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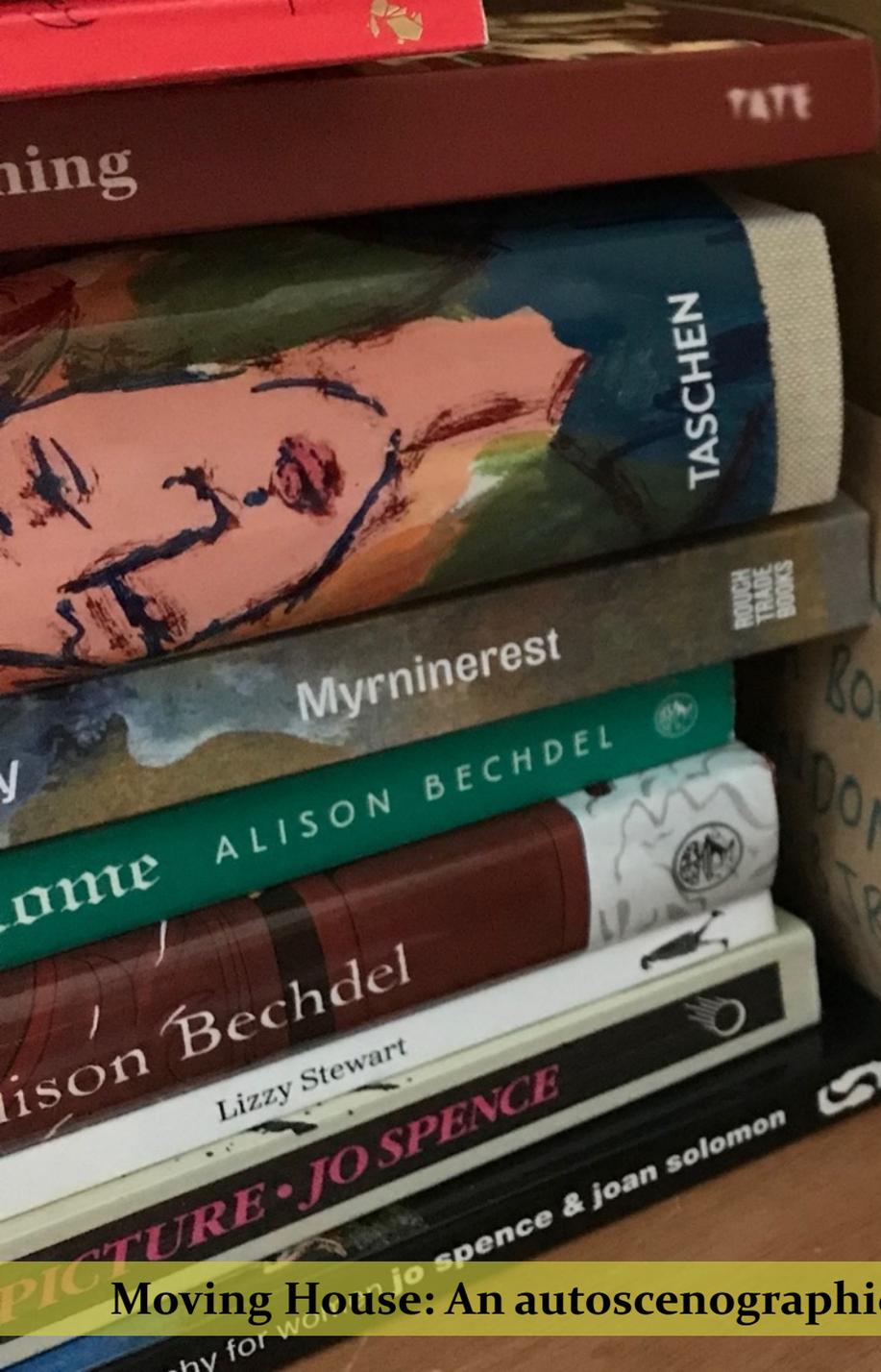
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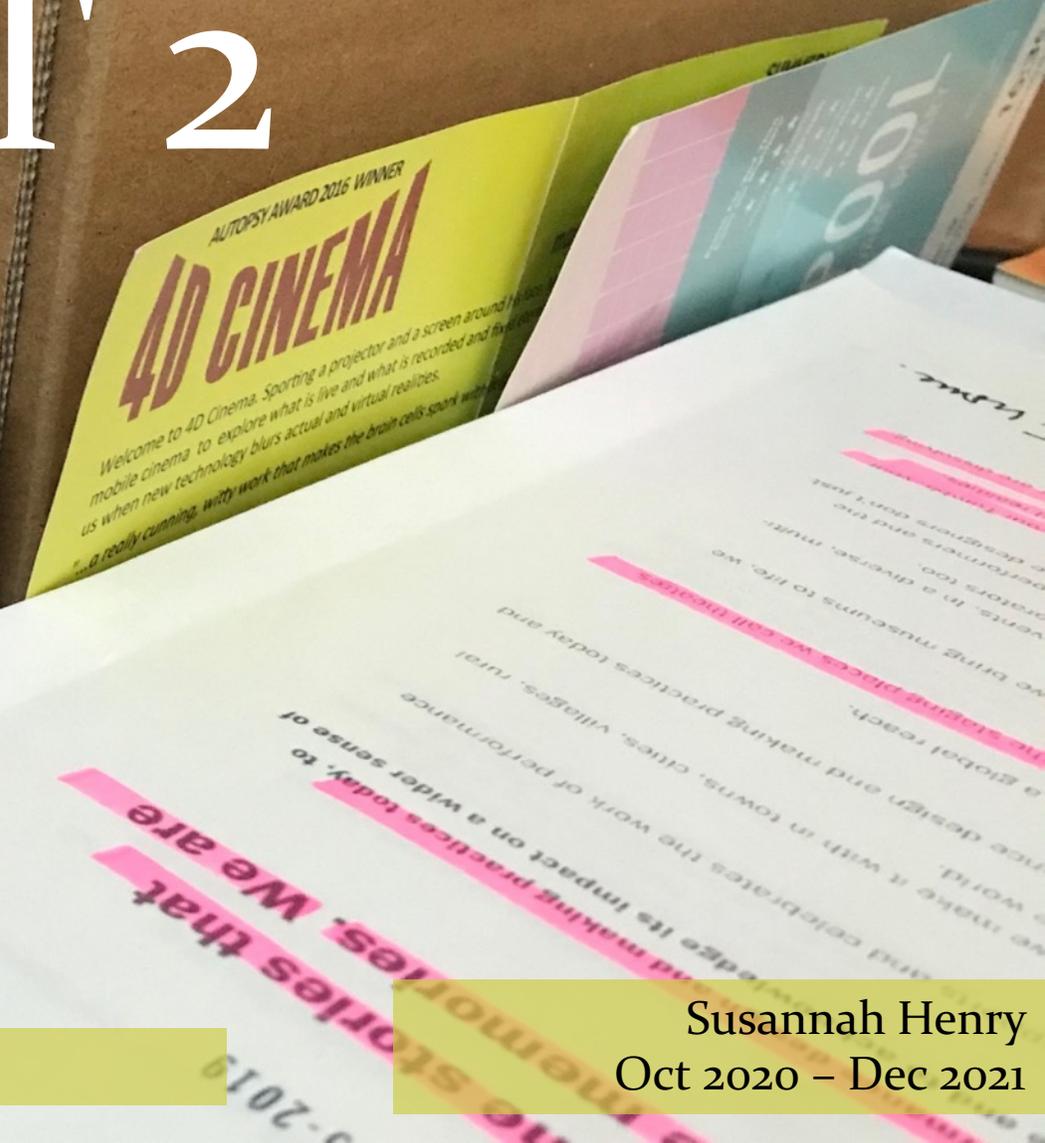
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PART 2



SUSANNAH HENRY
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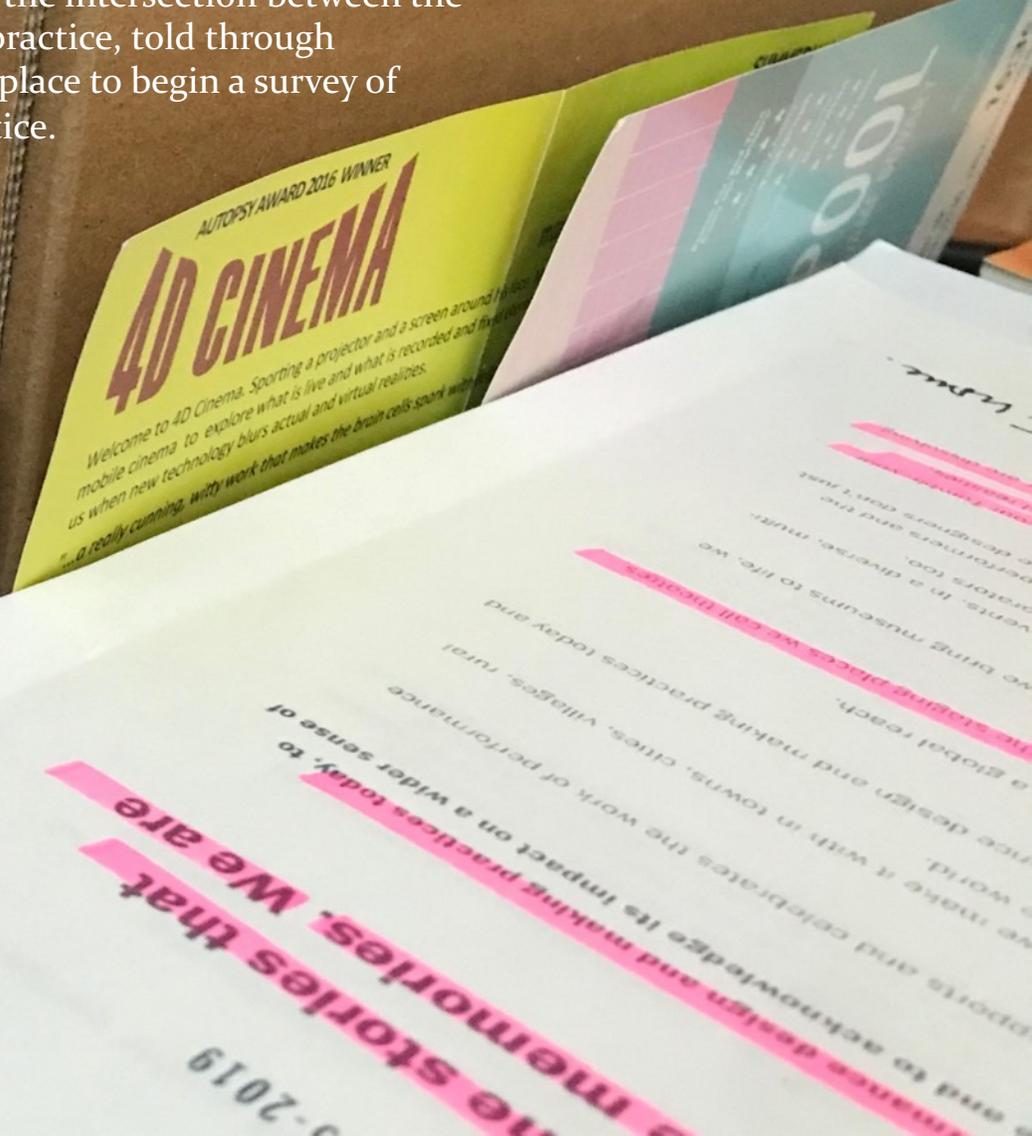
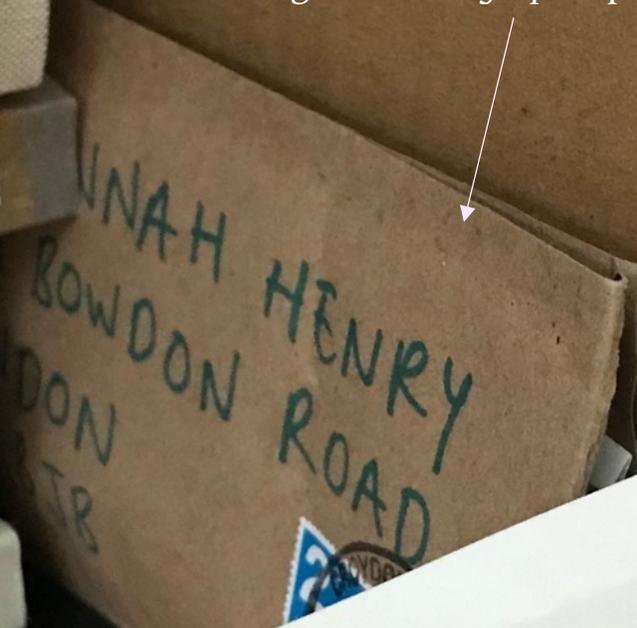


Moving House: An autoscenographic practice review

Susannah Henry
Oct 2020 – Dec 2021



To return to the box corner: this envelope represents a single example of practice; *Prayer* (2020) by Rosie Elnile– a contemporary British scenographer. It’s the closest example I have found to an exploration of the intersection between the scenographer’s story and their practice, told through scenography. This feels like the place to begin a survey of existing *autoscenographic* practice.



Prayer was a designer-led project proposing that designers of performance might more consciously and responsibly engage with the history and cultural or community contexts of the theatre spaces where their work is situated. Originally conceived as a three-dimensional scenographic work – a garden planted inside the Gate Theatre, London - the piece was reconceived as a digital space, which was necessary because of the 2020 Covid 19 pandemic.

While outlining her project in a recorded commentary, Elnile did an unusual thing - she highlighted the subjectivity of the 'theatre designer', giving this idea significant time in her narration. She also discussed – in the first person - an unhappy experience of working on a theatre production and considered how this had directly influenced the new evolution of her practice.

