noting your hesitation, they gently push you towards the centre of the room. you think you're feeling the prickle of thought against your leg but there's someone here you know. You slump into one of the deeper armchairs.

Asah th at was a. You notice a someone sitting in another armchair facing a good one she's fiddling with her hair while engaging in conversation. Surprised, delighted you look into it grows. Was a she a she now lying on the sofa. Seems to be talking takes up more room laughs as clicks open a fully dilt dilt dilt like a fat cigar, the sofa's popping out and the walls extruding the air seems hotter, tighter. She or she is pressing with her fingers and pulls the flaps apart. Coming out fast, she's conversing face down across a table her legs pushing a handful of her own up her indescribably big, her space-around ambient organism. Is laughing and sweating. You want to. But your face is dropping out of sight and you must busy yourself looking for it. Or you want to. But her arm has come over you and is covering your face forcing itself around your mouth around your tongue. This is all doubt beyond and wonderfully opaque. You fill your throat and think of Mary. Immaculate. Your saintly enigmatic envelope, bless me as I traverse, bless me the saintly alliance of your lips. Your saintly vacated saintly vacated occupancy, bless me as I'm moved to occupy, bless me Mary as I manifestly some profound occupation. Bless me

as she unpeels I discharges. Bless me Bless me Mary never let it be said, the splendid c I mean the splendid units are inward inward; sideinside in; are neither here nor there not this not that nor anything but not. Some uncool. Virginals halloed by their enduring lessening. Bless me Mary please do grace for to extend one's out outside now that's now that's.



Figure 2. Caroline Bergvall, "éclat sites 1-10" in *Performance Research Journal* (1996), np.

Whereas, for example, the journal version is arraigned in twenty-four sections across four double page spreads, the book version has twenty-six double page intersections and numerous contestable "sections" within and throughout its fifty-two pages. It is in this sense of textual materials composed and formatted in polymorphic fit with pertinence to site that the architectural installation, the journal and the book versions of *Éclat* lead in a useful way to a lengthier examination of a more recent piece of work. *Éclat* presents problems as to where the text lies, since it occurs "between" all of the versions already mentioned.<sup>16</sup>

What Bergvall's *Say: "parsley"* acutely explores is a phenomenology of textual apprehension performed in response to architectural site, to an extent that a textual extraction published on paper struggles to be anything more than a documentation of experiences that can be described but arguably only inadequately accessed. The publication of Bergvall's *Fig* (2005)<sup>17</sup> has required the factoring in to this discussion the representation of *Say: "parsley"* in that book. But I wanted the thrust of this discussion to remain focussed onto phenomenological apprehension of a particular text. Proliferation of sites for performances of poetic practice and consequent productions of versions increasingly beg the question "so where is the text?"; attempts to answer the question "where is the text?" tend to generate further questions.

*Say: "parsley,"* was installed for one week at Spacex 2 in Exeter Old Quay between 24-30 November, 2001 and freely open to all. Made and installed in collaboration with Ciarán Maher<sup>18</sup>, this work eloquently articulated a number of issues in respect of site and civic pride with which contemporary textual practitioners are faced. Critically, both writers and readers, as temporary textual operators, are required to make performances of enquiry in respect of works in writing sited beyond the expectations generated by dominant convention. The site of writing as a place to be visited, to which a journey out of the usual must be made and in which performances of perception are fully in play, is what interest me here.

This was a performance of writing in which reading and listening were spatially renegotiated by each visitor; this was not a series of readings



whether alone or accompanied in which the passages of a roving eye and an endophonic ear constructed reader-response. The movements of each reader's body through a series of spaces in which sound and light, textual imprints and sonic projection conversed with architectural space to embody the performance of this writing makes this approach to writing new. Conversations with Bergvall confirm my expectation that both adult and child visitors turned one particular aspect of this piece (swinging the pendulums) into a playground. Some groups of visitors, according to her, interacted with each other to explore the performativity that the piece realises; I imagine exchanges such as "hey have you heard this, come over here and listen to this one", "what's that say?" "I heard something different," a conversation "between" housing the writing and writing the housing of the writing.

Spacex 2 is a nineteenth-century, dockside warehouse, brought back into use as a city-designated site of cultural regeneration. This is not the coffee-house bookshop nor wine-bar environment in which literature events would more usually intervene, but four large white-walled ex-industrial chambers, essentially configured as a cavernous two up two down. *Say: "parsley"* set into motion a conversation "between" upper and lower orders (it is impossible not to read the human body into this configuration) and included the destabilising of such simplistic hierarchy. Bergvall and Maher's collaboration utilised two thirds of the possible available spatial subdivisions.

