



Organisational Encounters and Reflexive Undergoings: A Speculative Weaving in Three Transpositions

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Testing,
Testing

Organisational Encounters and Reflexive Undergoings:
A Speculative Weaving in Three Transpositions



Debbie Michaels

Transposition I

unmake

Organisational Encounters and Reflexive Undergoings: A Speculative Weaving in Three Transpositions

Deborah Anne Michaels

PRACTICE SUBMISSION – TRANSPOSITION I

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Culture and Creativity Research Institute, Faculty of Science, Technology and Arts

March 2022

All work attributed to Debbie Michaels unless otherwise stated

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Transposition I – <i>Unmake</i> | 01 |
| INTIMACY UNGUARDED | 03 |
| A GRAND DECEPTION | 09 |
| TESTING TESTING | 13 |
| Document the <i>unmaking</i> of an Object | 14 |
| Stage an Encounter | 24 |
| BE TWEEN | 26 |
| Discuss | 30 |
| Notes | 35 |

Transposition I – *Unmake*

'Transposition I' addresses the *unmaking* of previous practices as I cross disciplinary boundaries, transfer ideas and 'things' from one place to another, and tentatively test out how documentation of personal experience might become material for artistic practice and research.

Drawing on written and photographic notes I explore this *unmaking* of practice, and the inherent risks of personal exposure *through* the performance, production, and presentation of work(s) such as Intimacy Unguarded, A Grand Deception, and the Testing Testing project.

Intimacy Unguarded

2016

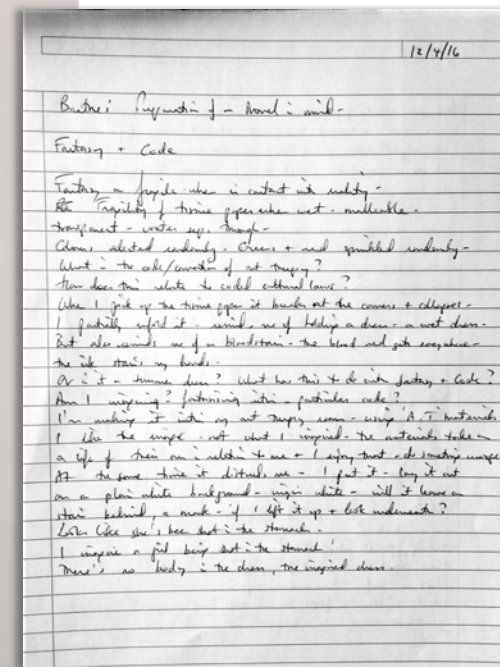
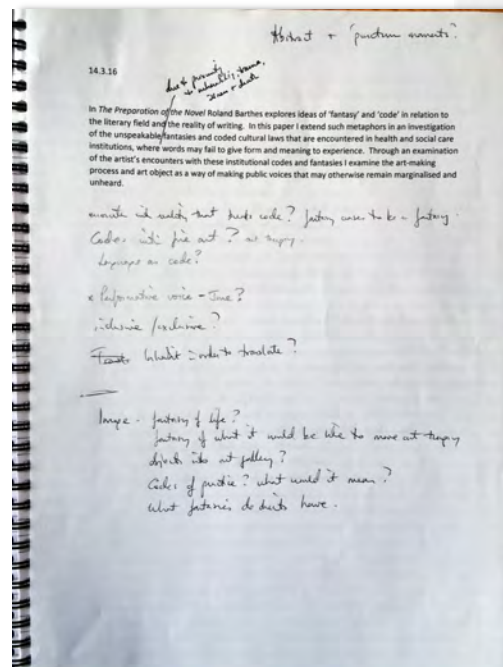
Intimacy Unguarded responds to material discussed in the ‘Roland Barthes Reading Group’, facilitated by artist-writer Sharon Kivland.¹ In March 2016, reading Barthes’s *The Preparation of the Novel*, Session of December 9, 1979, we are each asked to make an affective response to a ‘punctum’ moment in the form of an abstract for a paper. I respond to the idea of ‘code and fantasy’ which, Barthes suggests, is ‘an important problem.’²

The title of the work is borrowed from the ‘Intimacy Unguarded’ project and symposium hosted by professor Joanne Morra and artist Emma Talbot. This addresses the subject of how the personal becomes material for artistic practice – articulated through ‘some type of production (of words, images, gestures etc.) whether conscious or unconscious’ – and the risks involved.³

Exploring the fantasy of moving aspects of my practice from art (psycho)therapy to art academia and the tensions inherent in exchanging the codes and conventions of one for the other, I respond to the task on impulse rather than with anything particular in mind.