SUSANNAH HENRY



Following the experience of engaging with *Prayer* online, each audience member was invited to continue the conversation by leaving their address.

A few days after I did this, I received an envelope. It contained the pictured contents and instructions for staging a solo performance of *Prayer*, wherever the recipient happens to be.

At the point I received the envelope, I happened to be in my studio packing to move house and doing this Practice Review, and so I staged the piece in that place. Images documenting that performance will form a backdrop to my outlining the relevance of *Prayer* to the *autoscenography* project.

Instructions for a solo performance of *Prayer*

If you light this candle in the brightest part of your house as it's getting dark and look at the candlelight and the evening light mixing together then that is prayer

If you make a base for that candle with this piece of clay and you can clearly see how your hands made it - its not perfect but you made it then that is prayer

If you plant this seed/these seeds next to that candle then that is prayer

If you listen to *Alright* by D'Angelo at half speed while you're doing this then that is *Prayer*



The visual climax of *Prayer* is a series of photographs of experimental artworks Elnile made using model pieces recycled from a difficult former project. In the recorded commentary which underscores *Prayer*, she says:

It felt healing to make these very subjective works, to re-purpose the remnants of that experience. Making these models put me in this quiet, meditative space and also into a space where I had more autonomy and more power. As a designer, to completely admit subjectivity feels subversive, I kind of feel guilty for it. (2020)

Elsewhere in the commentary, Elnile describes these models as being “private spaces” which “show the working” of her hands. This is an example of a designer’s story - and their body - entering the picture of a scenographically-led narrative and driving both the story and the production of scenography.

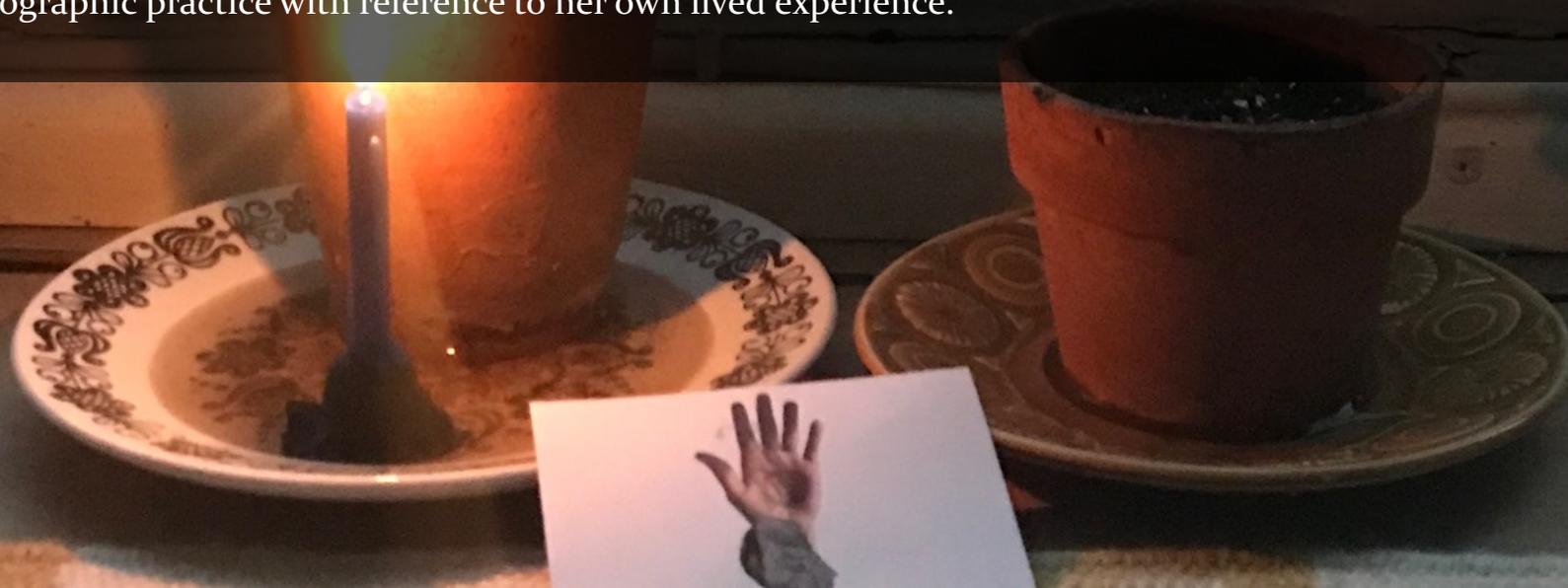
The emergence of the ‘subjective designer’ at this moment in *Prayer* can be read as a feminist response to institutional forces, while evidencing the scenographer affording themselves space and time to reflect on their practice in a way that is demonstrably neither ‘easy or comfortable’ (Hilevaara & Orley 2018: 8). The reflection that comes from the creation of re-purposed model-pieces can meanwhile be understood as being part of a process of knowing-doing (Makela 2007, Nelson 2013).



In summarising the personal value of these model artefacts, Elnile focuses on their deviation from the norms of craft-based scenographic practice, highlighting off-scale elements and materials not usually found in a theatre model. Additionally, it is their lack of polish which the artist sounds most invigorated and excited by:

The unfinished aesthetic of them is both about making new spaces and also towards unmaking. Unmaking parts of my practice. Unmaking inherited ideas of what design can and should be. These spaces are not neutral or objective, they are finished, all finished. They are active. The more I think about it, the more I feel there is something important about the admission and display of subjectivity as a theatre designer. (2020)

We rarely hear from 'the designer' in the way Elnile speaks to us through *Prayer*. Placing subjectivity alongside the technical and professional knowledge of scenographic practice is the autobiography of the designer placed within scenography, and is 'sensuous', as per Salami's (2020) aforementioned definition. We might further understand the subjective reflection of the designer as echoing bell hook's feminist strategy to 'live consciously' through critical reflection about the world we live in (2001: 56). Here, Elnile reflects critically on her world of scenographic practice with reference to her own lived experience.





Furthermore, we hear Elnile's story placed as emanating 'from my mind, which is my body, which is a mixed-race black AFAB body'. (2020) The designer as a person is embodied through text and images as well as making her own lived experiences explicit and placing her person-ness, her bodied-ness and her subjectivity as compass and reference point for the bigger themes explored within *Prayer*.

It is extraordinary, as a scenographer, to hear the story of a fellow designer so imbricated with their practice as part of a public offering of work. Ordinarily it is the design that speaks, and the personal story one knows (from first-hand experience) to be inextricably entwined with what is made, remains quiet.

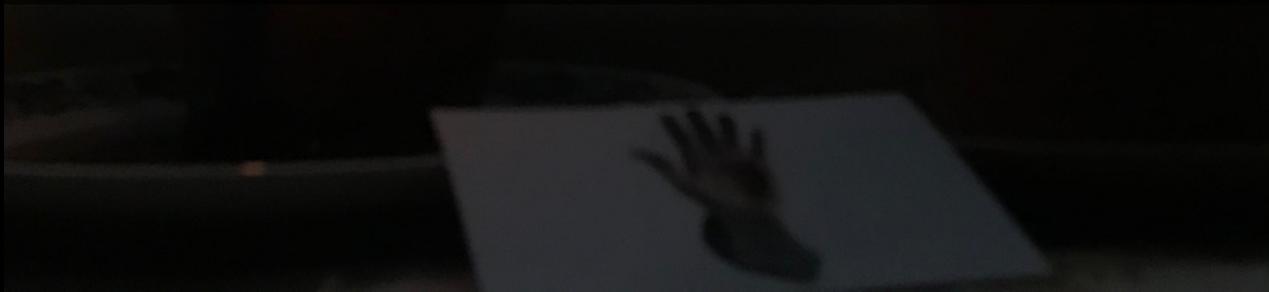


While the aim of *Prayer* is to ask questions about how design can facilitate care, and a more egalitarian way of experiencing and making theatre, it can also be read as an *autoscenographic* exercise. The voice of the designer is heard and their story and its relation to their practice is unpacked and woven through the scenographic activity which carries that narrative.

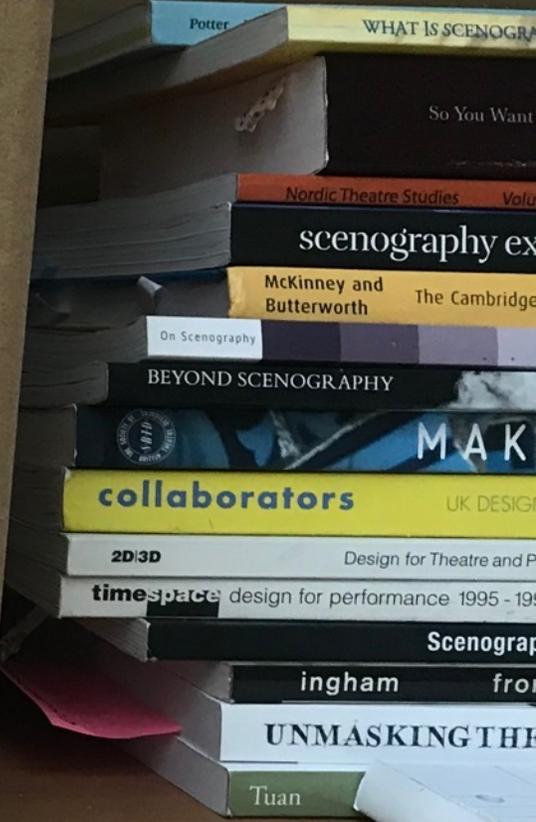
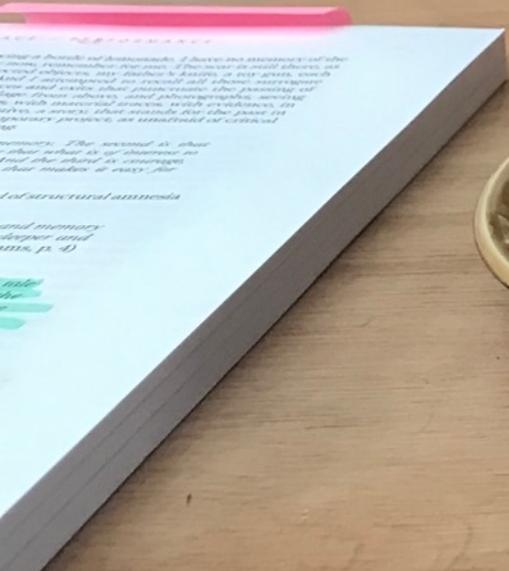
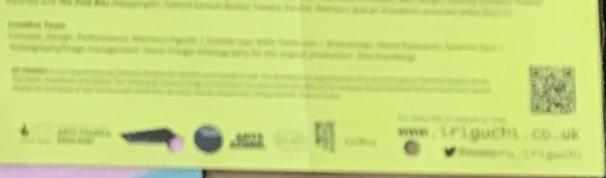
In an article Elnile wrote in *The Stage* newspaper to accompany the online launch of the piece, there is an argument to be found for the relevance of who the designer is to their practice:

There is... a kind of blankness and (false) idea of objectivity to the way in which we think about designers themselves. There have been lots of important conversations about who is cast in, and who directs, a show but much less thought is given to who the designer is – our lived experiences have a huge impact on our aesthetic values and biases. (2020)

It is beyond the scope of this project to examine the way that a designers' biases might influence their practice, but a consideration of the designer's values and/or personal politics is relevant to the practice of *autoscenography*, since these underpin and inform the scenographic process and thereafter, inevitably, the production of performance space. *Prayer* encourages (via practice-based example) the scenographer's consideration of their political, design-based values and utilises the materials of scenographic practice as instruments, enabling reflection on the circumstances within which the scenographer makes work.



The *Prayer* seeds grew across the practice review – this image was taken on Sunday 8th November 2020. The performance and the seeds' growth expanded Elnile's *autoscenographic* offering into my domestic space, towards my own subjectivity. This growth also evidences this practice review as an active *autoscenographic* process – a performance that happened in time.



What follows is another example of an artist bringing subjectivity into dialogue with her practice, albeit within a different discipline.

HER MASTER'S VOICE - NINA CONTI

watched 2.11.20

- Learning to ventriloquism
- Being remembered by 'monkeys'
- Ventriloquism HERSELF - self reflection

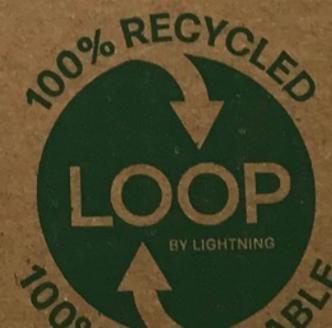
WOMEN
ARTISTS

WHO CLIMB
INTO THEIR
OWN
WORK



Nina's Conti's 2012 film documentary, *Her Master's Voice*, is an autobiographical art project in which Conti tells the story of inheriting a collection of ventriloquist's dummies belonging to her former partner and mentor, Ken Campbell, and what she does with them.

