Marita Fraser

'Speaking with' the School Run

ABSTRACT

This text uses auto-theoretical, diaristic and narrative writing methods to think through how correspondence operates in my writing, performative painting and moving image practice through a method I refer to as 'speaking with'.[1]

I understand 'speaking with' to be a feminist method of practice, of coming close to works, ideas, other artists and writers and their texts, and to converse with them through practice. Practices and research that utilizes 'speaking with' methods acknowledge and articulate proximity and subjectivity between conversational interlocutors in drawing on, and thinking with, the works of others. By engaging with creative materials, texts, archival gaps and bodies, subjectivities are held in dialogue, from which work arises. As a method of conversation in fine art practice, research and writing, and in thinking through the potential of the term 'correspondence', I am opening this term out to account for different forms of engaging with an interlocutor in practice. This includes forms of art writing, autofiction and auto theory, as well as non-textual, material driven creative and research practice, articulating these conversational encounters as fine art practice including moving image, performance, painting, sculpture, installation and more. In this text I enact 'speaking with' in correspondence with Amy Sillman's concept of 'awkwardness'(Sillman 2020: 79), the work of Lynda Benglis, haptic memory of touch, and feminist thinking around the horizontal (Irigaray 2002) thinking through an expanded painting, sculptural, moving image and performance practice, and the role of the floor as an important dialogic space in my work.

Preamble

This text captures some of the conversations that have been enacted in my studio across nonlinear time in developing the moving image work *Speaking With,* 2020-2023. It reflects on moments of conversation through my engagement with works and texts by Lynda Benglis and Amy Sillman in the studio prior to and following on from the production of the moving image work. In this text I enact 'speaking with' through locating my subjectivity in correspondence with Amy Sillman's concept of 'awkwardness'(Sillman 2020: 79), the work of Lynda Benglis, haptic memory of touch, and feminist thinking around the horizontal (Irigaray 2002) as ways of thinking through an expanded painting, sculptural, moving image and performance practice, and the role of the floor as an important dialogic space in my work.

As a feminist method 'speaking with' method looks to bring voice and make visible that which has been muted through patriarchal silencing. It is a creative method that offers opportunity to create, voice and make visible, feminist excess.[2] In my practice this excess is produced through conversations and live moments of engagement with artwork, art texts and event scores.[3] In my moving image work *Speaking With* 2020-2023, the excess within the work is understood as articulation of my personal subjectivity as mother, carer, friend and artist, in relation to scores, textiles, whilst thinking through feminist Carla Lonzi's 'use of the term 'nothing'(Lonzi, 1978: 200) as a construction of her subjecthood under patriarchy. [4]

In coming to understand practice that moves away from fixed form toward excess, I am reflecting on Lola Olufemi proposals for alternative forms of knowledge in *Experiments In Imagining Otherwise* (2021). In this text Olufemi proposes a nonlinear view of history, rejecting history as a straight line from A to B, and countering with something she describes as a "living commotion, a sprawling mess of the not quite-said, or did-it actually-happen". (Olufemi 2021: 3) In embracing Olufemi's call to "imagine otherwise", 'speaking with' as method enacts feminist resistance to fixed patriarchal structures of knowledge and language to create alternatives through creative practice. 'Speaking with' method offers a security of thinking, as well as a porous space which allows for feminist excess to be held unbounded, for other researchers and practitioners to bring their own thinking and conversations in, and to offer all of us concrete ground of real strength and power, as a space for further feminist work, thinking and making to happen. In my practice this porous scaffold is constructed from my interlocutors (artists, writers, creative material, archive and personal subjectivity), connecting through moments of 'speaking with' to create an open and active structure that enables feminist excess to be present.

May 2020, London

I'm thinking of a postcard taped to my studio wall. It is a black and white photo of artist Lynda Benglis, her eyes meet the gaze of the camera, a long pool of paint like latex running across the floor beside her. It would be one of the works from her *Fallen Painting* works created circa 1968. This long flood of paint-like material defies definitions of painting and sculpture in its materiality and site. The work has claimed the architecture, claimed her working space, claimed the floor as an expansive site without end. This painting/sculpture sits on the floor, it looks wet and flowing even in its final dried state. The work asserts paintings' removal from stretcher bars and tensioned canvas, away from the vertical, away from an object hung on a wall and into the architectural space. The space it claims is horizontal, it comes down to meet the floor, luxuriates into an expansive plane of potential, that it could continue to flow infinitely.