Due to previous...
 In *The Preparation of the Novel* Roland Barthes explores ideas of 'fantasy' and 'code' in relation to the literary field and the reality of writing. In this paper I extend such metaphors in an investigation of the unspeakable fantasies and coded cultural laws that are encountered in health and social care institutions, where words may fail to give form and meaning to experience. Through an examination of the artist's encounters with these institutional codes and fantasies I examine the art-making process and art object as a way of making public voices that may otherwise remain unheard.

encounter and reality that breaks code? fantasy case?
 Code, with the art? out there?
 Language as code?
 Time - Time?



On 11 May 2016 I present both material and textual works to the Roland Barthes Reading Group performing a reading alongside it.

The once white paper - tissue - creased - fragile - lies on
the clean virgin white - pure untouched - background,
stained irretrievably - unrecoverable in its original state
- pinned - stuck down at four corners as if fixed in time
and space - suspended - exposed to view.

The maker looks on from a distance - looks down from above -
looks back inside to a place in the past that returns to the
present. She touches the once white paper which gives way
beneath the fingers. No longer stained, but washed clean.
She is reminded - taken back to a place in time - a place in
mind and body that could not be held - obliterated -
submerged - only to re-emerge again.

The once white paper - tissue - creased - fragile - lies on
the clean virgin white - pure untouched - background,
stained irretrievably - unrecoverable in its original state
- holding the imprint of greens and reds - stained by
colours that colour the memory that can be held in body and
mind - finally.

A Grand Deception

2017

An experimental writing, *A Grand Deception* emerges from a series of workshops on the 'Writing Art' module at Sheffield Hallam University, led by Dr Sharon Kivland. Drawing on an examination of self as material for artistic production, the workshops invite participants to consider narratives that weave between internal and external landscapes, working against the linear and replicating the wanderings of the unconscious.

Based on the dreams of participants, the collected texts entitled *The Dreamers*, is published by MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, with short introductory essays by Rebecca Jagoe, Sharon Kivland, John McDowall, and dream texts by MA/MFA and Ph.D. students Ameera Al-Aji, Andrea Berry, Emma Bolland, Luke Chapman, Helen Clarke, Louise Finney, Debbie Michaels, Ameena Naushahi, Rachel Smith, Rachel Taylor, and Lunzhao Wu.

Further details of *The Dreamers* can be found at
<https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk/publications.php>

For *A Grand Deception* I merge waking memories with dreams, and subjective reflection with imagination – fictionalising the personal as I shift the pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘she’, and the narrative away from logic, grammar, and punctuation to the randomness of the unconscious.

A short reading from the text can be heard at
<https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk/dreamers.php>



Testing Testing

Making as Research

2016

The *Testing Testing* project involved a group of eleven doctoral researchers based in the Fine Arts at Sheffield Hallam University, and took the form of an exhibition at SIA Gallery, a symposium event, and two publications. Initiated by Jo Ray and Michael Day the aim was to

‘extend a discussion about research in art practice by showing the evolving stages of practice-based research.’⁴

Further details of the exhibition, symposium, and publications can be found at <http://testingtesting.org.uk>



Document the *unmaking* of an Object

Testing out the idea of moving aspects of my art (psycho)therapy practice from one place to another I explore and document the reflexive dialogues that emerge in the spaces between *unmaking*, *re-making*, and *exhibiting* an 'art therapy object' (not made for public view) within a fine art research context.⁵

The following pages draw on process notes and other documentation as I record the object's *unmaking* and its exposure to the gaze of the art academy.

Ideas - dialogue / conversation around 'making as research' -

Images in mind -

Transposing aspects of A.T. space into 'art gallery' space -



Chair set up in front of large mirror -
perhaps set up with plant, clock -
pictures etc?

