Making space and performing routes in writing

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This essay is a response to a research seminar presented by Lisa Muszynski at Media Lab UIAH, 27th October 2004. The seminar introduced with a summary of the premise - that there are approaches to academic writing which may suit better different methods of thinking, and so may employ different narrative logics to organise ideas onto paper.

Attempting to follow this idea into form, this text takes several starting points of notice. These points draw from the slides that were presented on the day and distributed to the participants afterwards [1]; notes taken during the seminar event; personal memory of the occasion and reflection by this author. These points absorb example from a recent academic PhD thesis which utilises alternative academic and performative writing methods[2], plus related texts and articles, to help explore the issues within this author's own emerging research writing style - of text, performance, and documenting situated, embodied practice.

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NOTICE a point here: The idea of a 'spatial thinker' is a relevant and important issue for the people who turn up to attend the seminar. All are doctoral candidates at a University of Art and Design, attempting with a greater or lesser effect to accommodate higher-academic research related to new media, interaction, socially-engaged design method and practice, with the writing and documentation of a research thesis.

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NOTICE a point here: Perceived intuition, relevant in such subject matter above, can be hard to describe with traditional academic reasoning. Muszynski relates the latter to be, at least in mainstream academic writing, a linear process based on factual orientation, which has an:

> "Inherently descriptive verbal structure, methodically guiding a listener in an orderly, step-by-step process to the central message to be communicated. It is coherent and reductive, and is more likely to create a type of one-to-one copy of the idea in words: less room for interpretation of meaning; more likely to communicate clearly to most readers"[3].

In comparison, Muszynski suggests spatial reasoning is intuitive and built upon a cumulative process of impulses from everyday experience - audio, visual, or kinetic, but arguably a combination of each. Within this process, where "emblematic elements" are complexly distributed, it means that a straightforward description of the object(s) of research may not be

organised in a step-by-step hierarchical order, but instead "organised as mental maps and patterns in constant flux"[4], potentially obscuring the view.

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that there may be linear thinkers and spatial thinkers. This is an artificial distinction noted explicitly by Muszynski on the 3rd slide, after the 1st slide of the time schedule for the day's seminar, and the 2nd slide which unpacked each thematic section of the seminar: "Please keep in mind that this seemingly clear cut distinction is an artificial division, made for the purpose of accounting for the phenomena which these terms imply in everyday life and action"[5]. In between each thematic section, there was also a coffee break.

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NOTICE an observation here: You have to imagine the red coloured and underline emphasises in the quotes for yourself - that cannot be copied - while this text is in the process of being written, there is no certainty in what way you are now reading this - if you have colour distinction, printed paper, computer screen or not - perceiving the arrangement and so the relevance of words.

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IMAGINE a map: In front of you is a map. You have the chance to look at it, and absorb the different features, points of interest, with different routes connecting different emblematic elements. Then you are told to journey from one point on the map to another point. When the map is no longer in view what might you remember? Will the image stay in your head with much of the detail intact, with reference to photographic (or textual) memory? Will you remember instead the relational shape of the space, and make reference to that? Will you recall instead the movement you would have to make if you were actually embodied in the space? It is likely that if there are a handful of persons looking at the same map, there will be different remembered and imagined journeys between those points[6].

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that narrative structure, and so the organisation of ideas, may be guided spatially, taking the reader on a journey. However, to communicate well, there should be a supporting context for deciding upon this form. Campbell and Ulin in their PhD thesis use the metaphor of 'borderLine': a place of crossing between two academic disciplines - Contemporary Archaeology and Performance Studies - to create a supposition:

> "In this space we are constantly crossing disciplinary boundaries, concepts of time and place, thought and imagination. We are departing from somewhere, into and onto somewhere else, falling, returning, trespassing, taking detours and transforming.

Here in this [constantly shifting] space of rhizome the itinerary of the voyage unfolds."[7]

In forming support for their argument to make such a space, the following action words describe their own process - "Searching.. Hearing.. Seeing.. Realising.. Finding.. Transforming.. Understanding"[8]. However, these are acts that the reader can (and may have to) do themselves, to rephrase the title in this section of the thesis: reading for the ground beneath the writers' feet. There is a belief, communicated by the writer to the reader, that the starting point of the journey is valuable as a point of departure, as well as the imagined journey to where-ever it goes.