Benglis' work from this time brings me back to thinking around Anna Halprin's dance space established ten years earlier in 1959, a radical move, outside of traditional dance studio spaces of the time. A dance, performance and training space on the edge of Mt. Tamalpais, north of San Francisco being a timber deck amongst and open to the trees. A space to move along, across. The removal of walls in opening the space to the outside speaks to me as a horizontal gesture of refusing the verticality of hierarchical structures of performing to audience, turning the moving bodies focus to points of contact across the floor, connecting to the spaciousness between bodies, the trees and beyond. [5]

Thinking through 'horizontality' as feminist practice has been and continues to be an important space of thinking in my practice, following on from Irigarary's discussion of spaces of horizonal transcendence, (Irigaray: 2002) the floor becomes a radical space of production operating outside of traditionally vertically orientated spaces of painting and performance practice.

In reaching for this postcard, I have to acknowledge it was not possible get to the studio at this time due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions put in late March 2020. So in thinking through the object, my concern is that in this imagined removal of the postcard from my studio wall, to turn it over and check the image credit, the tape will be old, the stickiness turned to powder, and that to return it to the wall new tape would be required.

I have another photograph of Benglis in my mind, actively pouring out her material directly onto the floor, this image being wrapped around the cover *High Times, Hard Times. New York Painting* 1967–1975. In this image she is moving with material and floor, frozen in making, pouring liquid on my screen. The long pool across the floor tracing her movement. Painting as material and action, the paint is

on the floor, but is a material in itself. The floor is not painted. There are no paintbrushes or rollers involved here. In pouring Benglis asserts that the material sits on and spreads over but one does not become the other. Paint on floor. This second image is in colour, and you can see the neon colours she has chosen to take up the space. She is pouring a neon yellow, over orange, red and blue. This coloured liquid latex, pooling up against the corners' walls.

My surprise in finding this photograph redrawn again, in watercolour form, in black and white, at the bottom of a page in painter Amy Sillman's book *Faux Pas* (2020). (Sillman 2020: 49) Sillman's remaking of the image is at the bottom of a page halfway through her essay on colour. The essay doesn't mention Benglis' work or the photograph that Sillman worked from, and it is not captioned, but looking at this image here, brings me into a bodily alignment with the weight of the paint as it poured, the control in tipping a large container of paint, a controlled release. The worry around drying times, a speculative smell of liquid material in an enclosed space starts to arise.

Sillman's quick watercolour sketch of the photograph, is slightly lumpy and awkward, holding the haptic memory of Sillman's brush on the page. Thinking through Sillman's holding of brush as time spent with an image. How might we come close to things through haptic encounters, holding a brush and working with what we can think of as 'wet' - so far away from the lens of the camera - as a conversation between materials, and shared references, a spending time with, through the time spent holding a brush, making marks.

Sillman writes 'To paint is to handle color by hand, to take hold of its plot line: painting for a painter is an inherently synesthetic experience that merges the senses of touch, smell, sight and even sound, while the painter makes the painting'. (Sillman 2020: 9) In thinking through the handling of colour as haptic memory in my practice, I'm also asking what happens to a painting when we remove the stretcher, remove the wood supports, painting as dried paint skin, painting as stretcher bars, as screen, the textiles that support the paint? Where do we meet these materials with touch? In weaving we are coaxing thread to become a potential support structure. What happens as we push paint into and onto a surface, does it yield as the fibers of cloth support separate, does it push back as paint slides and smears across a firmer surface? What is the encounter in staining and dying, between powder, water and other materials that stain paper, canvas, and cloth. What happens when we drape a textile rather than stretch, when we shred and then sew, how do these new forms sit, how do we encounter them?

The postcard in the studio is an unfinished conversation I have with Benglis across time, in questions about materials, spaces, and material supports, a conversation negotiated in my studio, through my materials, touch and body.

November 2020, London

Today I have invited you to lie on the floor in front of a camera in a dance studio hastily booked in a very short opening up of the city prior to another immanent lockdown. The back wall is covered in black felt, and the wooden sprung floor is covered in black rubber sheeting.

I'm working with a group I refer to as 'the school run' with performers and production team all tied to me through friendship, family, and my daughter's "class bubble" during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020. The felt and rubber flooring knocks back some of the echo in the room as we settle on the floor together. Through the camera, we begin to capture breathing, bodies softening into the floor.