15

^{mirror}
'Reflection' ? Looking at what is reflected back of me?

Ceaze

scouting, examination, inspection, viewing, survey,

Observation

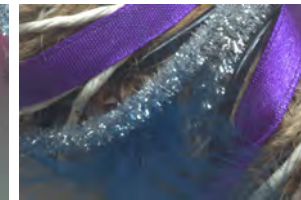
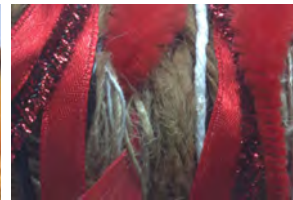
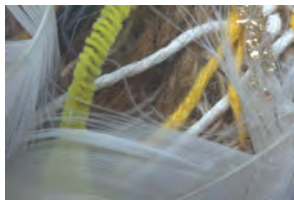
surveillance, attention, consideration, study, review,

remark, comment, statement, utterance, pronouncement, declaration

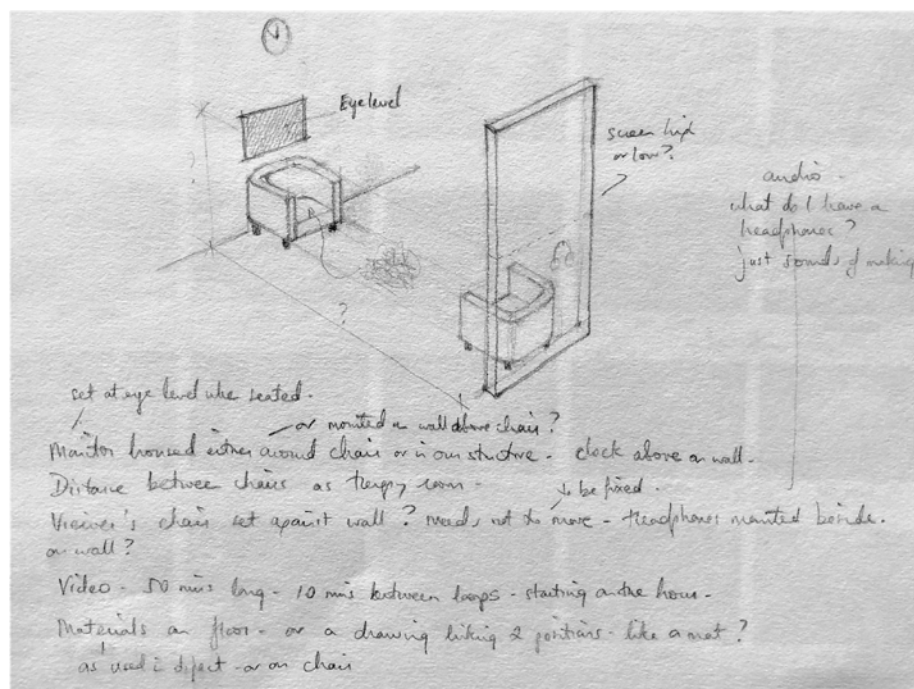
1 - Installation



*'...almost like an object you would hang on your door to ward off evil spirits – like a dream-catcher...
something quite profound about the piece – ritualistic wrapping – as if it could have had a function many years ago.'*⁶



I'm roughly circular and measure about 190mm in diameter and about 30mm thick, so I'm not very large. I'm made up of various materials wrapped and layered around a central circular core, and I have a hole in the middle. Some layers, the top ones, are brightly coloured. The layers beneath seem duller, but are made from more natural materials and form a complex weave. I'm quite soft I suppose, but also a bit fragile. It wouldn't do to handle me too much and it wouldn't take much to unravel me and then where would I be - naked! If I fell apart I expect I'd just be thrown in the bin - wouldn't be much use. The materials I'm made of aren't valuable in themselves. They are quite ordinary things, some more practical like string and scrim and others are more decorative, childlike and playful - like the ribbon, pipe-cleaners, and feathers. But all the different materials are somehow bound together. Some of them may seem a bit trivial, but without them I wouldn't be me. Oh, I forgot, there is also some black plastic twine. I don't like that part much. I feel it could choke the life out of me if it was tightened up. How strange. I've lived with it for so long and never thought of it like that before?! And the core material - it's quite resilient I think. It's a long time since I've really thought about it, but I guess it must be. At least I hope it is, as it forms my core structure and therefore is a critical part of what holds me together!