Using metaphors of shift and passage, navigation and the finding of (academic) bearings, Campbell and Ulin unfold their position "standing, in the midst of a representational image, an image of a world containing dispersed and scattered structures: lines of thought, lines of stories, lines of flight"[9]. Presented to the reader as emblematic 'turnings' on a map, bearings in the language of geometry - "north facing south.. 90 degrees to the east, across the Baltic Sea.. And we turn 180 degrees and face west.."[10] - a path and an accompanying story, not unlike a linear chronology of a journey. But it may be imagined, according to Muszynski, that the authors' are presenting rather a narrative logic which is 'showing not telling', describing not an actual journey (although they *are* describing actual presence at different places at different times in history on the map), but constructing a mental map, where in their own words, "[w]e are sitting together in a narrative space"[11]. Via the identification of events on the map, and with a process of "unpacking and translation"[12], the narrative space in which these emblematic 'turnings' are gathered by Campbell and Ulin, may be better understood as an accumulation of academic realisations. Or, indeed, as an observed pattern.

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that the identification and communication of common patterns can be the result of shared journeys and observations. This is a political project: as a strategy to attend to the disparity of experience in precarious labour/working conditions, a woman's collective in Madrid "opted for a research practice that would attend to the spatial/temporal continuum of existence and the experience of the double (or better, multiple) presence as a subjective transposition"[13]. Or, in other words, "a drift through diverse physical and psychic environments"[14].

Due to diverse specific situations - i.e. women working in domestic, tele-marketing and translation work, food service and health care - and the difficulty of common denominators from which to leverage alliance, plus identify irreducible differences - to mutually enrich expression towards activist action - the collective adopted the following practice:

"We decided that this drifting should be done in the first person, that is, with each one telling the others about herself, and walking together towards a prudent but sustained approximation of the differences between us. We talk, therefore of seeking common places and, simultaneously, of singularities to strengthen."[15]

The idea of a situated drift in which, by accompaniment, each would move through the everyday spaces of the others' in the collective, maintaining a multi-sensorial and open exchange of experiences. They describe their conversion of the drift into a "moving interview, crossed through by the collective perception of the environment"[16]. This 'mapping' process was augmented with media documentation - photographs, slides, video and audio recordings and written stories - to encourage shared reflection, with the aim "to produce simultaneous movements of approaching and distancing, visualising and de-familiarising, transit and narration"[17].. An effort which towards collective action hoped "to locate the scattered sites of conflict and know how to name them, to inaugurate other previously non-existent ones along with those we already experience."[18]

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NOTICE a point here: The idea of noticing each point. Beginning each paragraph with such a start emphasises the role of pattern and recognising repetition in spatial thinking. As a feature of the narrative logic of their thesis, Campbell and Ulin use repeating titles[19], emphasising the actions of re-engagement, re-visit, re-experience, re-write and re-read in their work. The discourse of performance and critical site-engagement is considered as a temporal dis-narrative: ephemeral, ambiguous, site-specific, event-specific, transient, particular, singular and speculative, the site of presence. However it is also a site-event of flux, where presence is shared, and other presents are present, so that analysis is less important than experience. Within this discourse, the following quote can be understood to offer a relevant metaphorical context for the textual design of thesis:

"It is in the shadows of the present that other alternative presents are possible. But these are not dormant, they do not share the exact same space, but dwell somewhere else, in the head of the spectator, the perceiver, you, me, I. Taking a step back simultaneously experiencing and observing and acting upon this double-take-present-reality.. This is the site of critique, evaluation, comparison, options; a site which opens up possibilities and refuses to accept that there is any final account; that prevents endings, and closure."[20]

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that this writing is nervous. Or more that it can't sit still, doesn't settle, crossing various references, stories, experiences, theories, and different spheres of practice. "Unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders", it follows the body's movement, operating "by synaptic relay, drawing one charged moment into another, constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferral.. that binds the traveller to his/her surging course like an electrical charge to its conduit"[21]. Already by the time I have written this point, it is not drawing in relay directly from the last point, but inserted as an/other. A situated drift written between thematic coffee breaks. A reminder to leverage an alliance, and identify the irreducible differences in the writing: to mutually enrich expression between points.