I say collaboration somewhat advisedly. For *Say: "parsley"* exemplified a sub-contractual model of collaboration whereby one artist sub-contracts aspects of the realisation of a work to a respected peer.<sup>19</sup> This is an important stress because Maher brings a sophistication to sonic realisation that strongly informed the detail of the work. His expertise in tonality, pitch and harmonic perception on the one hand and psycho-acoustics and tuning on the other helped to fit the whole piece to its environment. But the *writing*, its conception and conceptual assemblage and siting, remains attributable to Bergvall. There are so many elements of the piece which read into her bookwork, live writing, composed readings and installation works of the past decade that it would be foolish not to read such dialogues as part of her concerted drift.

In that which follows description is interwoven with commentary. I am narrating the experience of my own visit and adding into that mix details from Caroline Bergvall's own written account of making the work.<sup>20</sup> Say: "*parsley*" found me caught in a beguiling mesh of articulate meditations around recurrent problems of speaking and listening, of reading and interpretation.



Figure 3. Say: "*parsley*," photo, Gary Winters (2002).

Leaving the entrance, an echoing foyer, turning up the volume on my attention and awareness so as to experience this forthcoming writing as fully as I am able, I entered the darker body of the SpaceX 2 building's interior through a dividing curtain. In doing so I have already missed a prefatory textual detail, four stencilled white "R"s stuck onto the white wall beside the gallery entrance; as if there were a fourth *R* in the National Curriculum alongside reading, writing and arithmetic, possibly regulation, rule or even right (Figure 3).

Approaching sound drew me on into a classic warehouse space, a metal-columned and high-ceilinged rectangular box, at the far end of which onto a patch at the base of a wall a spotlight is activated for one minute every other minute. In this patch, framed by light when it is *on*, is written, in a "fat light-grey chalk"<sup>21</sup> that the wall's uneven surface already rendered, the following stanza:

speech mirrors ghosts [speak] as if  
appeased by the evidence of this

when [I speak] I hold at least two  
or as if intensely preoccupied  
when [I speak up] I am held to one

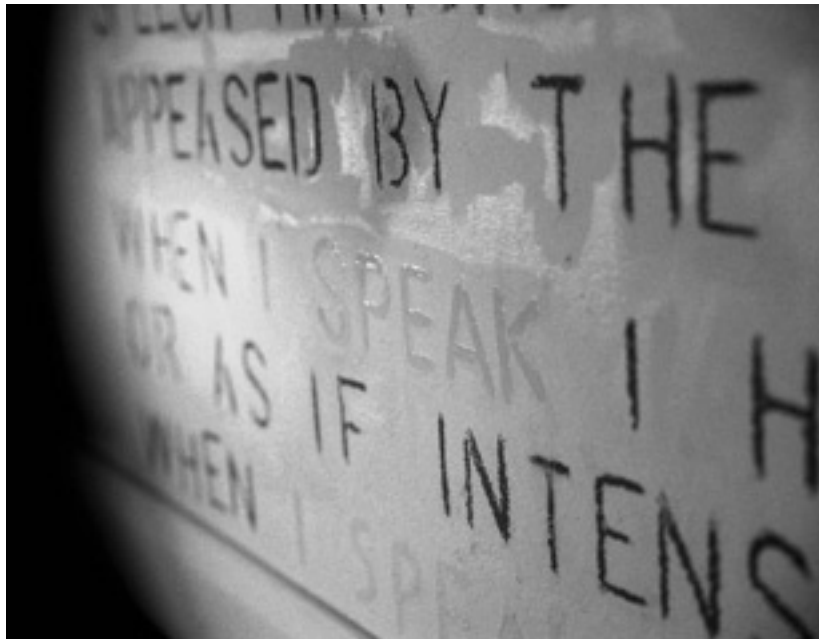


Figure 4. Say: "parsley," photo, Gary Winters (2002).

The accumulative insistence of that phrase present in square brackets here, “speak / I speak / I speak up,” is in fact differentiated, bracketed, in the wall’s texture only by having been subjected to deliberate partial erasure (Figure 4). Layers of thin white emulsion, so as to appear “between” presence and absence within the semantic flow, render clarity in a state “between” transparent and opaque. The instruction to “speak up” has been *whited-out* in a pointed critique of colonial regulation, as I shall show.