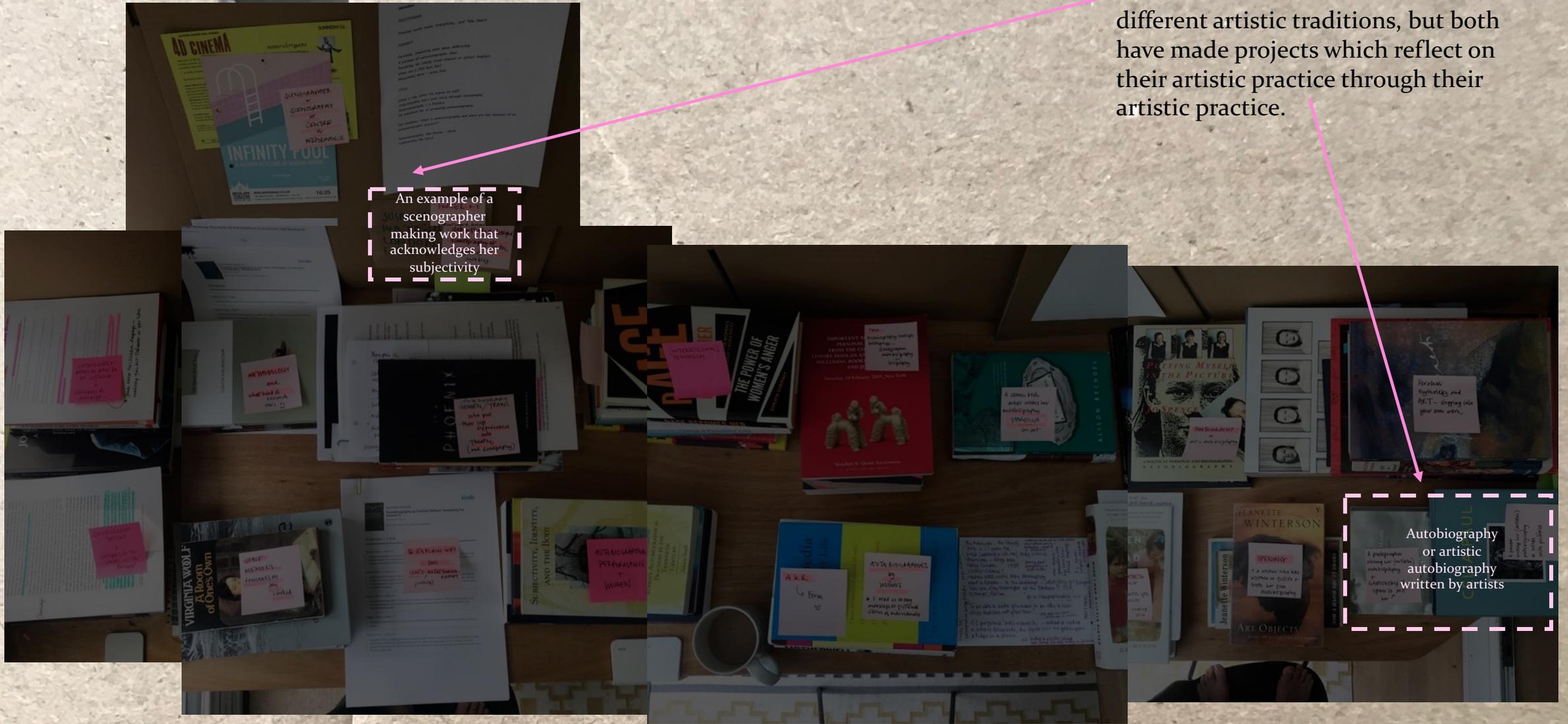
It is a moving film about bereavement which also explores Conti's relationship with her ventriloquism practice. This a ventriloquist making a film about her ventriloquism, using ventriloquism. As a self-produced documentary, it is relevant to a survey of artists exploring their own lived experience through - or alongside - their artistic practice.



Rosie Elnile and Nina Conti are from different artistic traditions, but both have made projects which reflect on their artistic practice through their artistic practice.

An example of a scenographer making work that acknowledges her subjectivity

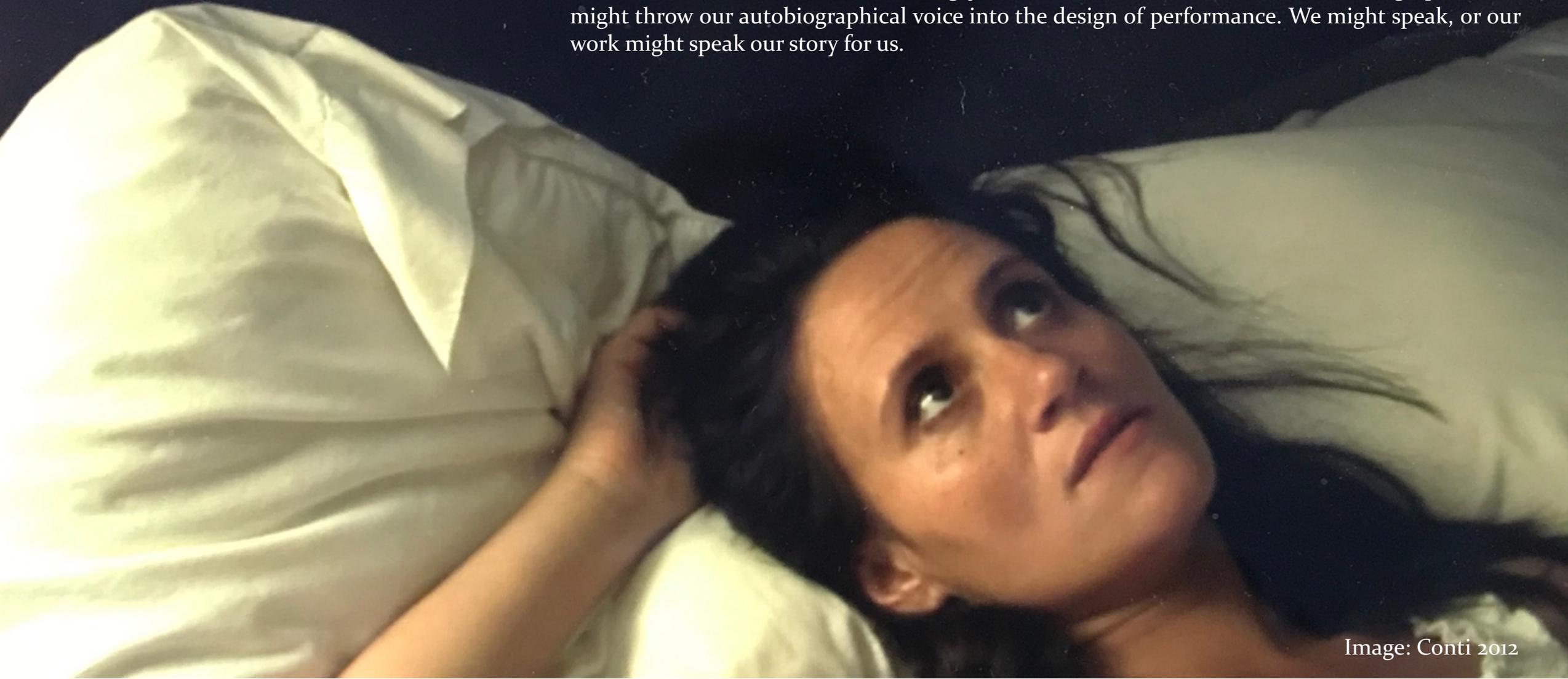
Autobiography or artistic autobiography written by artists



In *Her Master's Voice*, Conti is intermittently interviewed by her own ventriloquist puppet, Monkey, for whom she provides the voice and for whom her hand provides the movement. Conti acknowledges elsewhere in the film that Monkey expresses aspects of her character that are not otherwise easily accessible – he is rude, curmudgeonly and sometimes cruel.

Scenes showing Conti in conversation with Monkey (about her relationship with Campbell and his role in introducing her to ventriloquism) depict a woman-artist reflecting on her life and work through her craft. In this way the puppet works as a mirror – a reflective surface for the artist to peer into. It is affecting and poignant, highlighting Conti's aloneness at a ventriloquism convention, while affirming the one-ness of artist and practice and the comfort to be found in art-making.

A technical point explored in the film is that of 'bifurcation' - the act of detaching the speaking voice from the movement of the mouth. Bifurcation allows Conti's voice to wander and transpose itself into other things like Monkey or, during one memorable sequence, a scene where Conti lies in bed ventriloquizing her own voiceover - an expression of her anxious interior monologue. The concept of bifurcation is useful to *autoscenography* in that it highlights the theme of speaking for oneself, and the effect of 'throwing your voice' into other forms. As autoscenographers, we might throw our autobiographical voice into the design of performance. We might speak, or our work might speak our story for us.



An analysis of *Her Master's Voice* from media scholar Sarah Kessler (Kessler 2016) presents a reading of bifurcation in this film as being feminist or queer in identity. She evidences this by introducing two concepts that are analogous (and useful) to the mechanisms of *autoscenography*: that of 'besideness' (Sedgwick 2002) and 'speaking nearby' – a feminist approach to documentary-making articulated by Vietnamese film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha (in Chen 1992).

Eve Sedgwick proposes the consideration of 'beside' as a tool for non-dualistic thought i.e. using the spatial implications of *besideness* as a way to consider plural possibilities, without setting up a sense of being part of a pair, a binary or opposite.

The concept of 'besideness' offers a framework for understanding *autoscenography* as a reflective practice. The artist is removed from the daily craft of their practice to sit alongside it and consider the way in which it unfolds and continues to contain meaning for them. *Autoscenography* is one model through which 'besideness' might be explored by creative practitioners, in a way reflective of Conti's approach to *Her Master's Voice* and her craft of ventriloquism.

This can be read as a feminist approach in that it gives voice to that which might remain hidden within an understanding of creative practice as an 'institution' – where craft or technical/professional prowess may be foregrounded.

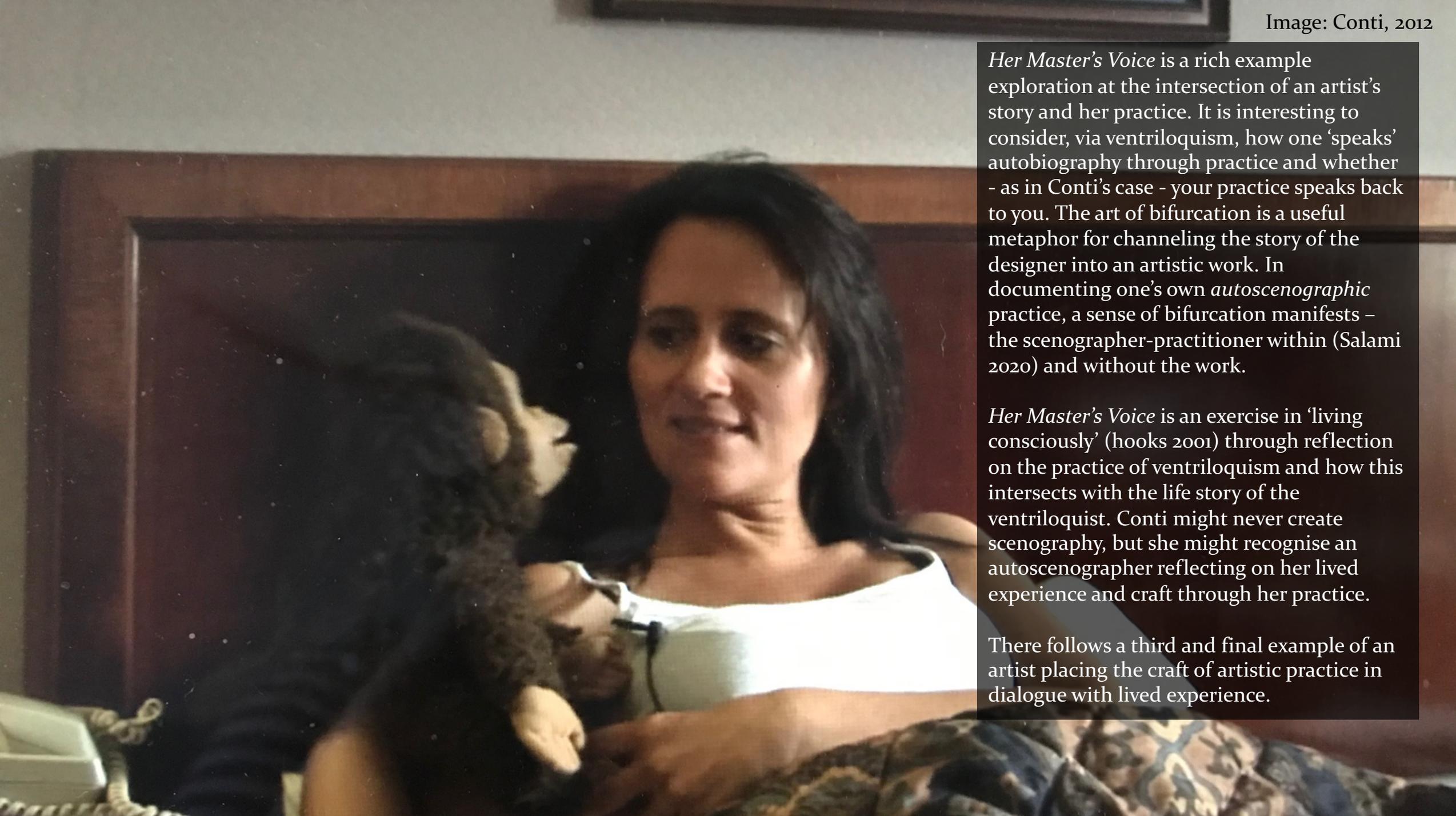




In drawing out this moment from Trinh's interview, Kessler highlights a deliberate subjectivity within the documentary artist, as a reaction to the normative historical approaches to the craft that eschew any reference to the subjectivity of the maker. One is reminded of Elnile's assertion that it feels radical, as a stage designer, to admit to subjectivity.