I'm thinking through how I can allow for the agency of my school run community to be held alongside the questions I have of my practice through enacted scores. These scores being instructional texts that I deliver to the group, that can create an orientation of intention as we are here in the room. We start with score *Z-O* (figure ref) and then thinking of where bodies are held and supported by the floor. The back of the heel, side of the calf, the buttocks, the side of the thigh, where the back arches away through its curvature, and where it softens. What supports the face, the head heavy and rested, can we feel the space around the body, the spaces between bodies, across the floor which holds us all in resting and then when we start to move.

Flashes of turquoise, coral, emerald, lime and scarlet are here too, as dye seeped into canvas. Stained and dyed cloth - that can be thought of as unstretched paintings - are resting over us, as sheets, blankets, something to disappear under and over, they rise and fall with the breath. It is cold when we start in here today, and they trap in some warmth.

The textiles map a tracing of the pathways of coloured powder meeting water. Dyed rather than painted, the colour sits in the fibers which are woven tightly together. I notice that the dye hasn't seeped completely through, that the backs and fronts of the cloths are not mirrors of each other. As my eyes are drawn back to the flashes of colour - I'm wondering if Sillman's observation of the weight of different colour's pigment (Sillman 2020: 9), is affecting the cloth as it is lifted and falls. Do these powdered colours of dye hold weight once they are wetted and then dried into the cloth's fibers? These questions offer me a way into the work, as another conversation between school runs. The community assembled are not the stretcher frames of these dyed canvases and here with these paintings unstretched, the cloth is left to find their own logic to the camera lens, and the bodies that hold them. I recall Amy Sillman's writing on abstraction in painting where she writes.

'The awkwardness I'm trying to describe is not a style but could be one result of a dialectic. I would rather call it a metabolism: the intimate and discomforting process of things changing as they go awry, look uncomfortable, have to be

confronted, repaired, or risked, i.e., the process of trying to figure something out while doing it. I don't know if that's abstraction, but I know it's awkward. Finding a form is building these feelings (in this case, dissatisfaction, embarrassment and doubt) into a substance'. (Sillman 2020: 79)

Thinking about the space I hope to open up with these bodies and paintings to camera, it is one in which an unimaginable conversation might unfold, to capture an awkwardness of process, of painting, of mothering, of voice, of moving. What would be the substance of my conversation - process, care, carelessness - in bringing my familial relationships together in front of a camera with some unstretched paintings. Sillman describes her practice as a metabolism, gesturing towards digestion, the chewing on things and bodily internal processes. She writes 'So what are we doing? I can still only call it looking for this fragile thing that is awkwardness. This is not alienated labour, nor a commodity precisely, but a need, a way of churning the world, as your digestive system churns food.' (Sillman 2020: 77) In grappling with painting's relationship to writing and the process of production, and digestion, Sillman identifies productive force located textually within the body and specifically within the gut. She writes 'Rejective verse. Unbecoming language. Painting that is writing that is gesture and shape; image that is word that is sound. What comes out of the mouth and goes back in; food in reverse. A venture made from between the legs and discharged from the gullet. The drawings that result lie on the floor like abandoned arrows from a quiver, dejected and excited.' (Sillman 2020: 77) For me the awkwardness of the paintings released from their stretchers, lying across bodies, upside down, crumpled, in the hands of others, could be described as a kind of discomfort to the task at hand of this 'churning of the world'. Caring, loving, friendships, the familial and my questions around materials and practice are present alongside their difficulties and failures. The camera is recording as they lie, stretch, breathe.

In my trying to process what the lens might capture, the cloth has become something for the performers to articulate their own positionality. Sinead seems to want to disappear into hers, using it as a blanket to wrap herself in. Amanda is all hands feet and head extended and contracting into and out of. Her cloth seems to breathe and much of the time we only see the canvas side of unbleached cotton canvas, the coloured side hidden underneath. It appears to be moving of its own accord much of the time. Lori directs hers as an extension of the movement of her limbs, following the way dancers use their hands to direct the eye of the viewer.