I dream about the object — about unmaking it. But as I unmake, it is as if the material turns into stuffing — chopped up pieces of stocking, stuffed into another to form the middle. It's all breaking up — disintegrating and I can't find the original pieces. They have disappeared. I look for them — trying to find them under all this 'stuff.'

documenting my process - all the doubts + anxieties - the fear of being looked at
and what will be seen - and what others might do with that. I found
thought about making out an area, but liked the idea of a stage - inviting, to be viewer + become
myself thinking this morning about the intimacy unguarded + the conference where
part of the work - to engage as a active participant. I am reminded of Marina Abramovic's educational
performance at the Serpentine Gallery which Donald had invited; it was called 512 hours. In the
there was a talk about the Lacanian exhibition the audience were invited to take part - to step up on a stage, to sit and look at a wall of
stage is part of the audience. And the patient or the analyst or a member of
I remember being struck by the slow, reflective atmosphere and thinking about what, later time, we
have to do this. At the same time aware of video cameras watching, of being watched, being part
of something which served a purpose for the artist, as it will do for me, except for a large proportion of,
perhaps I will also write about what it feels like to be absent? what might I inspire
purposes... what will it demonstrate? what new insights might I find?
And staying would be exposing. My mind returns to intimacy unguarded + the presentation.
I can't know until I try but it does make me think about what I
Step up the unconscious where training Lacanian Analysts have to interview a patient on stage - part of
doing - the awareness of entering into a body - the potential damage to
be done - the undoing and the care that needs to be taken when everything

I am aware of the cameras watching me [...] it is just my hands and arms and the materials in the frame. I can see my hands and the close up of what I am doing in the video screen which is helpful, but also makes me aware of keeping the object in the picture, so I am conscious of this particular viewpoint. As I 'unmake' or 'unwrap' the object, one material at a time I have a sense of undressing it, particularly when I get to the layers of scrim – or taking off bandages, carefully. With earlier layers – surface layers – I look for an end to begin with. Often they are tucked in behind something else. Some are easy to find, others take longer [...] As each piece comes free it joins the gathering collection beneath my hands. When I reach the final layer of scrim I sort the materials and move them to one side to create some space to complete the unwrapping [...] I feel I am unwrapping and laying something bare – uncovering the vulnerable inner core of the object.



*A circular shape with a gap –
a space [...] I am left with a
memory prompted only by
photographs and the sensory
memory – a sense of the object,
as if there has been a death
[...] The exposed ends look as
if they might have been torn –
stumps of limbs come to mind,
passing through almost
unnoticed.*