The concept of 'speaking nearby' is offered as a reaction against the patronising – traditional – motivation for documentary to 'give voice' to the subject, by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Interviewed by Nancy M. Chen, Trinh proposes 'speaking nearby' as an approach that does not assume the documentary-maker as an embodiment of cold objectivity, but acknowledges the subjectivity of the maker:

In other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself ... (Chen 1992, quoted in Kessler 2016)



Her Master's Voice is a rich example exploration at the intersection of an artist's story and her practice. It is interesting to consider, via ventriloquism, how one 'speaks' autobiography through practice and whether - as in Conti's case - your practice speaks back to you. The art of bifurcation is a useful metaphor for channeling the story of the designer into an artistic work. In documenting one's own *autoscenographic* practice, a sense of bifurcation manifests - the scenographer-practitioner within (Salami 2020) and without the work.

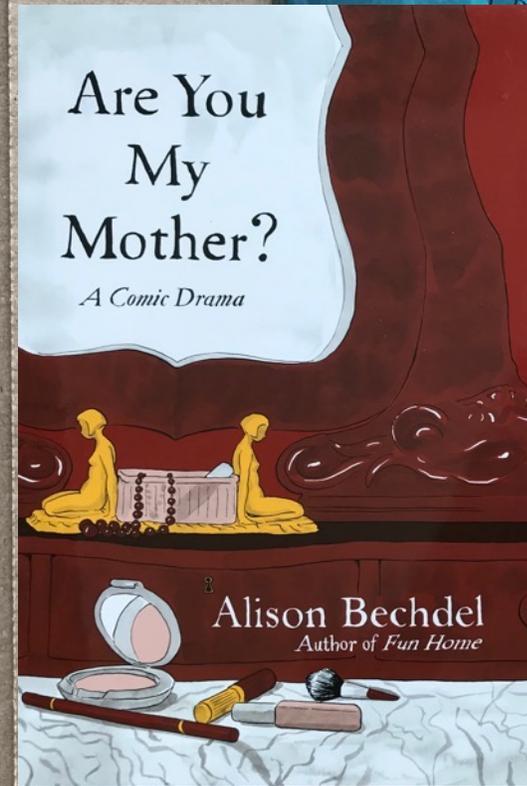
Her Master's Voice is an exercise in 'living consciously' (hooks 2001) through reflection on the practice of ventriloquism and how this intersects with the life story of the ventriloquist. Conti might never create scenography, but she might recognise an autoscenographer reflecting on her lived experience and craft through her practice.

There follows a third and final example of an artist placing the craft of artistic practice in dialogue with lived experience.

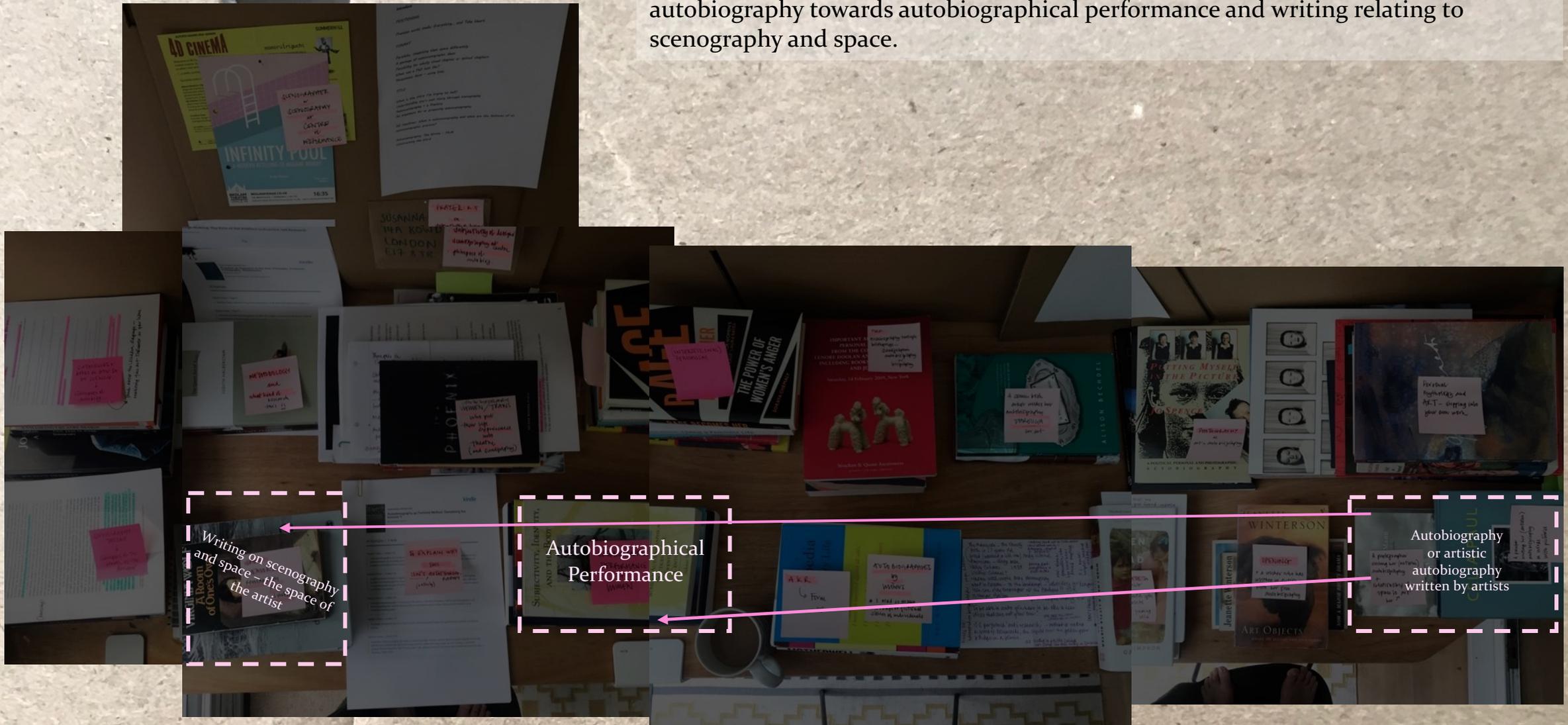
These two graphic novels by Alison Bechdel document her relationships with her father and mother. *Fun Home* (2006) was adapted for the stage and has now been interpreted through scenography, but otherwise this example might not readily suggest a relationship to *autoscenography*.

However, Bechdel's engagement with time, place, photography and memory in these books, alongside her constant acknowledgement (or even semi-documentation) of the 'performance' of writing and illustrating family autobiography, renders sections of *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012) at the least, autotopographic, as per the definition which follows from Dee Heddon (2008).

A brief deviation here, to reach across to autotopography – a concept related to the practice of *autoscenography* – before we continue with Bechdel's graphic novels.



With the concept of autotopography, I am reaching across territories from artistic autobiography towards autobiographical performance and writing relating to scenography and space.



Writing on scenography and space - the space of the artist

Autobiographical Performance

Autobiography or artistic autobiography written by artists

autobiography and performance

deirdre heddon



The concept of autotopography is explored in *Autobiography and Performance* (Heddon 2008). As Heddon articulates it, autotopography is distinct from an earlier application of the term coined by Jennifer A. Gonzalez (1995), who used it to describe an arrangement of autobiographical artefacts such as souvenirs, memorabilia or ephemera, as seen in the work of sculptor Louise Bourgeois. Heddon defines autotopography differently:

Autotopography... intends to foreground the subjectivity involved in plotting place; autotopography is writing place through self (and simultaneously writing self through place). Autotopography is a creative act of seeing, interpretation and invention, all of which depend on where you are standing, when and for what purpose. (2008: 90-91)

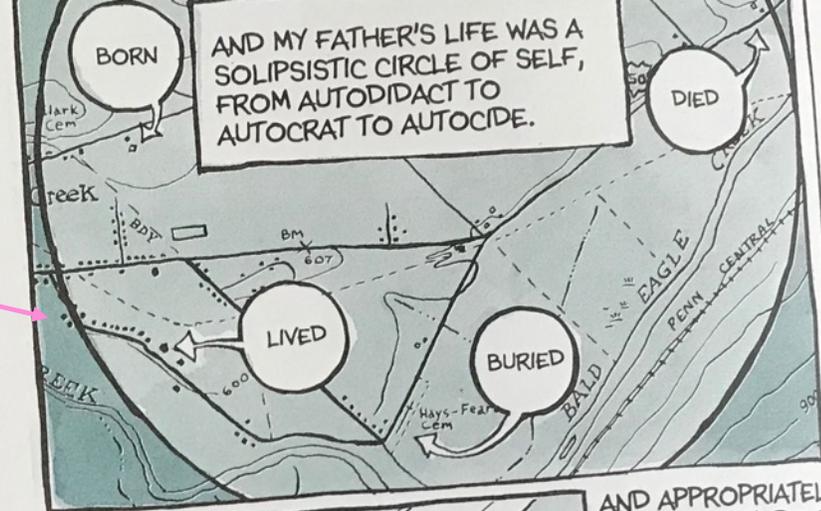
Autotopography as defined in *Autobiography and Performance* combines a spatial, located dimension with autobiography. It shares these properties with *autoscenography*, which also blends space and autobiography, except that it is the event, and is not confined to geography. As such, we can understand autotopography as being limited by its placed-ness, while *autoscenography* is not.

Bechdel's two aforementioned graphic novels evidence the two properties of autotopography – place and autobiography – within their visual narratives.

This example from *Fun Home* evidences autotopography – place + autobiography - in it's creation of a map to show how geographically confined her father's life had been, for all his apparent worldliness. There are several maps in *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*. They always appear as an illustrated version of a real-world map-object but they map events more so than places –supporting Heddon's assertion that lives take place (2008).

This page also highlights Bechdel's use of other real-world objects to 'place' herself in time and space within the narrative. We see the object of her childhood diary enter the frame, and a glimpse of the young Bechdel's writing hand.

The graphic novel form allows Bechdel to juxtapose objects – map, diary, hand - at different scales and to convey the places of childhood and (as will be shown in the next slide) the environment from which she writes her autobiography. This approach operates in a way that moves it beyond the 'autobiography + place' of autotopography towards an encounter with *autoscenographics*.

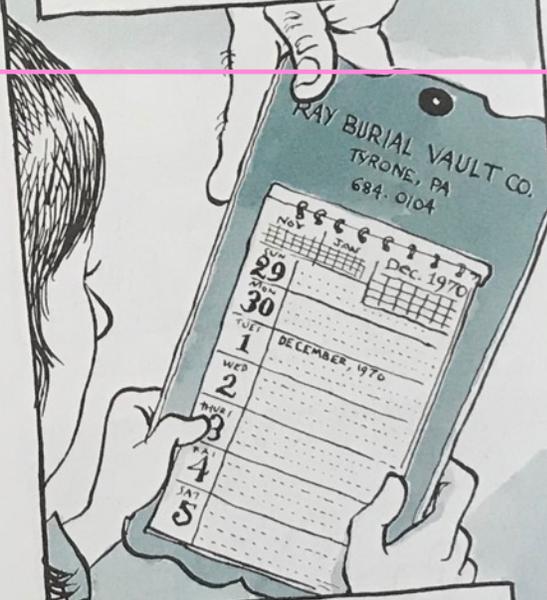


THEN THERE'S MY OWN COMPULSIVE PROPENSITY TO AUTO-BIOGRAPHY.

Friday MARC
It was prett
I got out a
Book. Chr
sand in Jo
He started
took him i

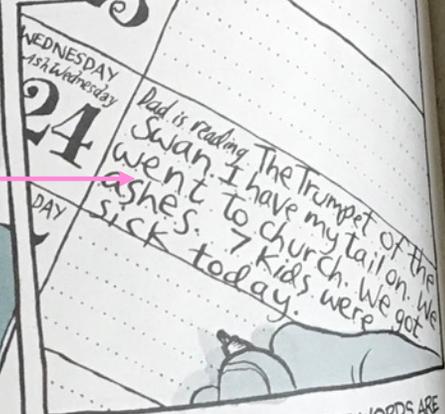
IT WAS A SORT OF E
CRISIS. HOW DID I
THINGS I WAS WRIT
ABSOLUTELY, OBJE

AT SOME POINT DURING MY OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE SPELL, I BEGAN A DIARY.



DAD GAVE ME A WALL CALENDAR FROM ONE OF HIS VENDORS TO WRITE IN, A CURIOUS MEMENTO MORI.

AND APPROPRIATELY ENOUGH, MY FIRST ENTRY WAS MADE ON THAT MOVABLE FEAST OF MORTALITY, ASH WEDNESDAY.



ACTUALLY, THE FIRST THREE WORDS ARE IN MY FATHER'S HANDWRITING, AS IF HE WERE GIVING ME A JUMP START.



ALL I COU
MY OWN P
PERHAPS



In this sequence from *Are You My Mother?* we see the equipment Bechdel uses to draw her illustrations, as though on her desk. Among these (illustrated) objects are a series of (illustrated) photographs the author uses to demonstrate her awareness, at even a young age, of her father as an unstable presence in the household. There is also a highlighted passage from a book about parenting and psychology.

The desk-based objects and the reference book text remind us of the author at work and re-enforce her task of rendering this autobiographical work, focused on childhood experience, in the time and place of the present. This recalls Elnile's positioning of her model boxes as "private spaces" which "show the working" of her hands (2020) while reaffirming Heddon's assertion that lives – and therefore life writing - happen somewhere (Heddon 2008).

CHRONOLOGICAL I'VE ARRANGED THEM TO MY OWN NARRATIVE.

MOM IS MAKING FACES AND PRESUMABLY SOUNDS AT ME. IN EACH SHOT, I REFLECT HER EXPRESSION AND THE SHAPE OF HER MOUTH WITH UNCANNY PRECISION.