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IMAGINE a piece of music: Soft soft hum scribble clock ticks piano. Computer hum. Interludes of pencil scribble warm rising emerging violin from the tick of the clock. Computer hum. Baby gurgles sway between the breeze. Soft strike out. Chords regular. Hard strike out. Chords back and forth, violin rises out front in march. Fall out. Soft breeze again clock tick. Pause writing for a moment. Soft stretching rising she walks slowly with the baby. Drama horns piercing the calm poking poking agitating. Stir mix all piano chords horn. Repeat loops and cycle down to soft. Rest. Drips on the shoulder. Lazy stretch into the circus frenzy of things to be done. Pause for a moment. Continue the same frenzy, then it all fades away. Clock ticks people still scribble softly. Violins bells gently remind of the start growing strokes strokes soft. Throughout the whole time the clock has been ticking you have been sitting quietly listening to the music now in the background soothing. Thoughts drift in and out[22].

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NOTICE a quote here: "The events I discuss here sound differently in the writing of them than in the 'experiencing' of them, and it is the urgent call of that difference that I am hoping to amplify here"[23]. Preceding this quote, it was noticed that when writing about an event or a performance, other versions are made: traces, partial views, incomplete accounts re-presented. And adjacent texts appear, re-tellings and re-views[24]..

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that each listener described the event of listening differently, and relational interpretations confirm and construct this description. As an event, there was a beginning, a set duration of time of listening and scribbling, and a closing. When given the opportunity to 'wrap up' in 5 minutes after the act of listening to music, the event became an

object that could be described in a linear fashion. The first description was actually a line of peaks and troughs on the whiteboard with the words 'bells' encircled at the beginning and end.

On viewing this description of the event, I started to understand my own structure of narrative better. I realised that where one other had imagined peaks and troughs, historical or contextual story chapters, I had imagined drifts in and out of the subject. When there was quiet, I had absorbed our (as a group) embodied and environmental situation of listening, including the surrounding auditory and kinetic influences into the resultant object, i.e. the textual description of the experience of listening to a piece of music.

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IMAGINE a gathering of practices: Around you are a group of people who are about to present what they have been doing during the previous week in April at *Rautatieasema* (Helsinki Central Railway Station)[25]. You gather them for a workshop so that related but different communities of practice come together and overlap at the same site: an international group of artists, writers, and researchers with disciplines of expression ranging from textual, aural, digital image and film, performance, and contemporary archaeological theory.

To make physical the space for overlap, the map inbetween, you introduce the physical site of *Rautatieasema* in the call of interest as a 'boundary object'[26]. An object of collective attention that is interpreted by different communities, with an acknowledgement and discussion of these differences, that allows a shared understanding to be formed; a common point of reference for conversation; a means of coordination and alignment, and of translation. In this way *Rautatieasema* is the common locus for activity and interaction, to engage, document, and problematise notions of site-specificity and place. And so, to return to the above imagining, with the chosen gathering of people, it is also a gathering for points of overlap between emerging media, performance and archaeological practices. Exploring relationships between critical fieldwork, site-specific performance, temporality, mediated memory, material culture, psycho-geography, collaborative and multiple- perspective documentation.

Situated presence and accumulation as an event, sitting together in the MUU gallery space on an early April afternoon, you watch each present themselves individually or collectively according to the collaboration which they did in the week of the workshop. It is the first time you as organiser (and possibly also for the workshop participants sitting there also) will see the paths between the practices as a collective engagement with the environment.

The bodily presence of standing in front of the audience, sharing stories about what was done; re-telling, re-presenting actions, this is captured on digital video as documentation.   For some presentations, digital images are also projected as a slideshow, moments to refer to in the

narrative, while other participants play sound recordings or video; one held up for the audience zip-locked bags of artefacts gathered from a rubbish bin within a certain duration of time; another paces backwards and forwards pontificating reflections about poetry and walking. As often more than one person is involved in each activity at the site, cross-references of experience become a feature of the presentations also, between the people upfront, the audience and the organizers.

