
DIALOGUE

Writing as Experiment: A Dialogue with Sher Doruff

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Dialogue between Sher Doruff and Lucy Cotter, exploring the potential of artistic writing to open experimental new forms of enquiry.

Lucy Cotter: You are an artist, a writer and a theorist, often working in the middle ground between these various areas and currently working on a series of three novellas, the first of which, *Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty*, is about to be published. It seems that an increasing number of artists are searching for ways to hold open the space of writing differently. Like your novellas, these experimental writings don't fit comfortably in academic discourse and their place in art discourse is shifting ground, but they draw on ways of thinking that come from the artistic as well as the academic. How do you personally situate your novellas in relationship to these different areas of practice and why did you turn to this form of writing?

Sher Doruff: Certainly the whole project was infected by the milieu of artistic research we both dog paddle in on a regular basis. By the agitation, frictions and, dare I say satisfactions, that praxis as research engenders. I was a latecomer to academic writing. Like many artists, I wasn't trained in it and I tended to overcompensate for my neophyte academic status with excessive referencing and quotation, bogging down the flow of ideas percolating underneath. I found my phrasing in my published writings too dense and jargon-driven to be accessible to the potential readers I care about. I thought that a turn to fiction or fabulation could perhaps liberate the concepts that intrigue me from this quagmire of relentless positioning. I wanted to allow the speculative the breath it requires. It's not that I disrespect academic or theoretical criteria, quite the contrary. I devour academic texts. But for my own distillation processes, I needed to try another approach. Philosophical inquiry often opens to a wafty unbounded kind of space but it can also feel like a sinkhole. I needed to find a way of having a voice again that's not a citational voice.

LC: The early stages of your first novella were partly the product of a writing experiment that you considered a kind of artistic research process. This involved keeping an early morning journal to chronicle the oscillating field of consciousness between waking and dream life. What started this process?

SD: I began to sense a certain collusion between the activities of waking life and the nocturnal adventures of somni-life. My dreams, or what I remembered of them, were rife with allusions to conceptual and material goings-on. This stemmed from my daily engagement in material-discursive practice, among other things in my role as a supervisor to artists pursuing research at master and PhD levels. So I decided to keep a waking journal to capture whatever remained of my dreams and whatever was rapidly emerging as fresh, new day dawning thinking-feeling. I think it was waking from a lively enactment of an Agamben shadow and a Derridean ghost that got me started.

LC: In the novellas you chose to depersonalize your journal experiences through the characters of Betty an ageing quasi-academic artist researcher, and Bob, an attuned urban rodent, both of whom inhabit both sides of the animal/human spectrum in an increasingly instable way. They are part of a wider cast of characters with the same name, whose happenstance meeting brings about a trans-species contagion. The novellas can

be read as a “story”, but also on a more theoretical level. They are structured in a very particular way with the protagonists, the chapters, the footnotes and so on, which sets the stage for this double function. Can you elaborate on the structure you developed and why you chose for this form?

SD: The starting points for these stories and characterizations emerged during the cusp between waking and dreaming, as I mentioned. I decided to obfuscate the question of overt subjectivity that journal writing tends to induce by writing in a gender fluid third person. This was partly inspired by my dream personas, which were also complex amalgams with wandering ages, sexes and phenotypes. After that the stories pretty much wrote themselves, which is something most writers will tell you. I never knew where the stories would go but I did have a concept for a basic structure, although it is dynamic and it’s changing already while I’m working on the second novella. That structure was that all of the characters would share the same name, they’d all be Betties and Bobs of some sort. They would also not necessarily be confined to one gender, though in the first book the rat is male and the Betty protagonist is female. There are two secondary protagonists for the first novella, Blue Betty and Blue Bob, who are homeless rat catchers in the new economy. I try not to ascribe temporality too much. There is chronology but the temporality is vague; the present is not our present, which gives the books an element of science fiction or science fact. I initially decided that there would be no footnotes, no endnotes, no end-of-text references, to use quotations modestly if at all, and to entangle any theoretical excitements and biases into character traits, situational clues and thought bubbles, which are also presented graphically.

LC: Is there anything in the final structure of the novellas that reveals the liminal state between sleeping and waking that sparked the initial writing process?

SD: The one thing I tried to keep from what we know of our dream reality is repetition. I’m not afraid of repetition and lots of times things happen and are said many different ways many times. And in this way I’m not trying to be a novelist and to write according to the craft of fiction writing. It’s a craft I don’t know for one thing. But there’s a kind of repetitiveness to things that recur with different foci, if you will, and through different characters, perceptions as well. It could be seen as a flaw but for me it’s a feature in the way these novellas are written. We find out for example that the Blue Betty who is the rat catcher in the first book was one of the original Betty protagonists who left the artist group, eventually became homeless and didn’t have anything to do with them any more. I didn’t know that Blue Betty would come back as a character in the second book. I think the primary character of Bette B. will probably return in the third book but I’m not sure how. These things happen as one writes. Maybe I can add here that I think perhaps the novellas might only be digestible as a series. There are loops and repetitions that recur, as in dreams, and that recurrence is important somehow.