BUT "THERE IS NOTHING MYSTICAL ABOUT THIS," SAYS DONALD WINNICOTT, IN THE ORDINARY DEVOTED MOTHER.

agrees, that ordinarily the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she ordinarily recovers in the weeks and months after the baby's birth, in which to a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her. There is nothing mystical about

FOR A LONG TIME I RESISTED INCLUDING MY PRESENT-DAY INTERACTIONS WITH MOM IN THIS BOOK PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY'RE SO "ORDINARY."

DRRRRING!

MOM!

HI. I WAS AT THE GYM. HAD TO GET MY LAPS IN.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE LADY GAGA ON THE GRAMMYS LAST NIGHT. PUH-LEASE. I LIKE PUNK. I LIKE WEIRD!

BUT SHE CAN'T DRESS LIKE THAT WITH THOSE THIGHS. IF I HAD ANOTHER LIFE TO LIVE, I'D COSTUME ROCK DIVAS.

THEN I STARTED SEEING HOW THE TRANSCENDENT WOULD ALMOST ALWAYS CREEP INTO THE EVERYDAY.

I DIDN'T GET MUCH SLEEP LAST NIGHT. I KEPT HAVING THESE DREAMS ABOUT DAD.

I GUESS IT'S FROM READING *500 VIA PI ATLAS*. TO BE HONEST SHE AND TED HUGHES ARE ALWAYS FIGHTING.

IN MY ARRANGEMENT OF THESE PHOTOS, THE RAPPORT BETWEEN MOM AND ME BUILDS UNTIL I SHRIEK WITH JOY.

SHE'S SUCH A SPOILED BRAT.

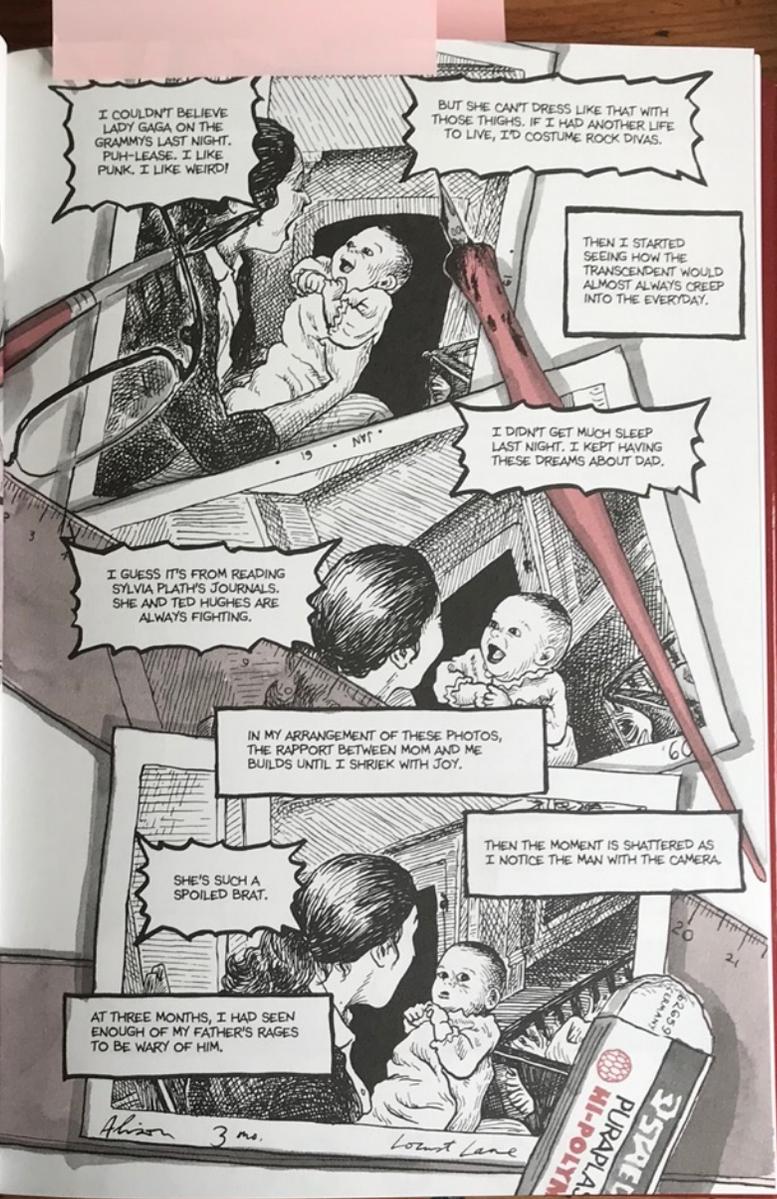
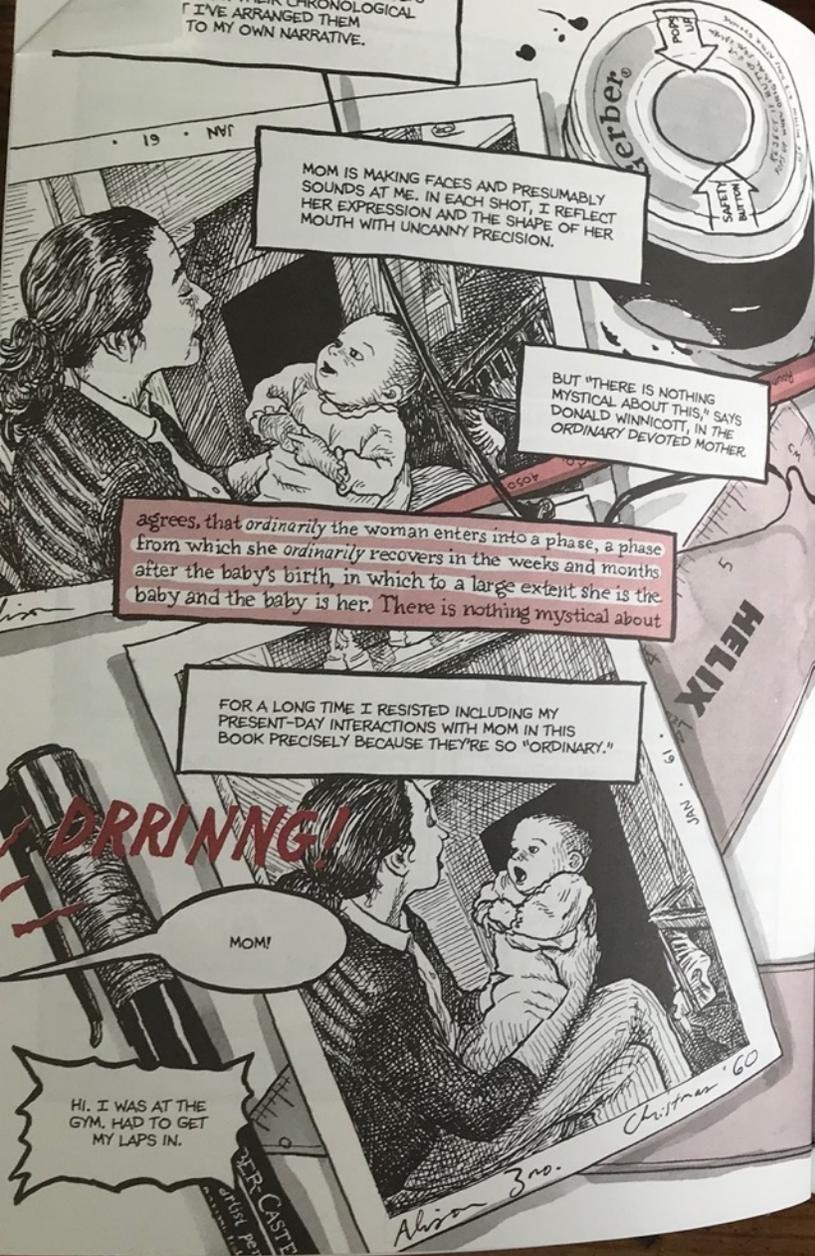
THEN THE MOMENT IS SHATTERED AS I NOTICE THE MAN WITH THE CAMERA.

AT THREE MONTHS, I HAD SEEN ENOUGH OF MY FATHER'S RAGES TO BE WARY OF HIM.

Alison 3 mo.

Lowst Lane

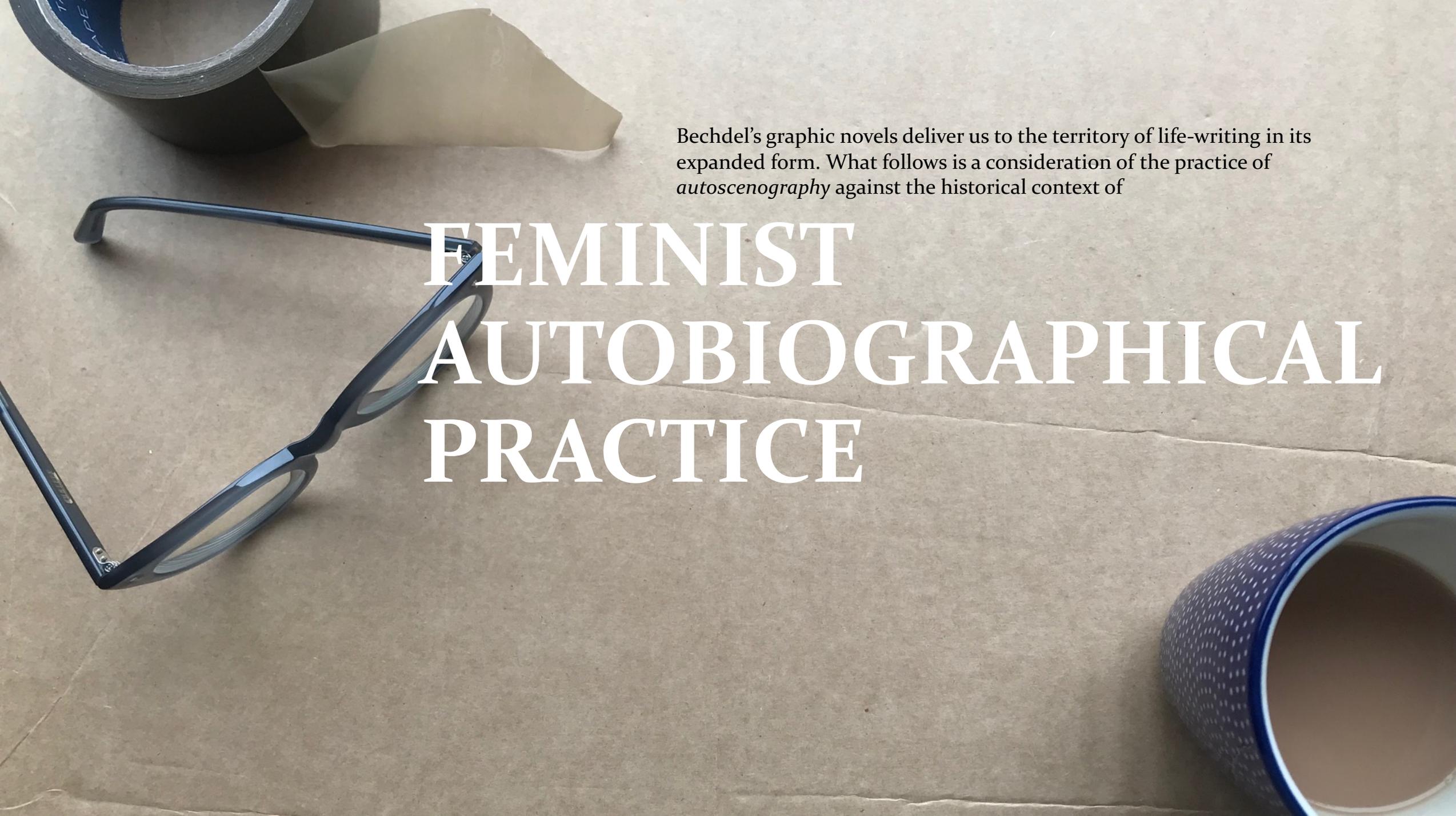




One can read the interplay of time, space, design, story and autobiographical narrative played out here as *autoscenographics* (pace Hann 2019) within Bechdel's form of life-writing, while not manifesting as a work of *autoscenography*.

This intertextual approach to life writing offers an example of 'besidness' (Sedgwick 2002) that is couched in the materials of the professional illustrator and writer – the practice and the personal 'beside each other.

