

‘Sheffield in virus time’: forms of writing, reading, living

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‘Sheffield in virus time’: Forms of writing, reading, living

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Abstract

This article considers the experience of writing a daily journal, published daily via a public social media site. The journal began on 31 March 2020 as an attempt to account for the suddenly changed experiences of my personal and professional life (as an artist

and lecturer) in the early days of the first UK coronavirus lockdown; it is still ongoing. After producing 700,000 words, this project has come to be understood as having shifted my writing in creative practice to writing as a practice for creating life. An expansive readerly engagement with a variety of creative and critical diarists provides generative perspectives for rethinking life and work. This latter part of the article's structure considers the 'Sheffield in virus time' project in relation to poet Kumiko Hahn's characterization of the *zuihitsu* as a fungal form. This Japanese genre (translated as 'following the will of the pen') develops casual, loosely connected fragments and ideas, often in haphazard order, a form well-suited to the ongoingness of writing life.

Keywords: diary, essay, the everyday, form, journal, reflection, *zuihitsu*

In my professional role as an art school lecturer, I have long worked with art and design students to encourage practices of journaling as a space for reflection, seeing it as a useful part of the creative and critical learning process, a means of laying hold to the sometimes fleeting insights that arise and are too easily lost without a means to record them. In my artistic-research – pursued through writing, photography and tested through forms of 'essaying' – I focus upon 'the everyday', 'the infra-ordinary' and 'the local' as a field of investigation, informed in particular by a sustained engagement with the projects of French writer Georges Perec. Just over two years ago, I embarked upon a new project (though it was not initially defined as such) which brought together these two aspects. In what I hastily titled as 'Sheffield in virus time', I began to write a daily, publicly accessible journal which attempted to account for the suddenly changed experiences of

my personal and professional life under the restrictions imposed during the first UK coronavirus lockdown.



Figure 1: Joanne Lee, *Winter Afternoon / Lights on & Blinds Not Yet Drawn / The Day's Hinge*, 2021. Photograph posted on Facebook and Instagram. © Joanne Lee.

My first words on 31 March 2020 described a trip to the very familiar, entirely unremarkable corner shop in my north Sheffield neighbourhood. They also told of the

first steps taken as we began to accommodate the early and uncertain days of the global pandemic:

Just after lunch we walk to the tiny corner shop at Malin Bridge to buy milk, butter, yoghurt and Penguin biscuits, for which I have a current mid-afternoon craving. The girl with dyed pale-green hair who walks her big rangy dog along the lane behind our house, usually whilst having a cigarette, is in there, as is another woman who entered just before us. We all duck back and forth around the corners of shelving to let each other pass safely, as if on a dance floor or playing peek-a-boo.

(Lee 2020–present: n.pag.)

That entry for 31 March – a Tuesday – went on to describe the route my partner and I took as we walked home. It registered diminished traffic on the roads and noted the way that people spoke less as we passed, fearful, I reckoned, of the viral transmissibility of each other's breath. Those first 776 words of what has grown to almost 700,000 tell of the River Loxley stained orange with locally occurring iron ore and of the engineering of those waters that drove the city's early metal industry. They remarked upon the strandline of poo bags tossed over a fence by regular dog walkers, reflected on the uncared-for land's offshore registration to a company in Guernsey and noted mallards on a mill pond and the shattered stems of the previous year's invasive Japanese knotweed growth.

I have written nearly every day since that date in 2020, only missing a few entries here and there when my health or schedule prevented it. I continued as the pandemic has waxed and waned and as variously political, economic and global factors impinged on daily life. At the beginning, I made an unconscious decision to write in the present tense and once I had started, I stuck to this approach. I did not re-read what had gone before as I sat down to write, preferring to stay with the insistent present.

As a creative practice, it took on its own identity, developing a voice that I do not use elsewhere in writing. Its blunt mantras, ways of phrasing the same things, repeat in entry after entry, giving a sense of the doing over and over that makes up daily life: I am at my desk. [...] We take a short walk. [...] Heading home. [...] After lunch. [...] In the afternoon. [...] I make. [...] We eat. [...] I read. [...] I think about[...]

