Five Bodies 2022 presentation
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This walk in air is solo and circular, taking in Cissbury Ring, a hill in the South Downs. At the top are the earthworks remains of an Iron Age hill fort. The walk begins on the Bostal Road, above Steyning. With me, I have my audio recording gear, two apples, some sweets, and four sheets of paper. These carry brief texts taken from works by poets CAConrad and Emily Dickinson, the anthropologist Tim Ingold and the musician and sound theorist François Bonnet.

I start by reading and thinking about a poem by CAConrad:

I find some in the moth's flight
there is a little in the moon
more than a little in my man
a flower recently gave me enough room to
accommodate my old friends Chaos and Death
18-day conversation through a magnifying glass
a tulip to challenge any artist
an edifying
short-lived
fellowship
symmetry
harmony
rethink
recode
engine
flow

The poem picks up from the previous one in the book: the 'some' in 'I find some in the moth's flight' has to do with 'a future poetry'. Both of the CA poems I take with me are part of the 'Corona Transmutations' sequence in their book *Amanda Paradise*. (In fact, the book asserts that the author is 'Amanda Paradise' and the title 'by CAConrad'.) I like the shadowy eroticism of moth, moon, man and flower. I like the erratic movement of the moth, perhaps a figure for the movement of poetry. The latter part of the poem talks about community ('fellowship') but also change ('recoding'). I think a lot of CA's work has to do with the 'recoding' made possible by what they call ritual. These rituals seem designed to carve out a space of creative resistance. Here's a short text on rituals by CA:

Create Your Ritual

(Soma)tic poetry rituals can help us see the creative viability of everything around us. the focus the rituals provide can reshape not only our poems but reveal the hidden edges of the world we thought we knew. Start with the refrigerator. Ask yourself how to enter the ritual with the box that stores your body before it becomes your body. Hold an empty drinking glass against the side to study its purring motor. Use a magnifying glass to examine the exterior and interior in ways you have never done before. Then use binoculars for sitting across the room and looking at it very carefully while far away. Please close your eyes, smell the inside, and feel the contents. Write notes before, during and after. Write for 5 minutes or longer.

I do not normally have much time for rituals, or for the soul, or for spirit. But I have long been interested in text scores. I like the way CA uses ritual to bracket a space off from the everyday. The text score is a prelude to action. CA's ritual is a prelude to writing. These are simple but generative acts of re-coding. Text score and CA's kind of ritual both have the characteristic of portability: they can be adopted and used in very different situations and to very different ends. CA's depiction of food as 'your body before it becomes your body' is analogous to the way I am thinking of breath on this walk. I like the emphasis on attention in the in CA's idea of ritual, the creation of what they describe as 'an "extreme present" where the many facets of what is around me wherever I am can come together through a sharper lens'.

I’m heading for a declivity called Stump Bottom, a meeting point of several pathways. In the South Downs at this time of year, the colour green is intensely present. In fact, there are many greens that reveal themselves, as light plays across the the landscape. But red is on my mind, too, because CA’s poetry moth led me to a moth in an Emily Dickinson poem. When I told them I was planning on taking some Dickinson on my walk, CA sent me an essay of theirs that begins: “In 1975 Emily Dickinson opened the door of poetry for me, which has been my center of gravity ever since.”

This Dickinson poem is extraordinary:

> A Moth the hue of this
> Haunts Candles in Brazil –
> Nature's Experience would make
> Our Reddest Second pale –
>
> Nature is fond, I sometimes think
> Of Trinkets, as a Girl

What is the 'hue' of the first line? And why Brazil here? Does 'Our Reddest Second pale' refer to the blush of desire experienced in a moment – a second – as we draw towards the candle? Is the capricious and 'fond' version of Nature not very different to the divinity of Dickinson's contemporaries? Does the poem even contain a sly take-down of Emerson, the author of essays entitled 'Nature' and 'Experience'?

I think about reds and greens as I walk down towards the confluence of pathways in the hollow of Stump Bottom. A blue tractor moves across a large field 500 yards away. Pheasants with red breasts and red eye markings make their skronky sounds. What is meant by 'Nature's Experience'?