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NOTICE a question here: How can you document all these different practices, points and processes of engagement? When a textual document has to be written about what happened? When a visual or event map of what was done is not desired, but summary of action that can be done again at any-place? When you wish to be evoke a productive force, projecting modes of being and doing[27]; partial but direct, leaving space for the reader to imagine their own way?

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that certain types of writing can benefit from the difference in imaginations. Della Pollock reserves the expectation that writing can serve a social function, and that it's value depends on "how well it performs within a system animated not only by democratic conflict but by conflict over the nature and aims of democracy"[28]. What she describes as performative writing is then the performativity of democratic exchange - conflict, compromise, dialogue, debate; and so both a "means and an effect of conflict"; and forms itself in the act of speaking/writing, between author-subjects, reading subjects, and subjects written/read[29]. In the interplay between reader and writer, collaboratively producing meaning, this is the construction site of "an ambi/multi-valence of possible, future histories"[30].

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NOTICE a point here: The idea that writing misses things, but certain forms of writing can make absence present. Quoting Pollock:

> "[by] recognising the extent to which writing displaces, even effaces 'others' and 'other-worlds' with its partial, opaque representations of them, not only not revealing truths, meanings, events, 'objects', but often obscuring them in the very act of writing, securing their absence with the substantial presence of words"[31].

She continues to note that in 'self-awareness', performative writing can be metonymic in that it can evoke the space of absence in the presence that we can see. It can do this by underscoring the "difference between print-based phenomena and the corporeal, affective, processual temporalities in which they operate"[32], actually making a feature of finding the loss in the text. Thus it can dis/place and un/do itself, highlighting and indeed celebrating the

flaws in representation by enacting the failure or loss: that they are finite, that at a certain point, due to repetition, redundancy, or familiarity, they break down. It is this dis/abling that produces or allows for the performative. A point whereby the text is returned to the present, and the reader or listener is brought into being[33].

Campbell and Ulin, in their PhD thesis 'BorderLine Archaeology' take on board the words of Pollock in their process and use them as 'cartographic tools' to perform the evocation of their field of study: "Because [that] place is not a place of the real, a place of facts, a place where one sees what one is really looking at. No, [that] place is the place of provisional realness.. to be performed, mapped and walked through, and each of us does this in our own particular and individual way"[34].

To elaborate, performative writing is used to map out a metaphorical landscape, to bring the reader in touch with the unfamiliar and with 'otherworlds' that are suggested, but which leaves space for the reader to realise the "space of absence made present in desire and imagination"[35], and take paths for themselves. It is a narrative as an open landscape[36].

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IMAGINE an extracted essence: In the distillation process, write a text which gathers together, not people, but their points of view, situated practices, performances, actions and spoken words. Press 'play'. And like the situated drifts of *Precarias*, scribble with a pencil, or maybe faster, typing into your keypad, transcribe a 'sustained approximation' of the different physical and psychic environments each is re-telling as a presentation captured on digital video. These notes are the quotes of both practice and experience[37]. Yet, still to extract the essence, you will now have to imagine the red coloured and underline emphases in the quotes for yourself. Use a filter. This is where you write your own creative and performative text[38].

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NOW IMAGINE the whole: Meanings and interpretations are contextual, emotional, and embodied. Further, by being located in a 'context-map' meanings simultaneously mark, determine and transform its surroundings[39]. A criticism made by Pollock of scholarly text is the lack of presence/life of performance in the process of knowledge formation; that instead of reductionism, there should be not less but more: "to write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social moralities, to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain. In other words to make writing perform"[40].

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NOTICE an observation here: The idea that there is a consequence to all these points. A distinction between "words that write about what other words and people do, and words that do what other words report"[41], which creates a space where (and when) language becomes a site of action and effect.. A space where (and when) language becomes a site of negotiation and reader response.. A space where (and when) language which involves the reader, not to persuade them of a certain reality, but "as a co-writer, co-constituent of an uncertain, provisional, normative practice"[42].. A space which opens up the view of writing to incursion, permeation and multiplicity[43].   Here and now, in front of such a vast and expansive open landscape, is a good place to rest and admire the view.

[1] Lisa Muszynski, *Writer's Workshop for Spatial Thinkers* (file .doc distributed via email to seminar participants by Lily Diaz-Kommonen, 29/10/2004).