Writing happened in the evenings; I would produce between 700 and 1000 words and publish them immediately to my public Facebook page. ('Sheffield in virus time' entries can be read at <https://www.facebook.com/generalistjo>.) From the beginning, I did not see it as a private diary but an act of thinking in public. Readers have commented, offering reflections on their own lives and I have learnt that posts have been shared or read far beyond the people I know personally.

Were I to produce an alphabetical index of the diary's contents, it would include such matters as ants, books, cats, dreams, eating, feeling cold, gardening, hospitals, industrial action, Boris Johnson, kitchen, litterpicking, Jonas Mekas, not going anywhere, orange-clad runners, poo bags, queues, rivers, straplines (corporate), tiredness, universities, vegetables, war (Syria, Ukraine, Yemen), Xpelair fan (broken), young people (behaving badly, getting drunk), Zoom meetings. This heterogenous list gives some sense of the things to which I have attended, though there is a very great deal besides.

The writing has been backed up from these public posts in my personal Dropbox as a series of Microsoft Word documents, each of which contains six months' entries. It is only on the occasions when I take time to read back over the entries generated in a particular period of time – a week, a month, half a year – that I started to get a sense of

the recurring patterns and concepts, but, rather than the sense of laying hold to insights I had thought would happen, I realized that the relentless continuation of the journal has often undone and unravelled the moments of clarity. I saw how the things about which I felt strongly or were apparently certain continually frayed, all too soon becoming muddled once more into the complex ongoingness of everyday life. There is so much of it – the journal, everyday life – that my reflection has tended to operate almost as a temporal, seasonal phenomenon of growth and decay; I think now of what I am doing as being more akin to another practice, that of gardening, with some things emerging, and others dying back, some self-seeding and others failing to reappear and some things thrown on the compost heap to nourish future seasons. I am learning to become OK with this as a creative practice.

My creative and critical self has been changed by this experience, I am both more and less ambitious as a result. I am more ambitious because the scale of this activity is larger than anything else I have previously done (I have never before written 700,000 words for a single project) and because its form has an almost limitless potential for enlargement and the inclusion of emerging ideas. It is less ambitious in a traditional sense because I am in its midst, swept up and sometimes pushed aside by the shifting tides of social situation, professional demand and personal well-being. It is thus a messy reflection on the ways in which life is lived and how we are buffeted by matters outside of our control, but try to continue nevertheless.

I have had to allow myself to be much more at the mercy of a creative process than I have previously felt comfortable, letting it go where it needs to, finding out as I go along what is the work that needs to be done. It is an odd kind of criticality, in which I

abdicate a certain directorial responsibility, but choose to work along with the life that is springing up around me.

What exactly has sprung up so far during this experiment? I have realized that while describing the way things are – everyday human activities, the changing weather, the animal-vegetable-fungal lives amongst which my human life exists, the political-social-cultural phenomena encountered which shape the way life can currently be lived – the journal has ultimately been having a conversation about alternatives to the status quo. This project has transcended narrowly academic or artistic aims, becoming instead an effort in finding the conditions necessary for writing and thinking as survival in difficult times. It is not writing in creative practice, but writing as a practice of creating life.

As I recounted the minutiae of daily life in a specific place in northern England, I recognized intersections with wider historical and contemporary contexts – the developing pandemic, various wars, Brexit, the catastrophes of the ‘capitalocene’, higher education and industrial action – and how my experiences were habitually brought into a dialogue with the reading I have pursued during this time.

This readerly engagement with a variety of creative and critical compatriots, thinkers and doers has provided perspectives that enable the branching of thought and practice. Very many are themselves diarists and keepers of journals and their multiple voices are present throughout the ‘Sheffield in virus time’ writing. It is to these other voices I want to turn finally in this article, since I realize that my choosing so often to incorporate their words in the journal was about seeking challenge and confirmation for practices of creating life through writing. As I wrote and read and lived, I have asked questions and recorded observations of what I produced. Below, I interpose some of these

(the italicized words) with associated diary excerpts. The original journal did not give citations, but reproducing it in this more formal academic context, I have added them according to convention.