In letting the bodies draw out the textiles, I am no longer shaping or fashioning how the paintings are seen. In painting I often struggle with the muteness of this practice, painting being a long conversation with myself and materials, outside of textual and visual narrative structures. I'm not telling stories, describing a form, a light, a mood or an idea. In that moment of struggling to understand and be understood I find the muteness of painting both embarrassing and liberating. The process frustrates me when there seems so much that is urgent that needs to be attended to right now. Here in the hands of others I have refused a final fixed

image for the works, they are now processes, being seen, concealed, moving, rising and falling with the breath, lost and crumpled, trodden on and forgotten. Coming back to Sillman I'm reminded of her description of struggle within non-representational painting as a 'hoping and groping' (Sillman 2020: 79)

In 'speaking with' Benglis and Sillman this text offers thinking through the horizontal, complex relationships between materials and bodies, the haptic and the chora[6] through diaristic and self-reflective text – across sites of practice – creating conversations across time. For my work 'speaking with' the chora is bringing dye and cloth into a room of gathered friends and familial relationships, a conversing of material, breath and personal subjectivities, something that I understand as holding an excess that exists outside of fixed patriarchal language and subject-hood, that can be held in a practice of not knowing.

Sillman outlines her thinking through of 'the chora's' potential as, "the shape of memory, the imprints of social structures on marks, marks as direness, physical mark, the chora, that molten place, a totality, a forge, the womb." (Sillman 2020: 153)

These are messy, awkward arrangements of materials, and ideas that unfold through the process of my practice. My moving image work *Speaking With* is as an experimental scaffold to hold some of this into an incomplete form.

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Breath and cloth and body are moving. We are thinking through where does the body touch the ground, where is it supported, where does it gently curve away?
I felt complete when I had you all here.

Marita Fraser, *Speaking With* (2020–23)
Single channel, digital video, 00:08:15
Performers: Amanda Butterworth, Alex Lawler, Sinead Mckeown, Lori Silmon-Neilson
Sound: Mücha – slow notes for piano and voice
Camera: Jasmine Johnson
Assistant: Brigid McLeer

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[1] The methodology "speaking with" is articulated in more detail in my PhD thesis *Speaking With: New Feminist Methods for Scoring Excess*, Royal College of Art, 2022. https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/5960/

[2] Feminist thinker Luce Irigaray offers a definition of excess through her critique of phallocentric language and thinking in her book *The Sex That Is Not One* (1985). Irigaray argues that within a male centred phallocentric world view anything that is not male is not part of the world, and therefore of excess to the world. This thinking positions woman and their subjectivity outside of phallocentric language and as such a female construction of self, as excess to the world. She writes "the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side."(Irigaray, 1985:78) Irigaray suggests that excess can be claimed as a feminist term of disruption, as well as a term that can hold all that is unaccounted for under patriarchal thinking.

[3] In using the term 'event score' I am referring to instructional text works as described by Liz Kolz in her (2001) essay 'Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score'. Event scores arose as a performative art form and practice in 1950's New York, embraced by a range of artists and practices through the 1960's and 70s and continue to be important in performative, textual and moving image art practices today.

[4]In Carla Lonzi's *Shut up, Or actually Speak: Diary of a Feminist* (1978) she writes
Twenty years ago I was a university student
Fifteen years ago I was a Bachelor of Arts
Ten years ago I was an art writer and friend of artists
Two years ago I was a feminist… Now
I am nothing, absolutely nothing
(Lonzi, 1978: 200) This English translation from Italian comes from Lucia Cardone's article 'Through the screen: Carla Lonzi and cinema' 2014.
Lonzi's *Shut up, Or actually Speak* was published by *Rivolta Femminile*, (*feminine revolt*), an Italian separatist feminist collective of which Lonzi was a founding member which operated between 1970-1980 in Rome. For Lonzi the question of how personal subjectivity is constituted through social structures was an important focus of her thinking and writing. *Rivolta Femminile* collective practiced *autocoscienza* (which roughly translates as 'consciousness raising') as a form of self-critique to recognise and reflect on members personal subjectivities, how they are constituted and operate under patriarchy, and what alternative might be possible from within a separatist feminist space. Lonzi's publishing with *Rivolta Femminile* can be understood as a 'speaking with' 'nothing', from a space of feminist separatist refusal.

[5] A fuller account of Anna Halprin's dance school can be found in Ninotchka Bennahum, Wendy Perron and Bruce Robertson, *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955-1972* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017)

[6] Feminist thinker Julia Kristeva uses the term "chora", borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus,* to conceptualise a space that holds the excess of the maternal space of child and mother prior to a child becoming verbal. She identifies this time in order to describe a generative space where knowledge is produced outside of language and to prioritise embodied knowledge that sits outside of a Hegelian patriarchal conception of knowledge as fixed. Kristeva introduced the concept of the chora in *La Re Language Poetique* (1974), as discussed in Maria Margaroni, ' "The Lost Foundation": Kristeva's Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy', *Hypatia* vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter 2005) 78- 98