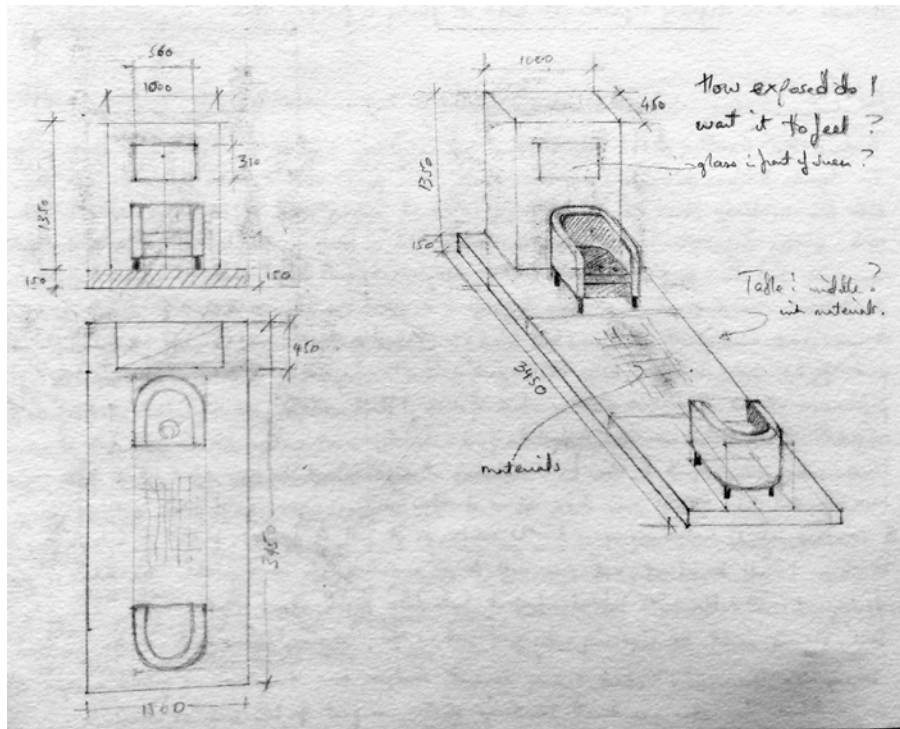


I lay the straightened pipe cleaners out in a row on the card. They present differently from those curled up as a result of being wound around the object for so many years. Continuing a similar process with the other materials I lay them out on the card, putting the measure down next to them. The black twine which seems the most incongruous is the most difficult to control. I stretch the three lengths out between my fingers and lay them out on the card but they have a life of their own, curling up again before my eyes as they retreat to a more familiar configuration. Eventually I tape them down, as if the only way I can measure them is to control the life in them.

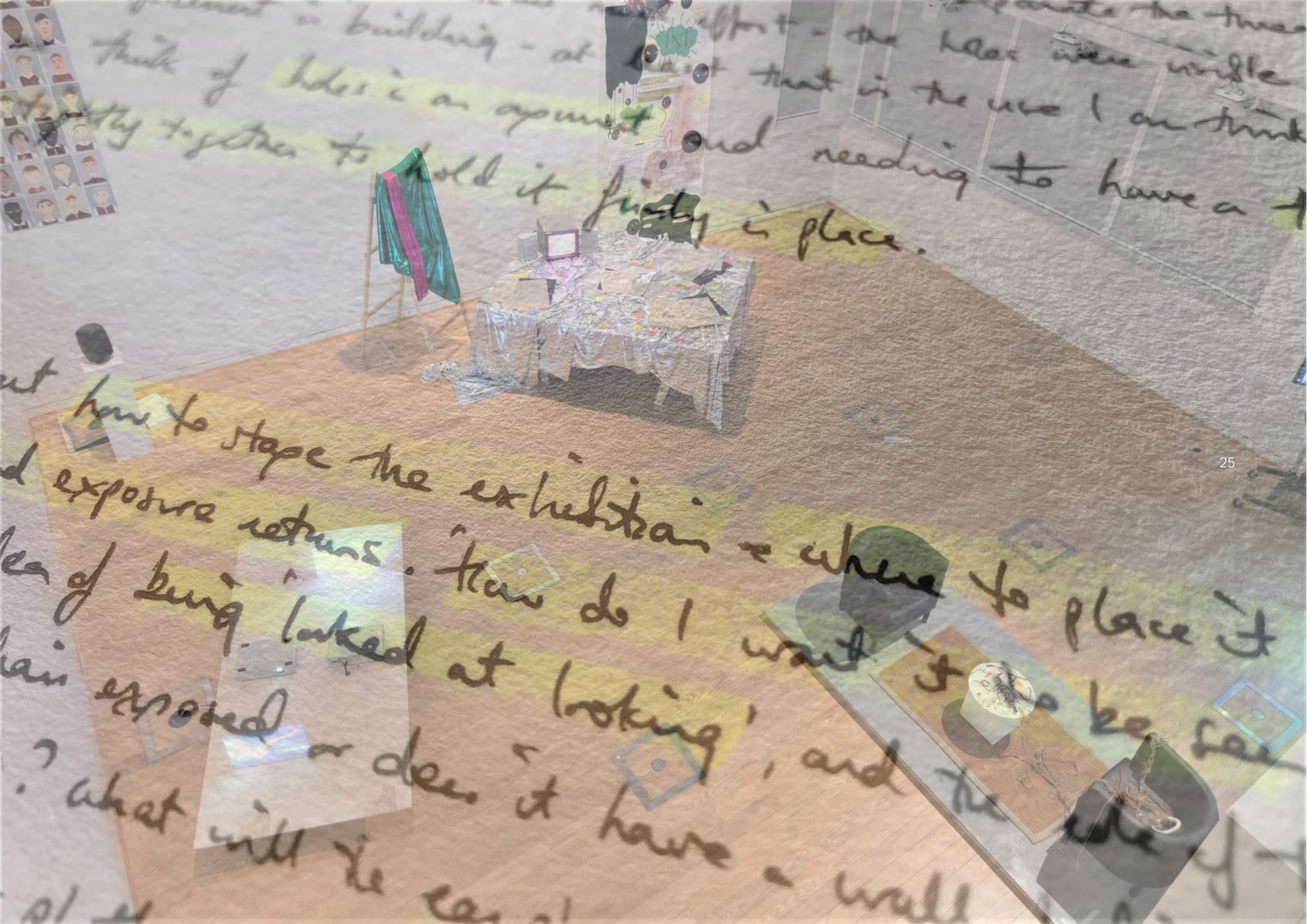
Photographing each in turn I make a kind of inventory, noticing that they bear little relation to the original object. They seem almost unrecognisable as having contributed to its form, as if stripped of any meaning beyond the purpose for which they were designed.