LC: The repetition you mention is very much a Deleuzian repetition in the sense of it always creating difference in its gesture of return. The focus shifts with each repetition, but also you had to craft a writing structure and form to be able to capture that. This to me gets to the core of why artists might be using writing in a particular way, because artists are almost always creating the structures and the forms as they make the work. Did you find that to be true of your own work on the novellas? Has that creation of new form through writing become necessary through your journey as an artist, as a researcher, as a theorist?

SD: Yes, definitely. Undertaking this new writing process was about looking for a way to maintain a rigorous sense of discovery though a daily *praxis*, putting myself through questions that might be resonant with other people working under a similar umbrella of concerns. That was in 2013 and these were writings I intended for my eyes only. I was interested in artistic *praxis* as research, in that liminal between space of doing; an act which is not looking towards the manifestation of an artwork, a product. In the interim years the status of the writing has changed, as things do. Once there is a “product” being published for a wider audience, it takes on different intensities. Other concerns crop up that are both liberating and frightening.

LC: In your articulation of the “story” of *Betty and Bob*, I have the feeling you work with words and concepts as materiality. Below the surface is a kind of theorization of materiality, the concept of human and the ways in which matter converses across time and space. I wonder to what extent we can talk about how the materiality of the artistic process informs these conceptual interests.

SD: I like to imagine conceptualization as a material process. Maybe I rely too much on contemporary theory and the ubiquitous pun on matter mattering, but it makes so much sense. How things come to matter in terms of thought really convolves in the English word “mattering”. Maybe another way to put this question is how does the body mediate the work? I am interested in nonconscious touch, the filtering out of the sensation of our feet as we walk for example, the nonconsciously felt as affective. We filter out so many of the sensations that bombard us every microsecond. So it’s maybe more a concern with attention. How much I want to pay attention to the circumstances of my sitting, my standing. That’s probably palpable in the writings, although it wasn’t a conscious decision to emphasize that.

LC: What about your attention to colour? The three novellas are based on a colour scheme. The first one is blue, the second is red and the third green.

SD: I hadn’t intended colour to be a focus initially, but blue kept coming up in the first writings. I was quite clear with myself that the novellas had to be a series with repetitions that would relate book to book. I was already thinking about it being a series of three books, so it was a logical leap to red and green to make up RGB. I’ve always been interested in colour because just about every Western philosopher, and I’m sure Eastern philosophers that I’m unfamiliar with, have thought with and through colour as material and as perception. It’s discursive and it’s conceptual and certainly people like the process philosophers have thought a great deal about how we perceive colour. In the differentiation between subject and object colour ends up being a way to think about that as a non-binary.

LC: In the opening pages there are citations from artist/filmmaker Derek Jarman’s writings on blue and to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* but there are also material things happening within the story line that relate to the colour. When Bette B is scraped on the cheek by the rat, the scar starts to glow in different colours, for example.

SD: Yes, it was probably unconscious in the first place, but when the scratch became a visible spectrum, that was also a cue to go further with colour. In the second book the Betties, a group of artists akin to the Gorilla Girls, label themselves according to the colours of the visible spectrum, which is the way I know I will link back to the Bette B character in the third novella. In the second book the Betty characters are all interested in the colours they choose and how they might relate to their [artistic] practices. The Black Betty character is interested in colour theory, both philosophically and scientifically. One of his projects is that he wants to rethink and disrupt the physics of colour.

LC: What about the role of images in the book? Each chapter is punctuated by images, which are in the form of graphics, with interruptive speech and thought balloons or comic-like diagrams or collages, as well as photographs of a hand holding selected found images. Can we start by talking about the collage images and the graphics in the novellas and how they relate to your wider practice?

SD: In the first novella, which is the one you’ve seen, the main protagonist finds herself sitting in a glass room in an epidemiology hospital and I wondered what someone would do in that situation, especially when their language is becoming impaired or in a changing state. I had collages that I had done years before as an attempt to parse theoretical texts with images. One of those texts was an essay by [Jacques] Rancière in *The Future of the Image* that reflected on the parataxis between image and text. I gathered the many different images he refers to, which included printing out hundreds of images from Godard’s film, *History of Cinema* and played with them, working with them and repositioning them in space over time, which gave me a different way of reading. I decided to use details of those collages as examples of what this Bette character created as an artist researcher.

LC: There are also graphic images, which are quite distinctive, such as the one referring to *ZeNez*.