[2] Fiona Campbell and Jonna Ulin, *BorderLine Archaeology: a practice of contemporary archaeology - exploring aspects of creative narratives and performative cultural production*, PhD dissertation (GOTARC Series B. Gothenburg Archeaological Theses, No. 29, Göteborg University, 2004).

[3] Lisa Muszynski, 14.

[4] Ibid., 15.

[5] Ibid., 3.

[6] This text section is based upon an introductory concept presented to the seminar group by Muszynski, making reference to different modes of spatial thinking: photographic, map-like, auditory and kinetic.

[7] Fiona Campbell and Jonna Ulin, 51.

[8] Ibid., 51-55.

[9] Ibid., 55.

[10] Ibid., 56-59.

[11] Ibid., 59.

[12] Lisa Muszynski, 17.

[13] Precarias collective, "Precarious women workers adrift", *Makeworlds Paper#4*, (February 2004), 22-23, http://www.makeworlds.org/book/view/112 (accessed 11/2004).

[14] Ibid., 22. The Precarias collective later extend their reference to the Situationist notion of drift, with the following recount: "the investigators wander without any particular destination through the city, permitting that conversations, interactions and urban micro-events guide them. This permits them to establish a psycho-cartography based on the coincidences and correspondences of physical and subjective flows: exposing themselves to the gravitation and repulsion of certain spaces, to the conversations that come up along the way, and, in general, to the way in which the urban and social environments influence exchanges and attitudes".

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 23.

[19] Fiona Campbell and Jonna Ulin, 8-9. Consider the list of contents.

[20] Ibid., 64.

[21] Della Pollock, "Performing Writing." In *The Ends of Performance*, Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, eds. (New York: New York University, 1998), 91.

[22] This text section refers to the listening exercise in the seminar given by Muszynski to the seminar group where we had to write down words when listening to the following composition: Henryk Górecki, *Kleines Requiem für Eine Polka (Little Requiem for a Polka)*, Op. 66 (1993).

[23] Peggy Phelen, quoted by Fiona Wright, *Uncertain Bodies III: telling otherwise*, article in Practice as Research in Performance Symposium, (University of Bristol, November 2001), 7. accessed 11/04, http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/s_fw.doc

[24] Fiona Wright, Ibid., 7.

[25] The locative media workshop (23rd March-3rd April 2004) was organized by this author as part of the pixelACHE festival in Helsinki. It aimed to invite and include the situated, the embodied, and the temporal into an emerging media practice/discourse dominated by the spatial relation. This international gathering joined the local (Helsinki-based) participants of the ongoing 'signal | process' workshop/exhibition that

was exploring issues of sound in public space through site-specific processes and engagements, led by sonic media artist Sophea Lerner (AU/FI). With approximately 30 people involved intermittently, both workshops shared a production base at the MUU gallery. Both workshops shared a locus of site engagement: the interior building, subterranean and surrounding area of the Rautatieasema (railway station) in central Helsinki. Ad-hoc and self-organising, collaborations between the local and international participants of both workshops formed according to collective interest, individual skills and knowledge. For further information can be found online here: http://locative.net/tcm/workshops/index.cgi?PixelACHE

[26] Brian Marick, *Boundary Objects*, accessed online 11/04, http://www.visibleworkings.com/analogyfest/marick-boundary-objects.pdf

[27] Della Pollock, 95.

[28] Ibid., 78.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 85.

[31] Ibid., 83.

[32] Ibid., 85.

[33] Jane Blocker, quoted by Della Pollock, Ibid., 84.

[34] Fiona Campbell and Jonna Ulin, 76.

[35] Della Pollock, 86.

[36] Lisa Muszynski, 3.

[37] These notes for the 'signal | process' and 'locative media' workshop presentations can be found online here: http://aware.uiah.fi/sp-lm/fragments.html

[38] Andrew Paterson, "Negotiating Rautatieasema", In *Acoustic Space issue#5: Trans Cultural Mapping*, Marc Tuters and Rasa Šmite, eds. (RIXC, Riga 2004), 178-179. Text accessible online at: http://aware.uiah.fi/sp-lm/apaterson_negotiating-rautatieasema-text_2004.pdf

[39] Della Pollock, 79.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 95.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 96.