I stayed in front of this text for a while and since it was effectively printed on that wall I had time to check my hand-written notes at the time.<sup>22</sup> I asked myself was it *appealed* or *appeared* or *appeased* at the start of that second line? The possible readings, each version of which would *work* in terms of syntactic role-play from each small amendment, are salutary. *Appealed* ushers in procedures of advocacy, *appeared* signals writing as visual ghosts of the speech preceding it, reinvigorating a derisory binary, whilst *appeased* would emphasise pressures of civic conformity and preface the active policing of linguistic Creolisation that forges the crux of

Say: “parsley.”

The title of this writing is taken from a 1937 massacre in the Dominican Republic, during which Creole Haitians were murdered for not pronouncing “parsley” (perejil) in the appropriate Spanish manner, by rolling their ‘R’.”<sup>23</sup> Seemingly the most anodyne of words, *parsley*, spoken in the lightest of accents, was used as a pretext for inclusion or exclusion in the body politic. That something as arbitrary as pronouncing a letter can be used as a cue for violence is part of language's power to monitor and control identity. Rita Dove's widely circulated *Parsley* (first published in 1983) refers to and explores the same historical incident. But whilst Dove's text focuses on issues of the codification and thereby suppression of identity as depicted Bergvall generates a far more poignant critique by placing her reader—writers as implicated witness—participants who are seduced into performing the means of codification and implied suppression within themselves as enacted.

This muted text (Figure 4), barely above the floor into which it is sinking or from which it is rising, partially parses itself. Questions are begged and potential answers found. Whose ghosts, limen “between” presence and absence, are they that are mirrored in speech and is writing, if understood as conspicuous mark-making not apprehended chiefly through the ear, an appeasement of speech? Bergvall writes “the leitmotif for the piece is that of the drama of the shibboleth” with “speech as a gatekeeper.”<sup>24</sup> Collaboration in the productive and circulatory sustainability of meaning can be understood here in a negative sense, as exhibiting what might be taken to be conservative tendencies. What motivates and services the authorial reservations of a partially veiled / and in what ways can that / be evidenced as plural? I was asking such a question as a temporary operator of this writing. It had possibly been fitted onto the wall line by line in reverse from the bottom line up, stacked as a textual cairn. Architectonic strata, here signifying the heap of “I-s” who were/are here, each line stratifying the previous and the next.

Whilst paying attention to such thoughts I was also listening to a multiplicity of other voices. Their sound waves delineated the space in which I stood, washing against the wall upon which this slippery assemblage about authorial identity has been gathered, saying, one voice

juxtaposing another voice, the seemingly transparent simple phrase “rolling hills.” A repeatedly articulated phrase, ‘rolling hills’ – “rolling hills,” both speech and quote, a reference to the four rolling *RRRRs* at the entrance, is the subject of pronunciation, a residue of the physical resonance of its selected interlocutor, with different intonation every time it is performed. Each signature voice, addressing the particular bio-mechanics of its pronunciation, recorded and assembled into an edited flow of embodied inscriptions. Another voice followed by another voice in a rolling morphology, copied into a loop presenting a cadence of family resemblance. A sequence of differentiated undulations of a tongue in a mouth and the background voices that form the context (the specific place and each of the people in it at that time) in which each voice had been recorded. An edit of foregrounds and backgrounds then, with each voice saying *rolling hills* differently in a differing sonic ambience of demotic chorus. I began to pay close attention to the revealing differences beyond initial recognition of rapidly paling lexical similarity.

Every voice inflecting that simple phrase differently would re-author it, phonographically inscribe its subtleties through interplays of microphone address, of the specific phonetic properties of this tongue in this mouth resonating through this body in this place at this time. Yet these multiple voices, these accents, these histories, these distinctions appeared to speak the same thing, to perform the same performative. I counted beyond thirty voices and failed to notice a repetition, although there lies another problem of the details of perception altered through time. In fact, according to Bergvall, approximately forty voices were represented but edited into three differing sequences.<sup>25</sup> She writes of approaching people in cafés and shops and asking them:

to speak a couple of words chosen for their tricky difficulty yet familiar (i.e. English) connotation. The thick English “l” and liquid “r”, and the fricative “th” (“shibboleth of foreigners”) are amongst the most recurring problems.<sup>26</sup>

Standing “between” the hung platform from which sound is projected and this wall from which I was reading, as one ear tuned in to articulated differences on which it is focussing, yet another sound of voices bleeds through from the rooms above. This is simply not possible on a page or on a video or on a web site; it is afforded by interlocking architectural spaces

and it is decisively calculated; an attention underlined when Bergvall writes of her and Maher spending time discussing “the spatialisation of sound and audience behaviour.”<sup>27</sup> Those other voices I am drawn to whilst standing and reading and listening are initially barely noticeable at first and then insistently beckoning. Displaced and distracted from my temporary performance of reading I moved towards this other speaking of which I had become aware.