Stage an Encounter



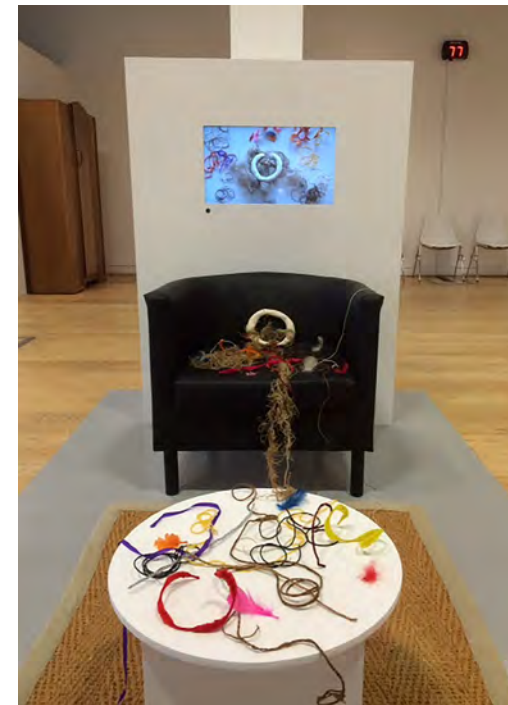
How exposed do I want it to feel?



BE | TWEEN

Multi-media installation 340 x 150 x 150, duration: 50 + 10 minutes (loop), 2016

26



An excerpt from the video can be found at
<https://www.debbiemichaels.co.uk/between.php>

...in the context of my role as art
community Arts Project.¹ It was not made
developed without conscious intention
space between myself and the group.
the wall of my art therapy room,
view and the demands of every-
s of reflection on interior life
therapy. The 'object' exists
and 'not me', as described
re there is both separation

...you could hang a you
like it could have

...value. Its value for
...almsman, endowed
therapy space it
space, the 'object'
brought to life
this is not unlike

(Schwartz)
...small

...which considers the art-making process
privacy or relative safety of the subject. No longer afforded
to detailed scrutiny, undressed, taken apart, destroyed in its o
and rendered naked and vulnerable.