What is this sort of writing? Who is it for? What does it do?

12 October 2021

Reading makes me hungry for more. I pick up Lauren Elkin's *No 91/92: Notes on a Parisian Commute* (2021), a slim volume whose form evokes that of the iPhone upon which she made a series of entries during her bus journeys to and from work in a French university.

On 17 November 2014 she refers to Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces*, noting the way 'he writes the city bit by bit piece by piece' (2015: 34). On 20 November 2014 she teaches Perec in her class and tells how her students are at first 'bogged down by all the details' (2015: 36). Being more used to books with plot and character, they haven't encountered writing like this: 'writing of the everyday, writing without an argument, writing that suggests, that counts, that tracks' (2015: 34). One student asks why Perec writes like this and who reads it. Elkin says she doesn't know how to answer because *Species of Spaces* seems less about writing for someone and 'more a means of making sense of the world. Like: things are out of control. Slow down. Count the buses. Pattern the world' (2015: 36–37).

It is too much and not enough.

13 October 2021

I continue to think about yesterday's reading and go back to look again at certain passages. On the back cover of Lauren Elkins' short volume about her bus commute, a

number of authors have provided their supportive blurb. One of these is poet and essayist Sarah Manguso, whose *Ongoingness* (2018) reflects on her years of diary-writing. She says: ‘I wrote so I could say I was truly paying attention’, and ‘Experience in itself wasn’t enough. The diary was my defense against waking up at the end of my life and realizing I’d missed it’ (2018: 3). A New Yorker article tells me that her 25 years of diarising have yielded 800,000 words, something described as being of ‘overwhelming proportions’ (Gregory 2015); I think of the mere eighteen-months during which time I have been writing my everyday experiences in virus-time and the fact this has already reached two-thirds of Manguso’s total. I think too of all that I have still not said, and the very many things I have no doubt failed to notice even as I tried my best to stay alert.

In Lauren Elkins’s book, her final entry returns to Georges Perec and his acknowledgement in *An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris* that even when his only goal is to observe he often fails to see what takes place only a few metres from him. Elkins writes: ‘There is so much we miss; none of us can have a total vision, or total understanding, of even just one place in our cities. This is a powerful and humbling thing to be aware of’ (2021: 113). I am grateful for these words.

Restricted in where we could travel and who we might see, I feared my perspective shrinking and narrowing. Reading functioned as challenging, generative, connecting, expanding.

23 June 2020

I read outside for a while. The book is *The Size of Thoughts*, a collection of Nicholson Baker’s essays (1997). I like them a lot because they are an example of what Ross Chambers has termed ‘loiterature’, a kind of writing where digression links one

context and another through a process of ‘slide’ and ‘slippage’ so that ‘the new position one reaches is both linked with the first and discontinuous with it’ (Chambers 1999: 12). The essay ‘Books as furniture’ starts with noticing and identifying the books used as props in mail order catalogue and then manages to explore all manner of things including medieval chained libraries, Beatrix Potter’s ‘Two Bad Mice’, the Massachusetts inventor of the pneumatic dental mallet, children’s paper engineered books and an obscure source in Hamlet, along with a great deal more besides (Baker 1997: 182–203). I think how much my physical world has shrunk these past months, but how I continue to wander in my reading. Thank goodness for a house full of books.

Wandering through reading enables wondering, I read with curiosity and without explicit aims.

9 January 2022

Over tea and stollen, I read from the filmmaker Jonas Mekas’ diaries. In 1952, he writes about being the sort of person who ‘gets very excited about all kinds of unnecessary, useless things’ (2019: 49). A later entry from 24 March 1958 quotes the art historian Bernard Berenson:

The fruit of my life was my loafing, not my work – when I was wool-gathering and satisfying useless curiosities. I didn’t prepare myself for anything but my voracious appetites for the useless, such as reading anthologies of Greek and Provençal poets. I never feared wasting time.

(145)

I am tired of the demands for productivity, which mean everything is professionalized, turned into work. How can it stay as life?