Through a doorway, passing a large empty barrel in a recess which I am drawn to examine in case it is the location of these calling voices or else a location of a further text, I moved on. To the bottom of a staircase at one end of which the prefix *mis* had been written and at the top of which was pencilled the monosyllabic adjunct *lead*, the latter of which had been overwritten several times, mark upon mark there. It, *lead*, performs direction, do not go this way, go this way. In what ways, I wrote a note as I walked, am I misle(a)d through/by language?

Upstairs, not having missed my leading, those voices that I heard calling me from below had fallen silent. I entered the mirror chamber of the downstairs box in a relative pause. This would not be the same for every visitor, it just happened that way. I arrived in what was an edited two-minute-long effective silence “between” minute-long loops. The room in front of me presented a grid of twenty weights, lead weights, hung from ceiling beams and I instantly read these as plumb lines, following the *lead*. Unfortunately it was a grey and rainy day and I missed that sunlight which, apparently, according to a later conversation with another visitor, occasionally cabled through the heavy fishing line that held each weight to within a half inch of the wooden floor and illuminated the hanging strings. The idea here is to convey some sense of how my mind worked in such circumstances, performing as a temporary textual operator in an unconventional site. As indicated, for example, these leads were read, by me, as plumbs. It seemed utterly appropriate beside the dock. A plumb being an instrument used to measure depth in a body of water. However, beneath each plumb other textualities were visible. In order to see them I moved the plumb, yes plumbed the depth, for these textual signposts were very minute in the grain of the wood of the floor. As the supporting line then moved, it was activated by the resultant swinging weight to perform as pendulum.



Concentration on the beginning of this pendulum play was again interrupted by voices, a seeming thicket of voices from a pair of speakers in the openly adjoining space. As I approached them I really could not make out what they were saying. There was a considerable amount of phasing and panning going on. I thought I could perceive English words but then they slipped away. Bergvall writes “during the week of showing, an Italian woman tells me she hears Italian words in the pairings. I hear French words. Ciarán hears Irish.”<sup>28</sup> I stood about two metres from the speakers listening intently to the twittering of illusory messages. Once again my perception altered through time, perceiving difference through repetitive looping. I could not tell if I was really hearing what I seemed to be hearing or something else that I wanted to hear. I moved closer, in “between” the speakers, up against the wall and suddenly the voices were absolutely clearly repeating “*nothing*” — “*certain.*” In each channel both words were clearly audible but their pitches had been manipulated to make one higher than the other. One hears a form of what might be called productive syncopation “between” them. Pairs of single words have been recorded and subsequently split so that one word occupies each channel. They have been spoken “more or less one octave apart” and then they have been looped at a speed of 0.5 sec to create aural phasing the outcome from which “blurs the original word spoken and allows for other word combinations, or ‘resultants’, to be perceived.”<sup>29</sup> Words had been chosen for their dissimilar endings, for their plosive and glottal clashing and for the field of associations they yield. Polylingual potentials of this writing were foregrounded, evidenced by Bergvall’s own comment on mother-tongue interventions and interpretations.

Yet another pair of speakers, I was remembering *when [I speak] I hold at least two*, interrupted this listening. They were positioned at a ninety-degree angle to the first two on an adjacent wall. Moving closer they appeared to say the same two words, “*nothing*” — “*certain*” but a thicket of resultants from tricks in the ears and wishful hearings in the distance of noise, potential openness, increased immeasurably. I was taking pleasure in such intimacy when still more voices could be heard back in the pendulum side of this large spaces and so I walked away to listen to them. I returned to this pair of speakers several times and having a care to the phenomenological aspects of experiencing writing through listening I



gradually wrote down some of what I heard there. The lineation and spelling is mine and the aside in brackets is part of my notes at the time also. Blank lines indicate a longer pause:

say this language heals  
language keels  
s wallow in it  
hollow hollow for lo  
s peak s lo li like lo  
spookvilles . .  
(those ghosts within speech again)  
. . . engage  
(spoken as in French)  
anguage . . [sic]  
say trim  
say tram  
say tramp  
say trump  
say trumpet  
say crumpet  
say crumble  
say rumble  
say Rimbaud  
say rubble  
say bubble  
say puddle  
say cuddle  
say curdle  
say girdle  
say gurgle  
say turgle  
say turtle  
say myrtle  
say mortal  
say portal  
say portly  
say portray  
say partly  
say "parsley"