The slope leading down to Stump Bottom is steep. I hear a sound and turn to see a cyclist coming over the horizon behind me. 'Walker!' he warns the friend following him. He means me.

Here are two of the five paths that meet at Stump Bottom. Close by is a patch of land labelled 'No Man's Land' on the map. There is no right of way across it – it is private property. No one can check out no man's land, as it is someone's land. I set up my microphones and press record, and then lie down with my feet at the base of the V you can see in the picture.

I look up at the clouds. CA's poetry moth leads me to the movement of birds and flies against the pale clouds high above. I'm struck by something Dickinson does a lot: the transition from the very small and immediate to the very big. It's an effect of scale. Can such shifts of thinking in poems help us gain purchase on the huge temporal and spatial reach of the changes that are occurring to the planet?

I read the following, from François Bonnet's aphoristic little book *The Music to Come*:

> …the diminishing influence of the score in favour of recording techniques has reestablished the need for exchange between author and instrumentalist, confirming the irreplaceable role played by oral transmission in music, or in any case music that still responds to the classical paradigm of composition and performance. The term 'orality', in fact, may cause confusion here, because it is really in the gaps between words, ie in non-verbal co-presence, that the musical unsayable can be transmitted. When words no longer suffice, it is the body, the gaze, proximity, that become expressive. This is where the truth of orality lies: not in the words exchanged, but in the companionship of an absence of words.

In his book, Bonnet tries to find a way of thinking about music's ways of eluding the interpretative grids we seek to apply to it. In discussing interactions between 'author and instrumentalist', he is perhaps thinking of the way Eliane Radigue's Occam compositions are transmitted to their interpreters. What Bonnet has to say about 'non-verbal co-presence' and 'companionship' puts me in mind of CA's 'fellowship'. Bonnet's discussion of the gaps in between words sends me, as I lie beneath the clouds and the flies, to a recent text by Tim Ingold that I had come upon a couple of days before my walk:

> No human… exists at the centre of their own circle; they are always with another, as one pole in a bipolar ellipse. The one who breathes is also breathed upon: the two, 'bonded by an intimate complicity', are ontological twins. Or in short, in the sharing of breath lies the very essence of human conviviality.

This is a very useful thought, identifying breath as the medium in which human collectivities subsist. Yet how strange to think of this being published in 2020, in the midst of a pandemic in which an airborne virus had so definitively upped the ante on the 'sharing of breath'. I look at another poem by CA:

we are 2nd-plague sisters
with daily breath rituals
bridge of breath
for a world of
failing lungs
remember the ones we want to see again
remember them in the deepest breath
web and light
positioned
just right
spider walks
across the
rising sun

Bonnet's 'companionship of an absence of words' and Ingold's finding of conviviality in the 'sharing of breath' turn me to the 'bridge of breath' in CA's poem. In the poem, breath joins human groups, but this coming together is dangerous under pandemic conditions. The poem reminds us of AIDS, the first plague of CA's generation. And it links breath to memory as it breathes life into the memory of the dead. The sight-line that goes through a spider's web to the sun beyond reminds me again of Dickinson's shifts in scale.

I get up, stop recording and move on, walking south towards Cissbury Ring.

In the fields there are many methane pumps.

In a quiet spot, I attach my contact mics to a fence, put on my headphones and listen as the wires of the fence are played by the breeze. A few minutes later, at another crossing of pathways I find a small bench. I set up my regular microphones. One of the positives of the pandemic was the suspension of aeroplane flights. But now we're back where we were: in this part of the world, 45 seconds or so is the longest you can go in daylight hours without hearing a plane moving in the air above. Thinking of the spider walking across the sun, I decide to serenade the machine in the sky. I remember that I can make loud music with blades of grass and my breath. My cries are not answered. Some ramblers pass by me with eyes to the ground. I move on, walking, breathing, thinking about air and breath.

In the 2020 article I quoted from earlier, Ingold meditates sceptically on our preoccupation with 'embodiment'. He is interested in the way that breath operates: it enters the body but is not of it.