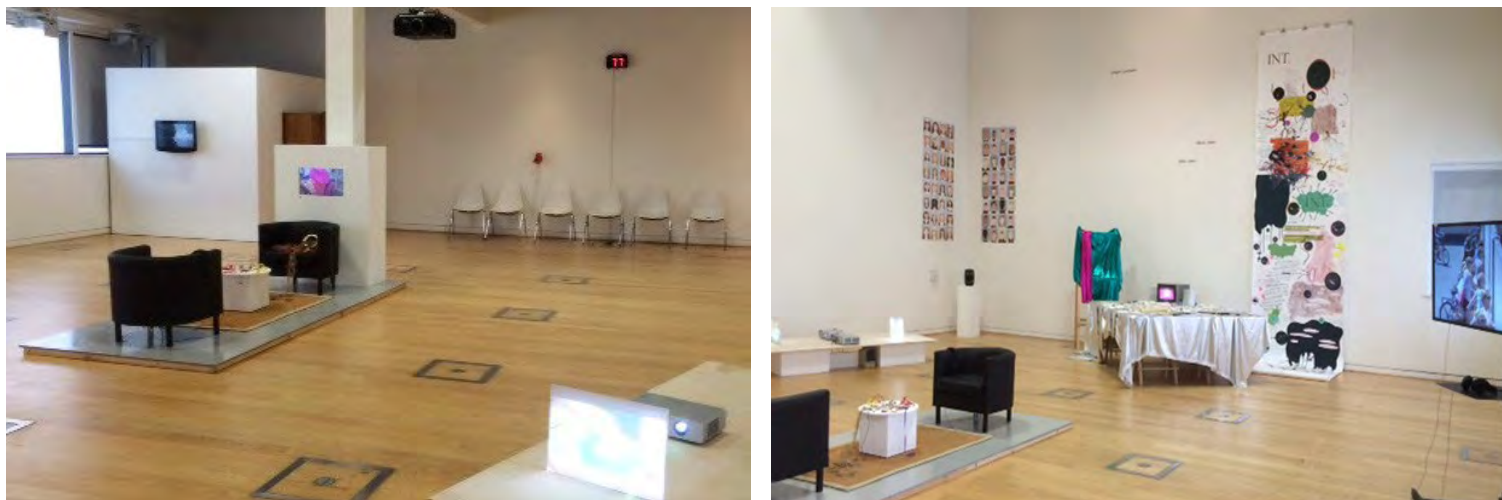
documenting my process - all the doubts + anxieties - the fear of being
and what will be seen - and what others might do with that.
to the material when it was soft. The exposed ends looked as if they might
been torn, stumps of limbs came briefly to mind, forming through almost w
to continue. This next stage felt more like 'deconstruction'. A much colder, mechan
process of straightening pieces of material out and measuring them. When straighten

Through exhibiting the work on a mock therapeutic stage, the viewer is
invited to participate in the dialogue, to have an experiential encounter with
the 'object' for the duration of a traditional therapeutic hour,⁴ to act as witness
to its predicament, and to sit with 'self' in relation to the object/other, looking
and being looked at.

thought about making out an even, but liked the idea of a stage - invitation to the viewer to become
part of the work. To engage as a active participant. I am reminded of Marina Abramovich's 'Imponderabilia'
performance at the Serpentine Gallery which Tom + I had visited in 2014 - called 'Imponderabilia' + the
such 'stopping' would be exposing - My mind returns to 'Intimacy Unwounded' + the
'Stopping the Unconscious' where training Lacanian Analysts have to interview

My research has only just begun. This
Unmaking, remaking and re-situating
and professional implication
what it was and
video de

Sheffield Hallam University, Art and Design Research Unit, 2016, 43-46
'Between' in *Testing Testing: Dialogue* (Vol. 1),



TESTING TESTING, 2016

Exhibition views, including works by: Debbie Michaels, Rachel Emily Taylor, Emma Bolland, Rose Butler, Susannah Gent, Jo Ray, and Emma O'Connor

Fiction

Pipe Cleaner: 30 cm – orange
bump stem: 30 cm, 1 × yellow, 1 × pink, 1 × red
: 105 × 0.88 cm, 1 × Length of purple ribbon:
103.5 × 0.8 cm,
re: 1 × length 89 cm, 2 × lengths 92.5 cm

Technical Equipment

screen, Media Player, HDMI lead, USB stick loaded
audio, 1 set headphones, 5m headphone extension lead,
r extension lead, operating instruction sheet.