Now the suggestion is not that this was Bergvall's text; this is only what I

thought I heard and what I wrote down at the time. I was aware of the tricks that auditory reception can play and I was helped in the exactness of that which I did re-notate by the fact of repeated listening. My listening became my reading. As this was an installation I could return and check my notes. In a live reading that just would not have been possible. There are though still striking divergences “between” what I wrote subsequent to what I thought I heard and what Bergvall’s source text registers. I will footnote changes made in the book version, but the text of *Say: “parsley”* as submitted to me by her in 2002 was written as follows<sup>30</sup>:

## SAY PARSLEY

say this language heels  
language keels<sup>31</sup>  
over  
s wallow in it<sup>32</sup> 5  
f hollow hollow fall low  
s peak s low ly lie low  
say this feels c loose  
the big mous th chokes  
has a bong st ruck in the throat<sup>33</sup>  
spooks lulls angage anguage 10  
pulls teeth out for the dogs<sup>34</sup>  
keep watch r ats the gate of the law<sup>35</sup>  
say pig  
say this with fl ramed gorge<sup>36</sup>  
say pig 15  
say fig  
say fag  
say fog  
say frog  
say frig 20  
say trig  
say trim  
say tram  
say tramp  
say trump 25  
say trumpet  
say crumpet  
say crumple  
say rumple

say rumble	30
say rubble	
say bubble	
say puddle	
say cuddle	
say curdle	35
say girdle	
say gurgle	
say turgle	
say turtle	
say myrtle	40
say mortal	
say portal	
say portly	
say partly	
say parsley	45

The instance of her very first line reveals much that is problematic when reading this new kind of writing. I have sufficient experience of enjambment and layout preferences in contemporary poetry to judge a likely line ending from a hearing. This would not necessarily be so for a less experienced listener, even though unlike many readers I have previous experience of reading Bergvall's writing and of listening to her voice enunciate her writing. However I would be loathe to place emphasis too strongly on such experience, especially since the form of the mutating sequence from "pig" to "parsley" enacts a kinship with children's playground rhyming chants. All of the information that a listener might need is in the precision of Bergvall's speaking and the placements of her pause which indicates both a necessary moving away and suspends the necessity of a return to speaking that characterises enjambment. The difference "between" the homophones *heals*, in my version, and *heels* in Bergvall's text, in respect of language reveals my projected desire for language to have recuperative power above the possibility of recuperation through rebellion against oppression. I had not heard *heels*; it simply hadn't occurred to me. In fact my version is a projection that carries a far less engaging proposition in respect of meaning. The key word that I omitted to hear is her third line, the singular word *over*, that hooks *heels* into a critique of standardised speech. If language is brought to heel, submits to being policed in terms of how one is and is not supposed to

say *parsley*, then *language keels / over*. In hearing *heals* and in either not hearing or omitting to note *over* I had interpreted *keels* as a stabilising influence, as in on an even keel, well-balanced. I had heard what I had wanted to hear. I had reinforced the horizon of my own preferences, exactly that recuperative move which Bergvall's seeks to engender and thereby to critique. Finally Bergvall's text is simply a more shapely text than my version and that shapeliness is integral to her textual cunning. Shapeliness has been brought smack into the foreground by her centred alignment of this text in *Fig*.

An exophonic reading, in which the sound voiced leaves the body, is also the subject of variables both on the part of the speaker and receiver. A reader reads with their sense of the sound, from their body with their particularities of pronunciation and their perception. It is possible therefore to understand how Bergvall's articulation of *fall low* (line 5 of her text) could have sounded like and been heard as *for lo* (line 4 of my version) by a listener. Similarly my own hearing of what appeared to me a sound reference to *Rimbaud* in my notation of *say rumble / say Rimbaud / say rubble* (her lines 29-31) when in fact the sequence from which she was speaking reads *say rumple / say rumble / say rubble*. But I was already indulging in my own version of expectation based upon my pronunciation and had misheard her *crumple* as *crumble* immediately preceding that sequence, so that I was imposing my own misheard logic of mutations onto her articulation. The human voice is a site of extremely subtle embodiments of pitching, velocity and amplitude. In electronic recognition systems the human voice is proving a more difficult signature to mimic than a fingerprint. Bergvall is making explicit points about standards of pronunciation and subversion of dominant meanings through articulatory slippage in particular in the context of colonialism. Her means are entirely appropriate to her intention, an extremely subtle yet fiercely achieved critique of colonial imposition.