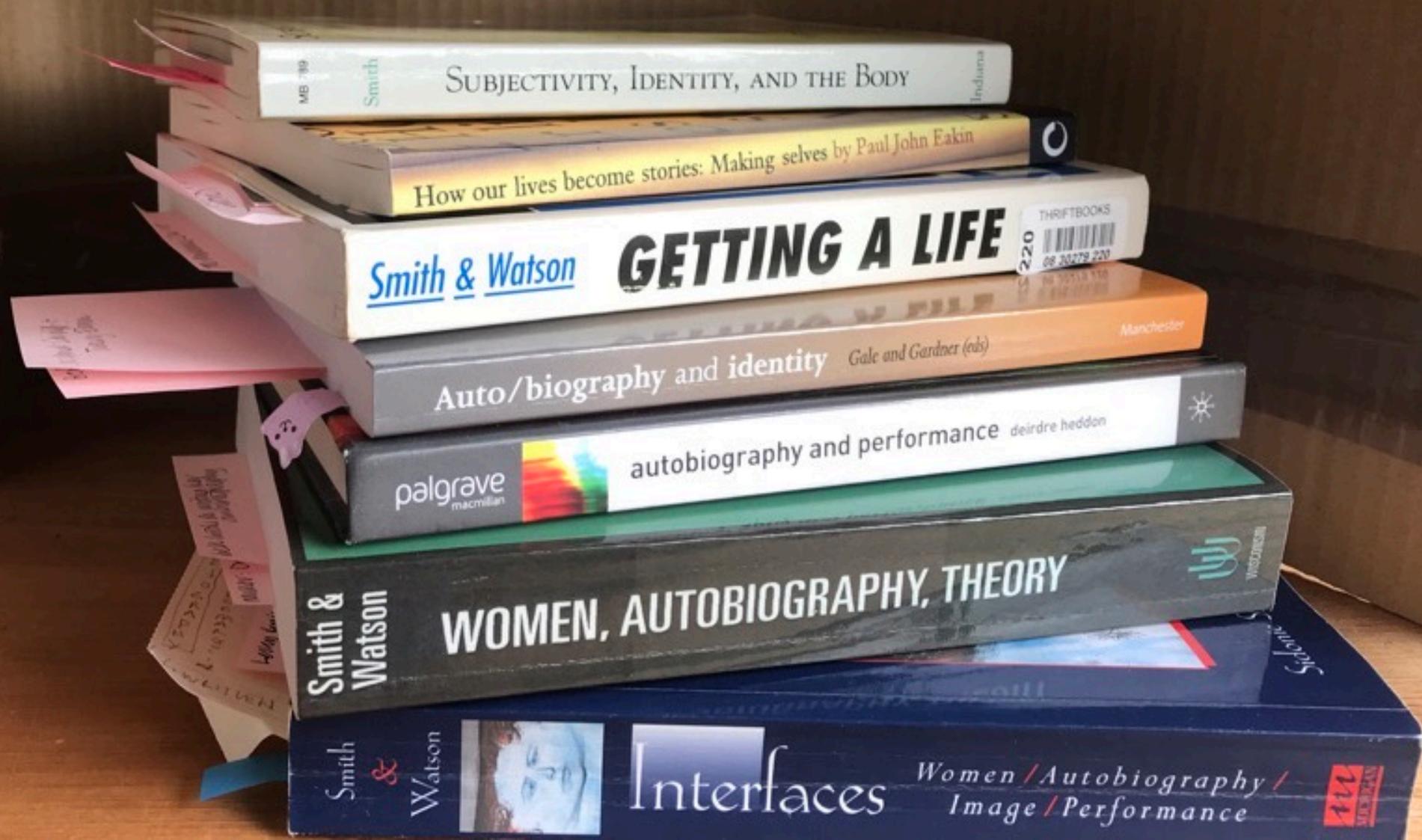
The 'materials' of the *autoscenographer* offer a broader spectrum of tools at the originating artists' disposal, which include paper-based illustration and other forms of 'writing' but also includes the live, performed dimension happening in real time.

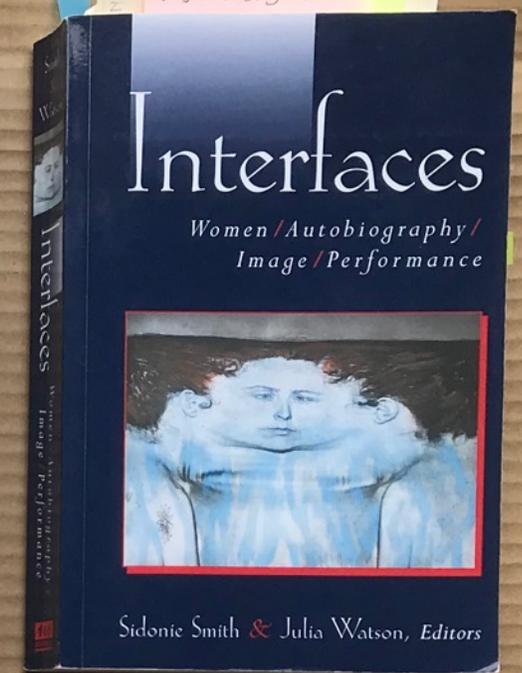
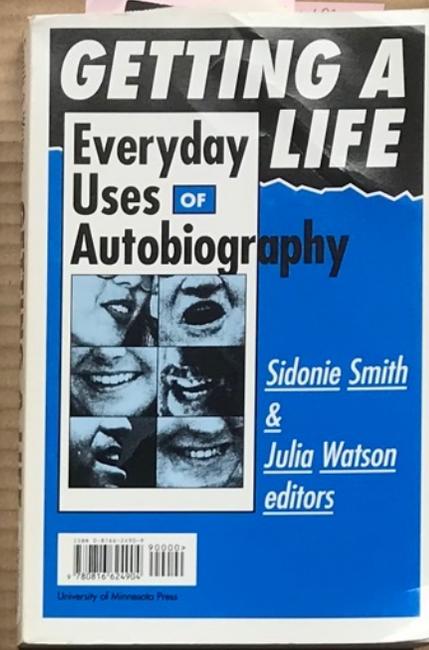
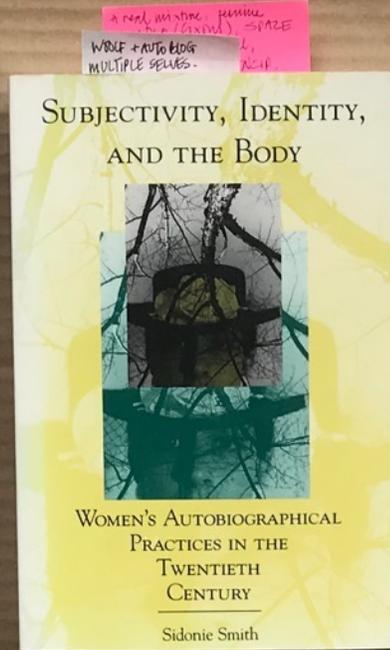
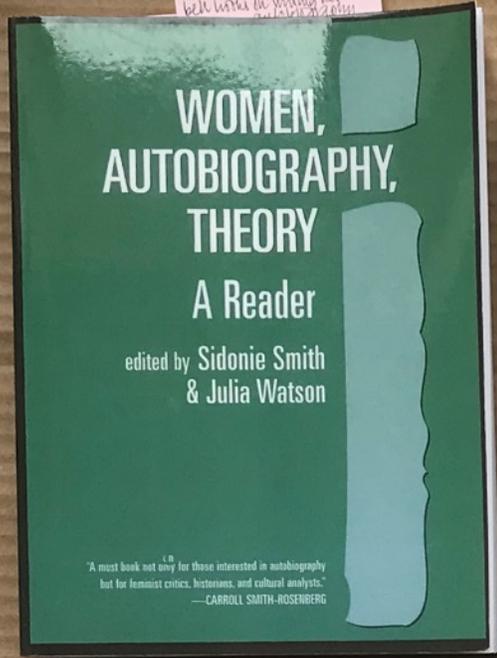
A top-down view of a desk with a pair of glasses, a roll of tape, and a cup of coffee on a brown paper background. The glasses are dark blue and are positioned on the left side of the frame. A roll of clear tape is partially unrolled and lies on the top left. A blue cup with white polka dots is filled with coffee and is located in the bottom right corner. The background is a textured, brown paper surface.

Bechdel's graphic novels deliver us to the territory of life-writing in its expanded form. What follows is a consideration of the practice of *autoscenography* against the historical context of

FEMINIST AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PRACTICE

As a feminist practice, *autoscenography* intersects with queer and feminist life-writing in literature and within expanded, embodied approaches to autobiography, especially those where the elements of space and time are prominent.





Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have spent over twenty years exploring women's autobiographical practices, editing collections focusing on life writing, theatre, performance art and art forms blending approaches. Their work offers an overview of the ways in which women's contemporary autobiographical practices have evolved through the 20th and early 21st centuries, recognizing in their reader *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (1998) that the criticism of women's autobiography has only developed as a genre since the late nineteen-seventies (1998: 4). Smith and Watson's work, alongside Maggie B. Gale & Viv Gardner (2004) on women's autobiographical performance and Julia Swindells (1995) on the applications of autobiography offers a key starting point to contextualizing the practice of *autoscenography* in terms of autobiography.

In their introduction to *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (2002), Smith and Watson propose a reading of what happens at the moment an artist activates her autobiography:

The life narrator selectively engages aspects of her lived experience through modes of personal "storytelling" – narratively, imagistically, in performance. That is, situated in a specific time and place, the autobiographical subject is in dialogue with her own processes and archives of memory. (2008: 9)

WOLF + AUTO BLOG
MULTIPLE SELVES -

al,
TRIP.

SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND THE BODY



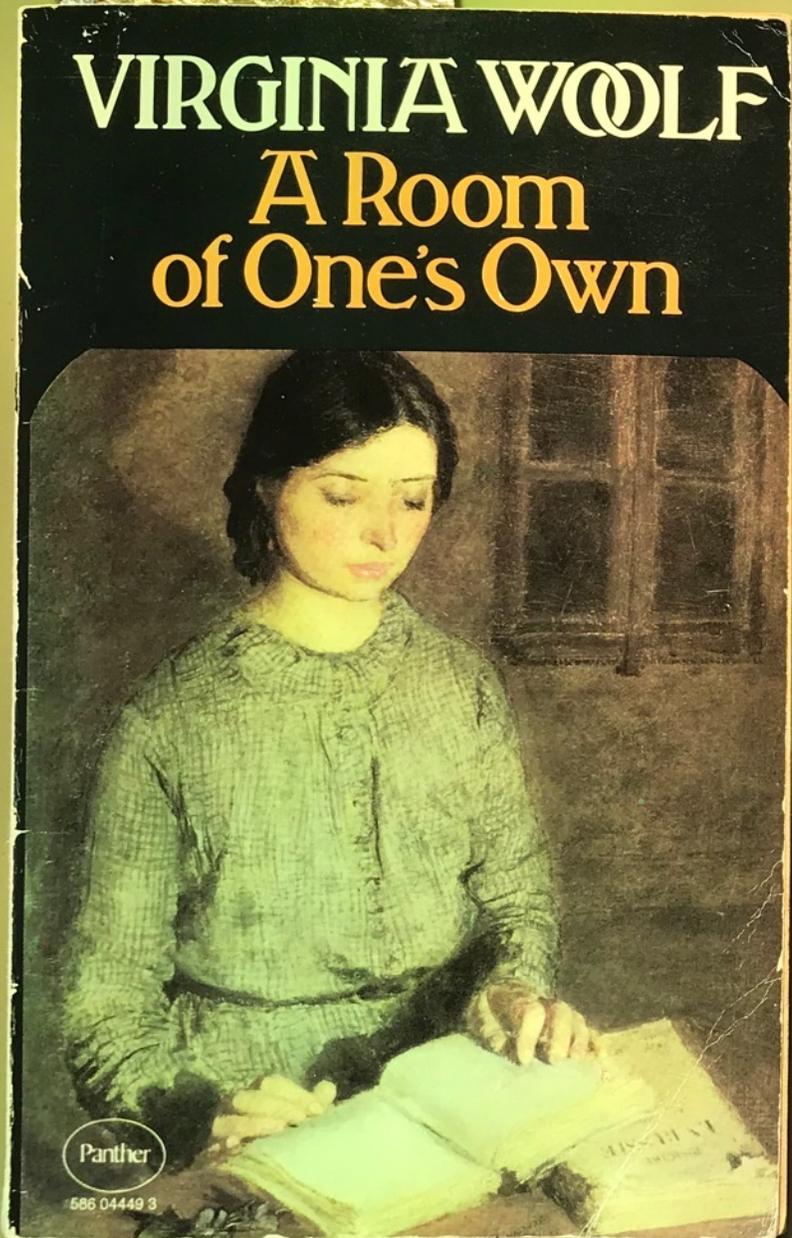
WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
PRACTICES IN THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY

The 'situated-ness' of the autobiographical storyteller/life narrator in 'time and place' (Smith & Watson 2008: 9) evokes the liveness of performance irrespective of the artistic medium and highlights a relationship between personal storytelling and renewed place orientation (Hann 2019) through *autoscenography* – that a new space is crafted in which the autoscenographer/life writer is in dialogue with memory as a process and an archive, from their situation in time and space.

The components of storytelling, image, space, and time can be properties of scenography, too. This suggests shared qualities between autobiography and scenography and proposes their compatibility as two halves of a single practice. One feature of this potential compatibility is offered in Smith's (1993) earlier writing, in which she draws out the spatial quality of 'selfhood' in autobiography:

Typically, the pursuit of selfhood develops in two directions. The self may move consecutively through stages of growth, expanding the horizons of self and boundaries of experience through accretion, but always carrying forward through new growth that globe of an irreducible, unified core. This direction we might call horizontal. Or the self may proceed vertically, delving downward into itself to find the irreducible core, stripping away mask after mask of false selves in search of that hard core at the center, that pure, unique or true self. (1993: 18)

While, in one sense, this offers a starkly linear model for a process which is ever-evolving and contrasts with character of identity as being something fluid or a kind of awareness in process' (Paul John Eakin, 1999: x) the proposal of the self as having a horizontal and a vertical axis spatializes the self in a way that is taken up by Heddon in *Autobiography and Performance* (2008).



In her chapter entitled Place (in which autotopography is explored) Heddon proposes a reading of autobiography as an act of mapping:

We might think of autobiography as a cartography of self. (2008: 88)

These two ideas in which life-writing is considered a spatial practice lend support to the approach to this *autoscenographic* Practice Review, which often resembles a mapping process in which the autoscenographer lays out and reviews her territories.