25 December 2021

Back home there are scrambled eggs and smoked salmon for lunch and afterwards music and books by the fire. I am reading Moyra Davey's *Index Cards* (2020), which speaks to me in so many ways. These essay fragments talk about reading and writing; about photography; about the collection – and loss, and misremembering – of other people's ideas through writing; and about the frustration of turning everything to projects rather than being able to enjoy things for their own sake.

I learn from Davey that the Swiss writer Robert Walser died on Christmas Day (in 1956). I have only read his work *The Walk* so I follow the references to the *Microscripts*, about which I know little. I learn they were written on narrow strips of paper (many during his hospitalization in the Waldau sanatorium). I look further and find an article from the New Yorker which begins with a reference to his 1909 novel *Jakob von Gunten* in which the hero adopts the motto 'To be small and to stay small', something that it is said could be applied to Walser himself (Kunkle 2007). This too speaks to me.

I want to find and make alternative modes of academic and creative practice, ones which are not driven by relentless entrepreneurialism and the assertion of grand claims.

16 February 2022

In 1970, Mekas writes a manifesto in support of the regional and the small. He asserts: 'Fuck your bigness!' (2021: 852). Today, a social media post takes me to the French Cinémathèque website promoting their programme for Mekas' centenary year. It offers his words from 1996's *Anti-100 Years of Cinema Manifesto*:

I want to celebrate the small forms of cinema: the lyrical form, the poem, the watercolour, the study, the sketch, the portrait, the arabesque and the trifle, and the small songs in 8 mm. At a time when everyone wants to succeed and sell, I want to celebrate those who consent to daily social failure in order to pursue the invisible, those personal

elements that bring neither money nor bread and do not claim to make history contemporary, art history or any other history. I am for the art that we make for each other, as friends.

(Mekas 1996 n. pag.)

Yes.

There are creative and epistemological opportunities in 'weakness'.

30 January 2022

I am still reading his [Mekas'] diaries. Today, I read an entry from 7 November 1960 when he recounts a disagreement with his directorial collaborator. Rather than preparing scenes in advance, Mekas asserts 'It is not my way. I search from the situation; I begin with ignorance' (2019: 273). Later, he writes: 'I begin everything from weakness, from zero' (2019: 275). He recognizes that pressure from others makes him want to be 'strong' and makes him 'lose my weakness, my naturalness, my truth' (2019: 275).

There are other ways of doing things and those approaches will make different routes possible.

12 October 2021

My computer operating system is updated by a university IT technician. [...] Once the update is downloading and updating, my computer cannot be used for quite a while, so I pick up Judith / Jack Halberstam's 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure*, something I have been intending to read for quite a while and about which I was recently reminded by a friend. I read the book in haste – gluttonously – all in one go.

Halberstam writes: 'If the boom and bust years of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first have taught us anything, we should have a healthy critique of static models of success and failure' (2011: 2). As a result, the book proposes: 'Under certain

circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (2011: 2–3).

Halberstam's manifesto speaks to me:

I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. [...] I am chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies.

(2011: 21)

When so much overwhelms, what good is this small stuff? Perhaps weakness is a humble methodology for dealing with what is here, and with what is coming.

29 June 2020

I think about feebleness, and the strength in recognizing and accommodating to it. I recently read a Facebook post by the writer, walker, performer and 'mythogeographer' Phil Smith. In it, he considers how in virus time we need to do much more than try to save existing arts institutions, suggesting instead that we need to 'build catastrophe and ruin and decay and mutation INTO our modi operandi'. [...] He says: 'I have no interest in apocalypse, but I'd like to see some extreme thinking that digests catastrophe so we can still walk, wheel, limp, crawl once it arrives' (Smith 2020).

Writing the everyday every day, makes me acutely aware of the care needed to make a home, to work with students, to build community and how little these are valued by the metrics driving strategies for those in power, in government, in the universities.

21 October 2021

As I eat breakfast, I finish Shannon Mattern's *The City Is Not a Computer* and read her call for maintenance to overtake the paradigm of innovation. She quotes from Steven Jackson's 2014 essay 'Rethinking Repair' which proposes that we 'take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress as our starting points' (quoted in Mattern 2021: 107). Jackson finds 'wonder and appreciation for the ongoing activities by which stability [...] is maintained, the subtle arts of repair by which rich and robust lives are sustained against the weight of centrifugal odds' (2021: 107). Mattern's chapter on repair is compelling.