> Perhaps we should be grateful that breath – a word whose very pronunciation evokes the sound and gesture of exhalation – has not gone the way of the body, that it retains a kind of poetic resonance that the body, in its solidification as an object of the self's regard, has lost. With breath, the muscular movement of breathing, in the heave of the lungs, merges with thinking, with the voice, with speech and song. All are together on the same plane of being, in the torments and ecstasies of the soul.

Ingold provocatively – unnecessarily, in my view – draws on the concept of the soul in order to find a vocabulary for the material/ immaterial conflux that is breath. This is his way of articulating qualities of ephemerality, elusiveness and ambiguity. Breathing is one with thinking. And thinking is not defined by what Ingold calls 'a cognitive machine that sits atop the apparatus of speech'. Thinking is co-extensive with the life-sustaining process of respiration.

For Ingold, the mastery of verbal flow which we so admire in our culture is a negation of a valuable hesitancy that is an index of thoughtfulness. He doesn't mention actual poems but, for me, this thought-full pause is enabled and exploited in the poetic utterance.

I move on. I climb Cissbury Ring, where the Iron Age earthworks remain visible. I'm still astonished, even though this is basic general knowledge, when I remind myself that the chalk of the South Downs is composed of zillions of microscopic plankton, compressed somewhere between 60 and 100 million years ago. I'm walking in air, and I'm walking on seafood. I lie down and realise that climbing this small hill has left me out of breath. I have mild asthma and I have not thought to bring my inhaler with me. I had Covid a couple of weeks before the walk and in the aftermath of the illness, I am far shorter of breath than I would normally expect.

I look again at CAConrad's poems. I think again about the plague-poem's 'bridge of breath', the moth-poem's "fellowship/ symmetry", and about Ingold on conviviality and Bonnet on 'co-presence'. And then I go to Dickinson's lungs:

> I breathed enough to take the Trick -
> And now, removed from Air -
> I simulate the Breath, so well -
> That One, to be quite sure -
>
> The Lungs are stirless - must descend
> Among the cunning cells -
> And touch the Pantomime - Himself,
> How numb, the Bellows feels!
>
> [How] cool -

This is a poem of zombification. The possibly posthumous speaker is removed from air, but simulating life. The lungs are like bellows, moving in a 'pantomime' of life. The speaker is both dead and alive, a facsimile of life, perhaps a machine. She incorporates the inspecting visit of 'Himself', among the 'cunning cells' of her lungs. The poem inhabits the paradox of a breath 'removed from Air'. Dickinson brings simulation, mime and cunning to my ruminations on breath and body, her sleights of thought dissolving the very categories that she presents to us.

Having got at least some of my breath back, I start off down the hill.

I move, wheezing a little, along the Monarch's Way. It is supposedly the route taken by Charles II after his defeat by Cromwell at Worcester in 1651. Disregarding this heritage retrospection, I allow the path to take me back to No Man's Land and Stump Bottom. I am really quite short of breath still.

I lie down in the same spot as before and I am surprised and thrilled to find my bunch of keys, which must have fallen out of my pocket earlier as I looked up at the clouds. I set up my mics. I press record. Though breathing doesn’t come easily, I eventually read aloud some of the texts I’ve been think about: a poem each by Dickinson and CA.

After a short while I get up and walk up the incline out of the hollow to finish the walk, thinking about the end of the poem I began my walk with: 'rethink/ recode/ engine/ flow'.

CA's rituals are all about recoding. This walking in air has brought some thoughts about breath and collectivity together. CA's ritual 'engine' is a powerful machine. Dickinson's bellows help me onwards. My thinking-motion through the landscape is a kind of flow-motion. My walk has ended but these are mobile affinities, not conclusions.

I go home. I have done a walk that I couldn't have done without CA's poetry. I've read the poems – and other texts – in a way that I couldn't have done had I not been walking. I have not produced either an artwork or a piece of criticism.

I am grateful to CA for their poems.

<u>Works cited</u>

Bonnet, François (2020) The Music to Come, Rennes: Shelter.

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