I cannot account for lines that I missed entirely in my notes, nor for all of the other more minor listening discrepancies although sense is ruptured through each, but these occurrences serve to highlight how partial my perception, and possibly of all other temporary operators of this "text", remains. Whether I heard them but omitted to write them down or whether I was repeatedly distracted or they were for some reason less audible in

either recording or playback I cannot accurately testify. Bergvall *might* have made an impromptu edit into her own text during recording. Whatever happened I am left feeling like a temporary witness--participant to a truth, to which I alone can never provide an adequate response. The site has become the text and vice versa to such an extent that I cannot answer the question, what is not part of the text?



Figure 5. Say: "*parsley*," photo, Gary Winters (2002).

Several pendulums had almost stopped swinging since I set them into motion.<sup>37</sup> I began to make a note of what lay underneath each plumb (Figure 5), to enquire into where each lead led. Arranged in a grid of four lines with five positions on each line or five lines with four positions on each line, depending upon one's orientation preference, this is a representation of what I found:

```
. [blank] E ( &
S I ? ) C
" " : : O
.
, V i - : 38
```

Word processing does this series of interlocking placements a disservice since they were not aligned in straightforward orientation whatsoever but the *C* and the *E* for example, and many other figures here, would be turned clockwise through ninety degrees. In other words there was no singular point of view to which the orientations were related; a witness--participant to this writing needed to walk around and through the grid to begin to unpack it. For that reason the word *voices* which can be decoded was not immediately apprehensible by me, although perhaps I am slow in 'solving' puzzles that are spatialised. Parts of speech notation and punctuation were placed "between" and amongst these *voices* and that word *voices* included both an interchangeable capital I and a lower-case i, as well as the *one* which *I am held to*. Reverberations and ambiguities, already then and now still performing *me* here, as to where authority resides in a text and by whom such authority is carried, deepen. Such a grid will be immediately familiar to readers of Bergvall's book from that same year *Goan Atom*.<sup>39</sup> In it she plays with titles for sections by encouraging readings to be made in unconventional reading orders and spreads constituent letters for these monosyllabic titles out into a grid on the page:

.	T	S
S	S	O
G	G	F
C	A	A

*Cogs, Fats and Gas*. There is continuity and conversation "between" her

bookwork and her architecturally sited work. This is true both in the sense of procedural and the spatial play. Her book environments however do indulge a singular orientation of view, in that there is nothing in either *Goan Atom* or *Éclat* requiring a reader to rotate the book object in their hands. Whilst such continuity of ludic tropes supports the fact of *Say: "parsley"* being a sub-contractual collaboration, overall responsibility for the work resting with Bergvall, it also suggests that Bergvall enlarges the scope of her non-linear play when negotiating her writing off the page.

Interrupted by the pairs of speakers in the adjoining space my attention was drawn to focus onto yet more pairs of local-cast voices which mobilised a different combinatory of tonalities and overtones. A local and translocal linguistic politics played into the room as "*freely*" — "*speak*", the other "*at*" — "*home*." A fourth phase of these recordings generated "*standard*" — "*English*" or "*english*." I walked within the orbit of these phasing perceptual textual materials, exploring optimal and minimal distances of auditory illusion created "between" them. It might be understood as a poetry reading. It might be read as a performance on my part of a performance by a network of collaborators to which Caroline Bergvall's writing provides a tuning of attention. Unlike a conventional poetry reading or a standard drama however, in which an audience arrives individually or in small groups and leaves as a crowd that has shared a coterminous experience, the witness--participants of a site-specific installation are themselves dispersed sites of social dispersal for the work. In this case the performance of the writing might be further circulated through informal discussions and e-listserv reports and magazine reviews, or indeed, here in this dissertation, but it remains a socially dispersed, temporally dispersed experience, amplifying rhizomatic models of network distribution.