SD: That piece was a contribution to one of the early *Inflexion* journals. I asked if I could do something graphic and they agreed. I did a piece called *ZeNez*, which is a palindrome riffing on Deleuze and the *acbdair*, when he comes to the letter “z” at the end, which is also near the end of his life. He talks about the “z” as the movement of the fly, which is never in a straight line, which I always related to artistic practice,

which is never going from A to B which so many scholars in the sciences and humanities might do. It really allows itself that line of flight. In that bit of the interview he also talks about how beautiful the “z” is, which reminds him of Zen and of Nez, the nose. I loved that as a palindrome.

LC: What about the many found images sourced from Wikipedia commons. What kinds of decisions were behind your inclusion of those images and how do you see them working?

SD: Those images came as part of the research process. Often in the flow of writing I write something I’m surprised by, and like anyone else, I go to Google and start to research what I’m writing about or the directions that are all of a sudden there in my text. When I started writing about rats, I really needed to research urban rats, for example. With those searches often there are associated images. Then I will research those images and put some in. Sometimes an image sparks a whole chapter. So the images balance the textual resources. I don’t know how else to say it except that it feels like they need to be there. There are far fewer images in the published book than I first intended. Half of the images could not be included in the final text for copyright reasons.

LC: Some of those images also point to phenomena that don’t have a direct relationship with the text. I’m thinking for example of a 19th-century photograph of men standing next to a pile of rats on the ground. Underneath this is a period engraving of a hunting dog in an enclosure surrounded by rats, which I assume shows a kind of sport. I connect the positionality of these images to the footnotes. For example at the end of the fourth chapter the footnotes referring to Puccini, to Kafka and to the scientific proof of rats having a singing voice confirm aspects of the main narrative, but they also point outside of it. They tell a parallel story to the text, rather than being a necessary piece of additional information in the way that a footnote might function in academic writing.

SD: I don’t remember any more, which came first. I guess that process of selecting images and researching is just part of artistic research. I looked at the Wikipedia page for Kafka and found out he died of laryngeal tuberculosis, shortly after writing “Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk” (1924), which I later found out through another Google search was one year before a singing mouse was discovered in Detroit. There are associations like this that have some kind of peculiar relevance to each other. I’m not going to connect the dots, I just put them there if I find them fascinating. The reader can make of it what they will. A lot of those things do fall out in the editing process. I have tons of footnote pages of interesting coincidences for the second novella at the moment. The tricky thing is to decide what is relevant for a coherent reading of the book and what isn’t. It’s a “kill your darlings” process.

LC: You talk about this process of “googling” as part of the research. As an artist one is inclined to go on the image search page at least as much as the text search page. You’re clearly also flicking from one to the other. An artist will often enter into unexpected subjects of interest through the images, whereas an academic researcher will tend to enter extraneous information through text. In the first novella at least there is an associative state of consciousness that has to do with operating in the cusp between sleeping and dreaming. But there is also a logic associated with search engines. One of the two main protagonists, Bette B, is an artist researcher. Her mind works in a way that is connected to search engines. She references thinkers and images naturally in her own mind. I wonder if this is also a manifestation of a certain kind of research that’s not normally brought to the fore within thinking processes.

SD: I think that’s precisely it, and I’m sure you recognize that process because of your own practice. When I was writing the first book, being very *invested* in that artistic researcher character (*laughs*), committing processes that that character might be doing professionally to the book seemed natural. It happens less or in a different way with these crazy Betty artists in the second novella. It’s interesting you point this out. I need to think about it more as I start to see the parts become a whole. I always knew it was important to the structure of these books that I didn’t want any reader to walk away from the first one with a complete sense of something. There’s something missing that the second book will start to fit in. It’s what I would call a forensic writing technique that will never come to a satisfying conclusion. It’s a forensic process that reveals things on an ongoing basis and makes new links that might tie in and might not. I want the reader to feel part of a journey of hyper-linking and associative thinking.

LC: Through Bob, the singing rat, and Bette, whose range of frequencies continues to expand as she changes species, there is also an ongoing reflection on sound throughout the first novella. Do you feel you are privy to these characters' inhabitation of the world through sound because you have been a sound artist and performer? Were you consciously incorporating some of the knowledge that you have acquired through that practice that might not have found another theoretical outlet?

SD: It could have found another theoretical outlet because the sonic arts have been theorized so beautifully in the past five to ten years in relation to the debate around the sonic as material or conceptual. But I was not trying to write theoretically. Writing in an associative way, ideas come up and you take excerpts from your notebooks. They enter characters as a kind of "faction". There's so much personal memory and fact from my own life that's perverted into ways in which the characters evolve. It did surprise me when I was all of a sudden writing about sound, about frequency and *melisma* and all sorts of things that were familiar to me from spending a chunk of my life with sound as my daily activity. Initially there wasn't a greater purpose to it. It came through that hyper-link mindset we discussed. But when I found the article about rats having an ability to sing in a high-pitched tone and reread Kafka's story, it was easy to resonate with those concerns because of my past experience, and this led to the Bob character. I don't have the need to reference that directly and that's what's so beautiful in finding this form. That's what's really important to me; that it draws from experience in a way that doesn't require this extra citation.