Dialogue

/ˈdɪələg/

discussion between two or more people, especially one directed
towards exploration of a particular subject'
sation between two or more people as a feature of a book, play, or film'

Risk Assessment prior to installation. Position platform with 150 cm width
rally against pillar, with length extending beneath double height ceiling, and
of the floor services outlets. Run headphone extension lead under platform and
gh prepared holes at either end (larger hole at pillar end). Plug power extension
outlet and pass up through hole in platform.

is on the hour. There is no-one else here and yet
chair with the object opposite ... its
I feel an expectation,
asking
assist

D A camera watches, two in fact ... one directly in front,
watching from a distance. I feel other eyes around looking, even the
there. The eyes of the children whose portraits hang in the corner behind
seem to look down at me accusingly, as if to ask 'why did you abandon me?'¹ Then
names chime out in the space on the quarter hour, reminding me that I must not
forget they are there. More eyes, different eyes ... disembodied ... staring, and that
heavy breathing sound ... muffled with the headphones on, but lurking in the corners
of my mind.²

J Watching the video originally, it looked like an investigative procedure, almost
scientific ... straightening things out and putting rulers against them, measuring
them ... a careful sorting.

Plug in power and HDMI connector between monitor and media player. Fix media
player to inside front of housing with sensor facing up. Insert USB stick into media player.
Set up video playing on repeated loop. Correct timing to the hour as per instruction sh
fixed to inside of monitor housing. Place remote controls in plastic bag taped to insi
of monitor housing and place top in position.

D My awareness shifts to the wall on the screen to my left ... a row of people
standing peering through its restrictive openings.³ Barriers and resistances
to mind ... what may be hidden or blocked from view ... shut out or defen

A CONSTRUCTED FICTION
in *Testing Testing: Dialogue* (Vol. 2), Sheffield Hallam University,
Art and Design Research Unit, 2016, 17–20

Testing,
Testing



Discuss



'Each artist invites critical discussion from the symposium attendees on their project, with a focus on how she or he approaches dialogue in his or her work: how can art practice enable, obscure and facilitate it? The artists' also have the opportunity to ask the audience specific questions in relation to their practice in the context of dialogue.'⁷

'It's really seldom that you sit in front of a piece of art and want to touch it.
That was my initial impulse was to touch it and rearrange it'.

'I just sort of felt like I should do something [...] I think it was because I was facing the other chair that I thought maybe – I don't know really – I just felt that there was something I was supposed to do but I didn't know what it was.'

'I couldn't bring myself to sit in the chair. It felt destructive – the unravelling – I couldn't bring myself to do that.'

'The object exists only because of, and in response to, the object it once was'



Sharon Kivland, 2016

Notes

1. 'The Roland Barthes Reading Group', which I joined in 2015, sustained for over six years under the tutelage of Dr Sharon Kivland and served not only as an environment in which a text is discussed – Barthes's *The Preparation of The Novel*, (translated by Kate Briggs) – but also as a community and a space to think about the process of reading and its relation to writing.
2. Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the College De France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*. trans. Kate Briggs. ed. by Nathalie Léger, NYC: Columbia University Press, 2010, 10–16. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes describes the 'punctum' moment as the 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me...', p. 26.
3. Morra, Joanne, and Emma Talbot, 'Intimacy Unguarded: How the Personal Becomes Material', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 16, 3, 2017, 159–62. See also 'Intimacy Unguarded: Gender, the Unconscious, and Contemporary Art', Symposium, London, Freud Museum, 27 February 2016.
4. Michael Day and Jo Ray, *Testing Testing: Prologue (Vol. 1)*, Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, Art and Design Research Unit, 2016, p. 5.
5. The 'object' was made in the context of a Community Arts project, 'A Case for Art', which celebrated arts, health and emotional wellbeing for World Mental Health Day 2006. The central aim was to make public, artwork being produced in many different settings in Sheffield by people with wide ranging experiences of art in relationship to mental health and wellbeing. I was recruited along with another art (psycho)therapist, to facilitate a workshop for mental health service-users within a gallery space. Endowed with layers of meaning by me and others, the 'art therapy object' remained on the wall of my art (psycho)therapy room for over ten years until it was removed and 'unmade' for Testing Testing.
6. Personal communication, 26 May 2016. Meeting with artist and former art (psycho)therapist, Clee Claire Lee, I explore the idea of *unmaking* the 'art therapy object'.
7. Extract from *Testing Testing* symposium programme.