The critical politics of plurilingualism, a notable and significant most recent theme in the foreground of Bergvall's writing as "writing that takes place across and between languages,"<sup>40</sup> haunted my thoughts as I left Spacex 2. *Say: "parsley"* achieved a provocative decentering of perceptual judgement based upon a monolingual perspective. It foregrounded a politics of plurilinguistic particularity, carrying forceful contemporary urgency. Confronted by differentiations of articulation, interpreted through acculturation, rooted in corporeal perception, my experience was of both reading and of being read. The writing was not occasioned "between"



languages as such, although that is part of its subject, but it does raise the problems “of socio-linguistic frames and the performativity of cultural identities,”<sup>41</sup> even though hyphenated identities (Jewish-American, Chinese-Australian, Japanese-Canadian, Malay-Singaporean) are no more than an implicit focus. What is said and how it is said is not of necessity that which is heard nor what is shared. Language is full of sited and cited mispronunciations and misunderstandings, both humorous and treacherous, a discovery that Creole Haitians of the Dominican Republic paid for with their lives. Language is also the arena of cultural, social and political expectation and such expectations are the subject of institutional, community and individual differences. To speak is to articulate an often highly subtle and occasionally more brutalizing sense and nonsense of boundaries. To speak is to position.

### Footnotes

[1] – Dartington College of Arts is in Devon, part of the University of Plymouth. I had the fortune to work on the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes there, alongside Caroline, from 1995-2002. Other key artist-pedagogues during that time were Brigid McLeer, Ric Allsopp, John Hall and Alaric Sumner. [[Back to text](#)]

[2] – *Performance Research Journal*, Vol 1. Number 1. (1996), p.94. [[Back to text](#)]

[3] – Ibid., p.94. [[Back to text](#)]

[4] – Ibid., p.95. [[Back to text](#)]

[5] – John Dewey ed., *Writing Live* (London: New Playwrights Trust, 1998), p.41. [[Back to text](#)]

[6] – Caroline Bergvall, *an oblique view of a room in movement* (London: Monolith, 1989); Caroline Bergvall, *Strange Passage* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993). [[Back to text](#)]

[7] – *Flaunt Mine* remains unpublished except for extracts as “from Flaunt Mine: Compact Mix” in *Chain 4*, ed. Juliana Spahr and Jena Osman, (1996). [[Back to text](#)]

[8] – Caroline Bergvall, “In Situ,” appeared in *Language aLive 2* (1996) ed. cris cheek. [[Back to text](#)]

[9] – <http://www.dartington.ac.uk/pw/keynote.html> (this link works as of April 2008) [[Back to text](#)]

[10] – The Institution of Rot (IOR) at 109 Corbyn St, Finsbury Park, London, founded in 1992 by Richard Crow (sculptor, installation and performance artist) and Nick Couldry (writer and sound artist). IOR concerned itself with objects and processes born out of the destruction/transformation taking place within Crow's private living/ working space. The first public performances and installations at

the Institution of Rot were in June 1993. In 1996 IOR curated *Noisiness Of Bodies* - a series of site-specific work and performances that revealed multiple imaginary histories of a single private space. *Éclat—Occupation des Lieux 1 - 10* was part of this commissioned series. Other such home-based studio galleries in London's artist communities during the 1990s included Interim, Platform and Home. Perhaps the most well know before then was Matt's Gallery, which opened in 1979. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[11] – *Rooms*, the third and final section of *Tender Buttons* and the longest section in that piece. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (New York: Dover, 1997), pp.43-52. An incidence of explicit adaptation from *Rooms* comes from Stein's "The sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. It was." (p.44). This becomes "A sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. Yes no. It was. A sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. Yes no. It was. A sister was not a mis... Wa this usurp. Ye. Noit wa. A sist wa no mms. Wtis urpr. NYo was. Asist wno m. Tis urp. Yas." *Éclat*. p.36. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[12] – *Performance Research Journal* vol. 1, no. 3 (1996), first page of supplement (see below). [\[Back to text\]](#)

[13] – Caroline Bergvall, *Éclat* (Lowestoft: Sound & Language, 1996). [\[Back to text\]](#)

[14] – Caroline Bergvall, "Éclat: sites 1—10," *Performance Research Journal* vol. 1, no. 3 (1996) inserted as an artist pages supplement between pp.70-71. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[15] – As publisher of the book form I know that between delivery of a mock-up from Caroline Bergvall on 10/6/96 (dated from her covering letter) and the book going to print in August of that year, the manuscript expanded to become two-thirds longer through a conversational and playful exploration of working on the book's design and formatting together. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[16] – A further version now exists, the product of a year-long collaboration between Bergvall and the designer Marit Muenzberg, in the form of a downloadable pdf. [http://www.ubu.com/ubu/bergvall\\_eclat.html](http://www.ubu.com/ubu/bergvall_eclat.html) [\[Back to text\]](#)