While not strictly autobiography, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1977) merges reflection on the act of writing and on the authors immediate environment - as mirrored by Bechdel - as she sits down to write an essay entitled *Women and Fiction*. Here Woolf 'maps' her environment as a physical space while also mapping it against the circumstances that permit the act of writing, as a woman:

I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people's hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction and no more. (1977: 26)

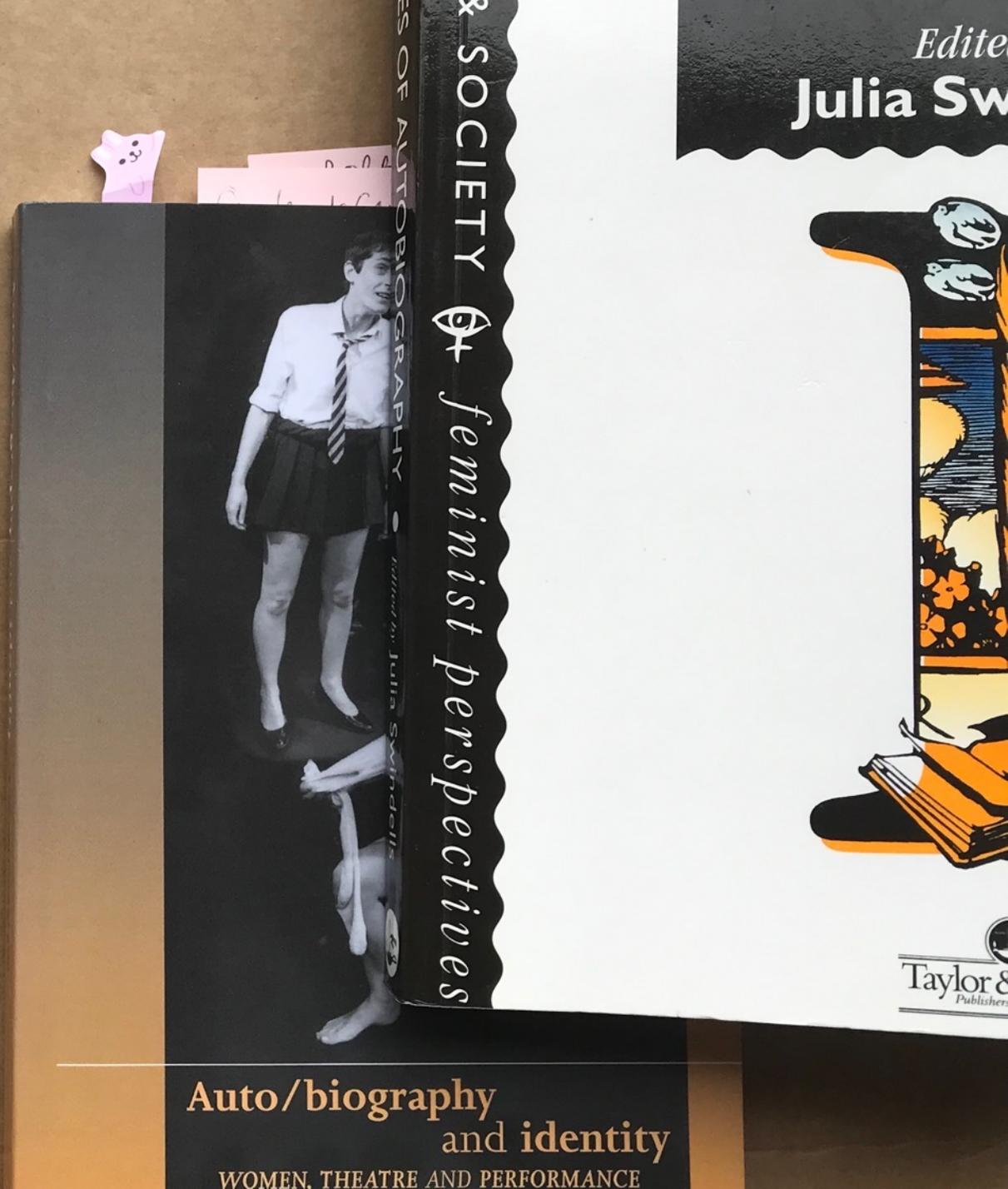
Ahmed highlights this section of *A Room of One's Own* in her essay *Orientations Matter* (2010) as evidencing the significant role of the writer's environment within the feminist argument Woolf makes. Ahmed will re-emerge again later in this review within discussions of orientation and feminism as an act of self-building, but Woolf's use of her own situated-ness in this example evokes Smith's model of the autobiographical moment alongside Heddon's notion of autobiography as an act of topographical surveillance.

Many early women's autobiographies are diaries rather than narrative accounts, which re-enforces Woolf's point that how and whether a woman can write is subject to her environment and context – diaries could be worked respectably into a woman's day as, ostensibly, records of day-to-day activities at points in history where the lived experience of women has been subject to social constraint:

The ways in which women approach the autobiographic form, as writers, performers or readers, whether in eighteenth or twenty-first century, are as influenced by their social, economic and historical positions, of which the theatre event and theatre history are a part, as they are influenced by any general tendencies in autobiographical writing. (Gale & Gardner 2004: 3)

In her introduction to an edited collection of essays, *The Uses of Autobiography* (1995) Julia Swindells affirms the historically male tradition of autobiography, by first acknowledging that the 'orthodox version of the Western European autobiographical tradition displays Roland Barthes as the twentieth century apotheosis, and various St Augustine or Jean Jacques Rousseau as the revered head of the tradition.' (1995: 1).

The historical centring of autobiography written by men accounts for the creative, innovative or even covert ways in which the 'life-writing' of historically marginalised groups have been made manifest.



autobiography and performance

deirdre heddon

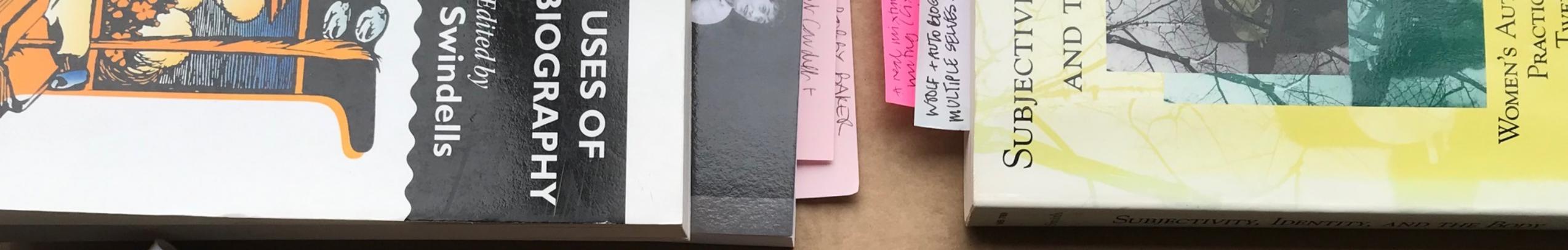


In Heddon's more recent survey, *Autobiography and Performance* (2008) the practices in which performance and identity merge are framed as a means by which historically marginalised groups have found levels of visibility and self-expression that have not been afforded them within wider society. Thus, Heddon points out the relationship between performance art and second wave feminist protest (2008: 21) and beyond, a third wave call for feminist performance art to evidence a spectrum of experiences reflective of the 'embodied, subjective and specific' female perspective (2008: 32):

The radical feminist act was not only the publicising of the personal but also the insistence that the personal was never only personal since it was always structural and relational. (2008: 161)

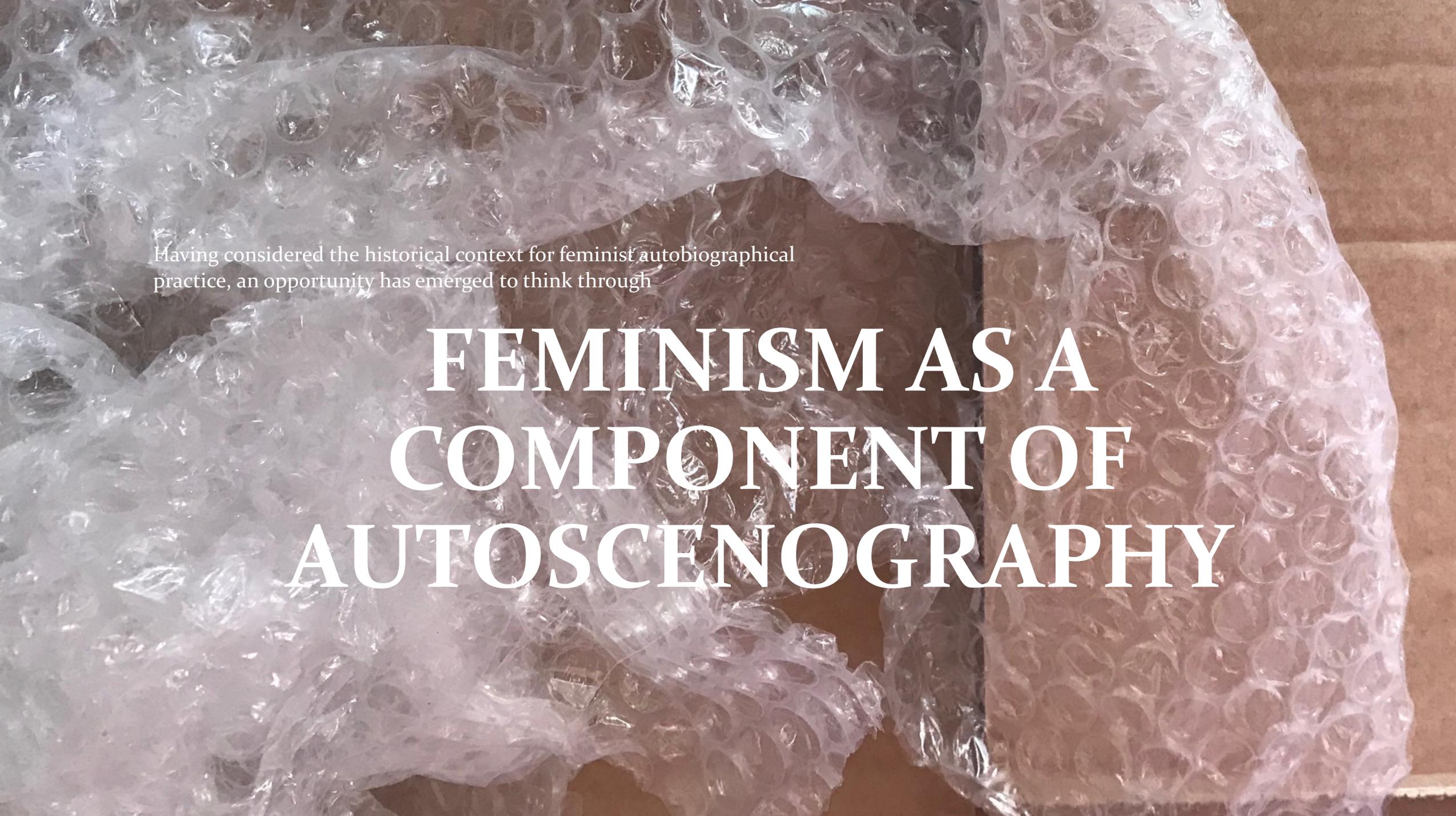
Thus, women's autobiography goes hand-in-hand with its social, structural, institutional and relational context and points to the power of individual female presence and perspective within a range of autobiographical practices. In her contribution to *Auto/biography and Identity* (Gale & Gardner 2004) theatre and performance scholar Jen Harvie observes the power of the presence of the artist in relation to art works by Tracey Emin - who has also written an autobiographical account of her childhood and early adulthood in Margate - *Strangeland* (2005) - and Janet Cardiff, both contemporary artists whose art references their lived experience:

By exploring the female artists' presence, the work affirms female identity and explores women's subjective experiences, of intimacy and memory in particular; challenges the boundaries that delimit women's spatial and institutional mobility; and affirms experience as sensual and material, not only visual but also aural, spatial, tactile and olfactory. (Harvie 2003 in Gale & Gardner 2004: 195)



This supports a reading of feminist autobiography as being relational and highlights the sensory material potential of autobiography which may here be explored by a sense of the artist's physical presence, but also through the multidimensional practice of *autoscenography*. The passage ends with a list of ingredients the *autoscenographer* might have at their disposal – sensual, material, visual, aural, spatial, tactile and olfactory - in crafting an affective atmosphere through *autoscenography*. These ingredients of lived experience point once again to *autoscenography* as an act of place orientation, recalling Hann's assertion that place is 'intrinsically multi-sensory'. (2019: 20)

Scenography offers autobiography an opportunity to draw out (and draw together) these multi-dimensional qualities, which are in play within the above examples of autobiographical fine art making but are also emerging within contemporary written autobiography via a visual turn in life-writing. In *Interfaces*, Smith and Watson point out that 'the regime of visibility, particularly photography, has come to play an ever-larger role in written autobiographical narratives, incorporated as another mode of telling within the text or described and thematized within the narrative.' (2002:18) As a form of life-writing, *autoscenography* offers itself as a potential route – beyond photography or film - by which written autobiography might manifest as visual, even while scenography (as representing a collection of practices) need not be exclusively or necessarily visual.