LC: The theoretical underpinning of the writings reveals itself at different moments, ranging from these graphic or explicit textual references to subtle undertones in referring to apparently simple notions like matter, holes or becoming animal, which are philosophical concepts in their own right. The subtitles of the novellas are also concepts from [Alfred North] Whitehead, which some readers with a background in philosophy or cultural theory will pick up on. I imagine the subtitles also signal that this work can be approached through this lens.

SD: Yes, and for me that signalling is sufficient. The philosophers I reference directly within the text also tend not to be those I have the most expertise with. Thinkers like Wittgenstein and Derrida come up, whose work I have a very limited knowledge of, but I follow a path and see where it goes. The subtitles are all generated from Whiteheadian concepts: A Novelty, An Adventure, An Actual Occasion. I should add the disclaimer though that the third novella of the trilogy is yet to be written. I think I only quote Whitehead once, in the second book. I don't reference him much otherwise. I thought the broad stroke of having Whitehead's concepts in the subtitles would rather set a stage.

LC: I was recently at a talk by Teju Cole who commented that, moving from art writing into literary writing, he found literature's distinction between fiction and non-fiction odd. He pointed out that it's not at all a natural way of splitting up experience, just as we don't go around an art museum looking for fictional or non-fictional artworks. In fact it's also relatively recent in literature for this distinction to be made. Has the writing's relationship to fiction or non-fiction also been of relevance to you?

SD: When I began working on *Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty*, I thought perhaps it fell into the category of "speculative fiction" a category that seemed a redundant misnomer to me at the time. Isn't fiction always already speculative? Maybe "faction" is a better container but then do we need categorical containers at all? I am a lifelong reader of literature but have been mostly reading non-fiction philosophical and theoretical texts since the millennium turn. But the usual suspect writers have made significant impressions on me. Beckett, Woolf, Proust. Gertrude Stein's writing experiments have probably been the most sustained artistic influences of my life. Perhaps it's why I have chosen fictive writing now, rather than say, sound or music experimentation, as a means of expression, as I did earlier in my practice. Part of the process of writing the second novella this year has also been to allow myself to luxuriate in reading fiction again.

LC: Fiction writers are the most experimental with form, but your first novella will be published by Open Humanities Press, who normally specialize in critical and cultural theory. Certainly one of the things I found so striking in the first novella is that by, for example, coming up with a hallucinatory rat drinking Spiritus, who takes up a particular practice of skidding along a shiny surface, you have opened up a space for new theoretical possibilities. I imagine they embraced the experimental investigation going on within this work, which draws so much on material and practice-based knowledge as well as theory.

SD: I think the editors of the *Immediations* series read it as an experiment, something that might move towards opening a new genre. It makes me a bit nervous when it's read as theory. That was not my purpose. If I had a purpose at all it was to escape the confines of theory and philosophical writing, as I mentioned. I do think it opens up a space for new theoretical possibilities, but it also probably opens up a huge space for critique because that anthropomorphic gesture is going to put a lot of people off. [*laughs*] Or at least it will focus critique in a particular vein that I'm well aware of. I often overthink what I've written, but I'm trying to liberate myself from that tendency, so that my characters can have more valence in their voices than just my own world views.

LC: Isn't that part of reclaiming the freedom you have as an artist?

SD: Of course, that's part of the pleasure in it and one of the reasons I find it important. I expect full-blooded critique, as the novellas don't easily slot into an existing genre, either in art or in humanities discourse. They are an experiment.

Sher Doruff (Chicago, 1950) is an artist-researcher, writer and theorist who is currently authoring a trilogy of artist's novellas. The first, entitled *Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty* is forthcoming with Open Humanities Press. She holds a PhD from the University of the Arts London/Central Saint Martins for a dissertation entitled *The Translocal Event and the Polyrhythmic Diagram* (2006) investigating the role of collaborative interplay and creative processes in networked performance practice. She was Head of the Research Program at Waag Society in Amsterdam (2005–2007) and Creative Director of the Sensing Presence/Connected: Live Art project (2002–2005). She teaches at in the Master of Choreography programme (2002–present) at DAS Graduate School and coordinates the THIRD cohort of artists pursuing PhD's in the Performing Arts as well as the Gerrit Rietveld Academy PhD research group (2011–present). Doruff has published internationally and is co-editor of the *Experimental Practices* series with Manuela Rossini, forthcoming with Brill.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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