[17] – Caroline Bergvall, *Fig* (Cambridge: Salt 2005). The book mentions yet another sit(uat)ing of the work, for the Liverpool Biennial in September 2004 and identifies several key elements both in common between the version that I was witness-participant to in Exeter, and differing substantially from that version. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[18] – Ciarán Maher is a composer from Dublin particularly interested in the integration of spatial components into experiences of listening. Recent examples of his compositions can be found at [http://www.rhizomecowboy.com/spectral\\_variations/](http://www.rhizomecowboy.com/spectral_variations/) and other works are embedded within his rhizomecowboy homepage. [\[Back to text\]](#)

[19] – There are multiple collaborations in play; Josie Sutcliffe was credited with initiating and facilitating this project; the organising venue Spacex, themselves in

collaboration with Art + Location. A successful UK hi-fi retailer Richer Sounds partially sponsored the project. Additional support was received from Dartington College of Arts, Exeter Council, the Exeter Canal and Quay Trust. [[Back to text](#)]

[20] – Caroline Bergvall, “Marks Of Speech: On Siting Writing - The Making Of The Site-Specific Piece ‘Say: Parsley’,” in *Additional Apparitions* eds. Keith Tuma and David Kennedy (Sheffield: The Cherry On The Top Press, 2002), pp.191-200. [[Back to text](#)]

[21] – Ibid., p.198. [[Back to text](#)]

[22] – This is the text, both as I noted it down at the time (I visited on November 26th) and as later copied to me by Caroline Bergvall. [[Back to text](#)]

[23] – SpaceX 2 press release for the installation. [[Back to text](#)]

[24] – *Additional Apparitions*, p.192. [[Back to text](#)]

[25] – Ibid., p.193. The book publication amended this figure to “about fifty different voices”, *Fig* (Cambridge: Salt 2005) p. 51. [[Back to text](#)]

[26] – Ibid., p.193. [[Back to text](#)]

[27] – Ibid., p.192. [[Back to text](#)]

[28] – Ibid., p.195. [[Back to text](#)]

[29] – Ibid., p.195. [[Back to text](#)]

[30] – The text remained unpublished at the time of this article’s main drafting. A 2003 re-drafting (the manuscript in circulation prior publication) shows three subtle changes that add no further to my arguments as to phenomenology of textual apprehension. The text has now been published (see footnote 15). The kinds of changes made for book publication are the kinds of changes often made by poets in contemporary texts as the pressures of formatting for a particular publication impinge. The one huge difference is that the version in *Fig* has been “centered”, rather than being read as left-aligned. [[Back to text](#)]

[31] – *Fig* has a spelling of “keals” which I cannot find listed in dictionaries to hand (Oxford and Webster’s). I suspect a publisher’s error is in play here. However a web-search, as April 2008, for the word “keal” brings up an information technology company, the “relaxing New Age or Neo Classical composer” Solomon Keal, a storyteller Pete Keal and John Keal’s Online Service Center. [[Back to text](#)]

[32] – S has become capitalized. Almost all of the lines of this text now have a capitalized initial. [[Back to text](#)]

[33] – “st ruck” had been further prised apart to read “st r uck”, followed by a line break bring added emphasis to “in the throat”. [[Back to text](#)]

[34] – A line break emphasizing “for the dogs”. [[Back to text](#)]

[35] – “r ats” has been further prised apart to articulate “r at s”, so that, for example, the colloquial sense of “r at” like a flattened form of “are at” has an additional sense of being extinguished as when a cigarette is dropped into a puddle of beer. A line break emphasizes “of the law”. [[Back to text](#)]

[36] – Two line breaks create “enflamed” and “gorge d”. [[Back to text](#)]

[37] – In fact there was a 21st pendulum, positioned in the remnant of what had been a doorway “between” the two sides of what must now be a knocked-through space. Its purpose seemed simply to articulate this doorway. Except that in bringing the number of pendulums to 21 we are again faced with the numerological conundrum of the two in the one and one in the two? This was one of those points at which I felt I might have missed something. [[Back to text](#)]

[38] – These gaming grids of textual symbols are not represented in *Fig.* [[Back to text](#)]

[39] – Caroline Bergvall, *Goan Atom* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2001), p.9. [[Back to text](#)]

[40] – Caroline Bergvall, “Performing Writing at the Crossroads of Languages,” in *Translating Nations*, ed. Prem Poddar (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1999), p.248. [[Back to text](#)]

[41] – *Ibid.*, p.248. [[Back to text](#)]