So why have I been keeping a diary which takes an hour or more out of each day when I already seem to have too little time? Where is the care and repair in this?

14 February 2022

I read Jonas Mekas' diaries over breakfast, finishing the 824 pages of Volume 1, which relates to his life between 1950 and 1969. It reproduces a poster from the '2nd Buffalo Festival of the Arts Today', from which I learn that the first draft of Mekas' film *Walden* received its 'world premiere' on 7 March 1968 (2019: 690). Mekas tells how the [film] *Diaries* were made over three years and brought to an audience 'with a devil-break-neck-deadline' thanks to the Festival (2019: 685). Of its making, he writes: 'For me, so badly and desperately distracted by my other activities [...] this was the only way to keep my brains in one piece by keeping such a diary' (2019: 685).

Sometimes, though, we just need to allow ourselves to think of alternatives.

7 October 2021

On 10 May 1970, he [Andrey Tarkovsky] writes of a house he has bought in the country, some three-hundred kilometres from Moscow and I see the same plans for

escape I myself so often hatch: 'Now I don't care what happens. If they don't give me any work I'll sit in the country and breed piglets and geese, and tend my vegetable patch, and to hell with them!' (1994: 3). He lists the jobs to be done in the property to make it habitable. There are seventeen points, which begin with 'Re-roofing' and 'Re-lay all floors', and includes 'Put fence all round house', 'make lavatory' and 'plant garden' (1994: 4). The place obviously needs a lot of work. As I read on, I discover that the following year a large part of the building is destroyed by fire, though plans for its renovation continue.

Exploration may happen slowly, and the destination is uncertain.

10 February 2021

I am reading Annie Dillard again, and am struck in an essay on the polar regions by her reference to the technique of 'drift expeditions' (2016: 263). She tells how, in 1893, the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen deliberately drove his ship into the pack ice and allowed it to drift with the current, which he hoped would take him nearer to the Pole. He and his crew of twelve spent two years onboard their ship moving slowly across the frozen ocean. He wrote in his diary: 'the years are passing here' and 'this inactivity crushes one's very soul; one's life seems as dark as the winter night outside; there is sunlight upon no other part of it except the past and the far, far distant future' (quoted in Dillard 2016: 263). I try to imagine these two icebound years of his, under the extreme darkness and light of the polar seasons. We are only a year into this pandemic, and it is our first winter.

Ought I to continue? What form will continuing or finishing take?

7 February 2022

I pick up Jonas Mekas' diaries again and open them at random. In an entry for 29 August 1963 (2019: 393) he relates a dream conversation:

‘What should I do?’

‘Be humble’.

‘Should I do what I’m doing or leave it?’

‘All growing depends on you, it is all in you, not only in what you are doing. It is how you are doing it. It’s in what you’re doing and in what you’re not doing’.

Life goes on, ongoingly, as does the ‘Sheffield in virus time’ journal, as does my reading. I have so far failed to conclude, though this article must. I will do so with reference to my most recent wandering reading, where I learnt via Diane Ackerman of the Japanese genre of ‘zuihitsu’, a term that translates as ‘following the will of the pen’ or ‘the pen following the mind’ (2009: 104). Ackerman says that ‘The zuihitsu isn’t as loose or meandering as a stream of consciousness, but less single-minded than a formal essay. It wanders as our thoughts do, not freely but following related pathways’ (2009: 104). She considers it to be a descendent of the practice of Sei Shōnagon’s informal, meandering *Pillow Book* diary. For contemporary American poet Kimiko Hahn, these casual, loosely connected fragments and ideas, often in haphazard order, are a fungal form (cited in Sheck 2006). I am thinking now of the creative and critical mycelium that links the heterogeneous topics of everyday life and the words of those I have been reading. I am thinking of the compost heap and the hyphae that thread it, and then reach out into the soil, continue to grow and extend. I am thinking of the potential of small thoughts shared widely. I am thinking of how to live.

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