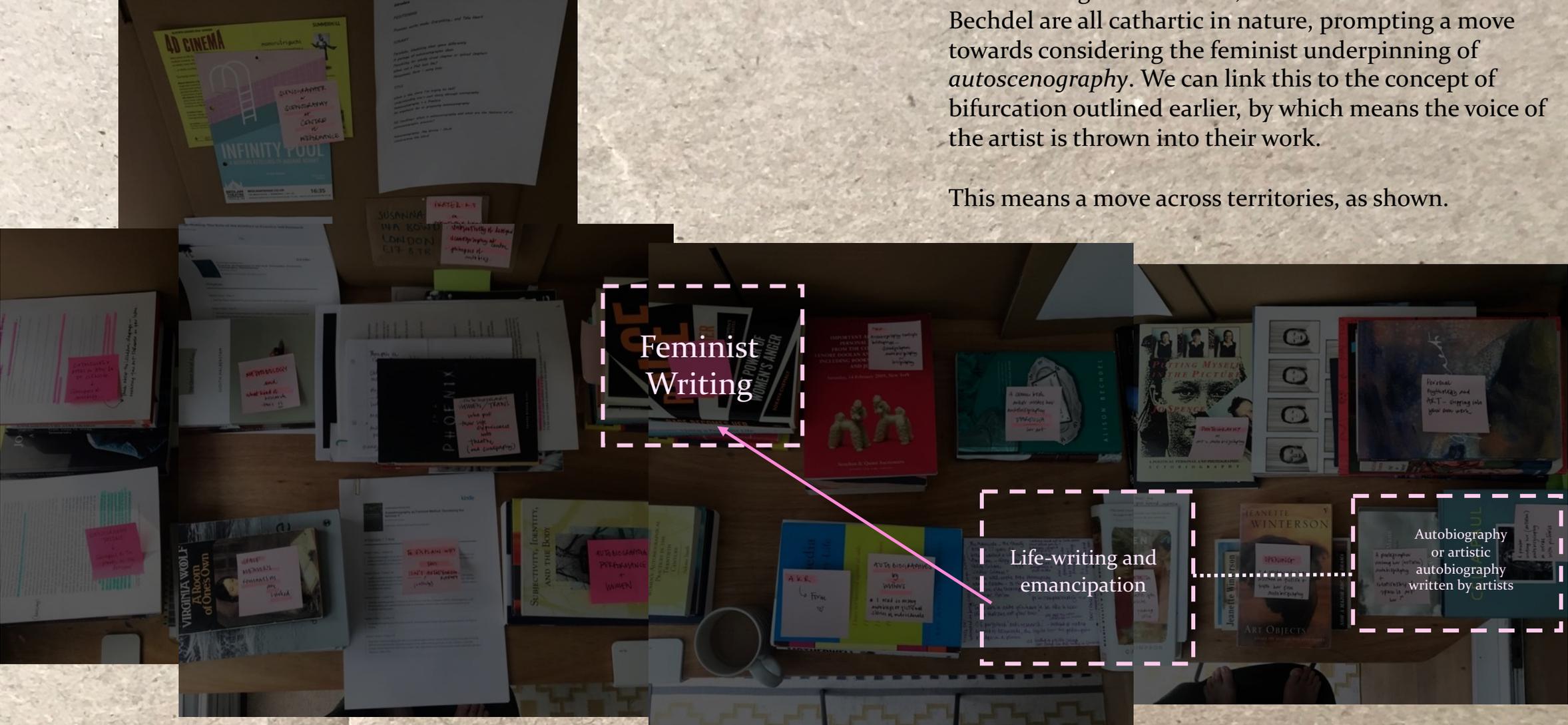


Having considered the historical context for feminist autobiographical practice, an opportunity has emerged to think through

FEMINISM AS A COMPONENT OF AUTOSCENOGRAPHY

The key examples of practice relating to *autoscenography* found through Rosie Elnile, Nina Conti and Alison Bechdel are all cathartic in nature, prompting a move towards considering the feminist underpinning of *autoscenography*. We can link this to the concept of bifurcation outlined earlier, by which means the voice of the artist is thrown into their work.

This means a move across territories, as shown.



Feminist Writing

Life-writing and emancipation

Autobiography or artistic autobiography written by artists



Autoscenography as a project has felt personal and particular to me – it represents the building of a feminist space of practice. After twenty years, and through the arc of this PhD, I left what I felt to be the patriarchal British Theatre industry and set about building a different space for myself and my work to be in.

Thus the practice of *autoscenography* aligns with a re-invention of ‘traditional’ space that is part of the feminist agenda. I don’t say that one needs to be feminist to practice *autoscenography*, but the idea of feminist building aligns itself with a practice where the scenographer is afforded an agency and visibility they may not have - as acknowledged in Elnile’s commentary for *Prayer* (2020) - within traditional contexts for their work.

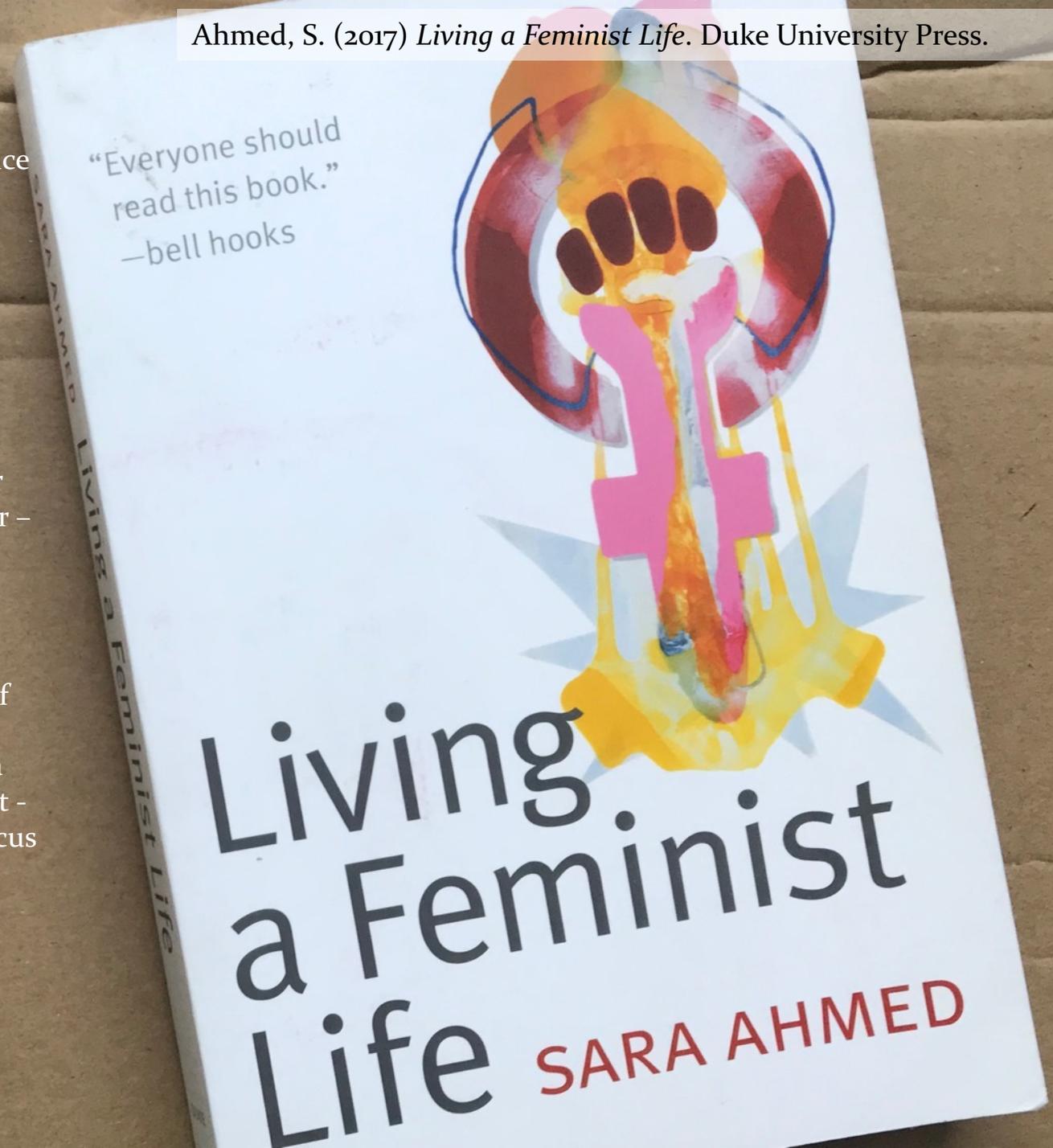
Throughout the course of this project, I have been using the writers cited in this section to help me think about the way in which I build the space of my autoscenographic practice, as a person who is - amongst other things - feminist. You might think of this as my being interested in where the scenographer is, in all senses (see unpacking of the term super-local in the commentary for *Autoscenography She Wrote*) and how they perform as the architect of their own space of practice as well as designing spaces for others to use.

Space metaphors can be found frequently in feminist writing (Ahmed 2017/2021, Woolf 1977) and as someone whose practice is in designing performance space, I have collected and used them to support the practice of *autoscenography*:

When did you put the pieces together? Perhaps when you put the pieces back together you are putting yourself back together. We assemble something. Feminism is DIY: a form of self-assembly. (Ahmed 2017: 27)

We might think of *autoscenography* as space in which the self of the scenography can be re/assembled. A space in which, if necessary, if their experiences suggest it, a scenographer may put themselves back together – as with Elnile's *Prayer* or following the models offered by Conti and Bechdel – or assemble their space of practice differently to the shape proposed by their training or their work history.

Autoscenography offers a concrete method through which the concept of feminism through DIY or self-assembly can be enacted. This is a spatialising of feminism: a scenography of place orientation enacted in a feminist spirit and with a view to manifesting an 'affective' – and feminist – 'atmosphere' (Hann 2019). Scenography as the root practice enables a focus on the staging of feminism, as opposed to the object-centred or image-based strategies of feminist fine art (e.g. Louise Bourgeois) or the body-centred practice of feminist body art (e.g. Carolee Schneemann). One could read the work of performance artist Bobby Baker as enacting feminism through space – I will discuss Baker's feminist work and its relationship to *autoscenography* later on in Part 2.



As in the citation on the previous page, Ahmed frequently uses the features of architectural space – walls, doors, houses – as motifs in her discussion of the institutional structures in our lives that need to evolve in order to welcome everyone equally. During a keynote lecture at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) (2021) Ahmed used an example of sparrows nesting in post-boxes as an example of queering heteropatriarchal space. In her example, a space with an established tradition (the post box) is re-invented and disrupted as new inhabitants (the sparrows) take a fresh approach to occupying that space.

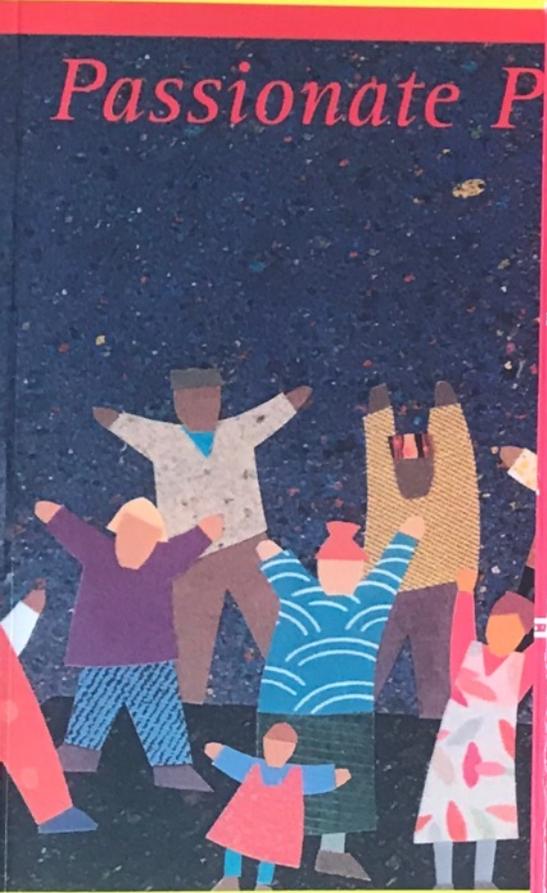
In the same keynote lecture Ahmed took the feminist maxim that the personal is political and expanded on it; ‘not only is the personal political, but the structural is also political’ (2021). Bringing the personal and the structural into parallel highlights the way in which the person and the place in which they find themselves can be in dialogue with each other. *Autoscenography* has developed from an initial reaction – and thereafter a position – that the structural (i.e. the theatre system) feels personal to the practitioner. This phenomena has been acknowledged by Elnile in her reflection on designing *The Wolves* at Stratford East as a response to the orthodoxies of her training and to the embedded history of the 18th century theatre space she found herself working in, as a black scenographer (Elnile & Hann 2021).

Ahmed’s reflections on inequality within institutional structures are part of a broader queer feminist conversation about occupying, taking or making space. To that end, it felt appropriate that part of the way Ahmed filled the space of her practice on the day of the IMMA lecture was by punctuating her spoken paper with vocalised sound effects, including the squeaky hinge of the metaphorical ‘diversity door’ opening.

Ahmed’s writing takes a critical role in underpinning Project 3: *Dear John*, in which the feminist dimension of my *autoscenography* is played out.

hooks, b. (2001) *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow & Co.
hooks, b. (2000) *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Pluto Press.

Feminism is for
EVERYBODY



bell hook

*all
about
love*

NEW VISIONS

As mentioned in Part 1 of the Practice Review, sharing an interest with Ahmed in the structures that hold us is feminist scholar bell hooks. hooks reflects on the structure of academia through her writing, from her perspective as a black feminist academic, and formerly as a college student.

Despite her frustrations with institutional rigidity of different kinds, one of the other things I go to hooks for is her writing on love, specifically love or a 'love ethic' as a feminist strategy for approaching aspects of professional or academic life that feel, perhaps, less than loving:

Remaining open to love was crucial to my academic survival. When the environment you live in and know most intimately does not place value on loving, a spiritual life provides a place of solace and renewal. (2001: 80)

Autoscenography offers the feminist artist working within institutional structures a framework for re-introducing or affirming 'love' or loving values within their working life, in the instance that support or encouragement is - momentarily or otherwise - lost from their professional environment. The rediscovery of empowerment described by Elnile through the making of *Prayer* (2020) is a manifestation of hooks' 'love ethic' or part of a system of 'loving values'. It also embodies hooks' proposal that 'living consciously' requires critical reflection on our environment. (2001: 56)

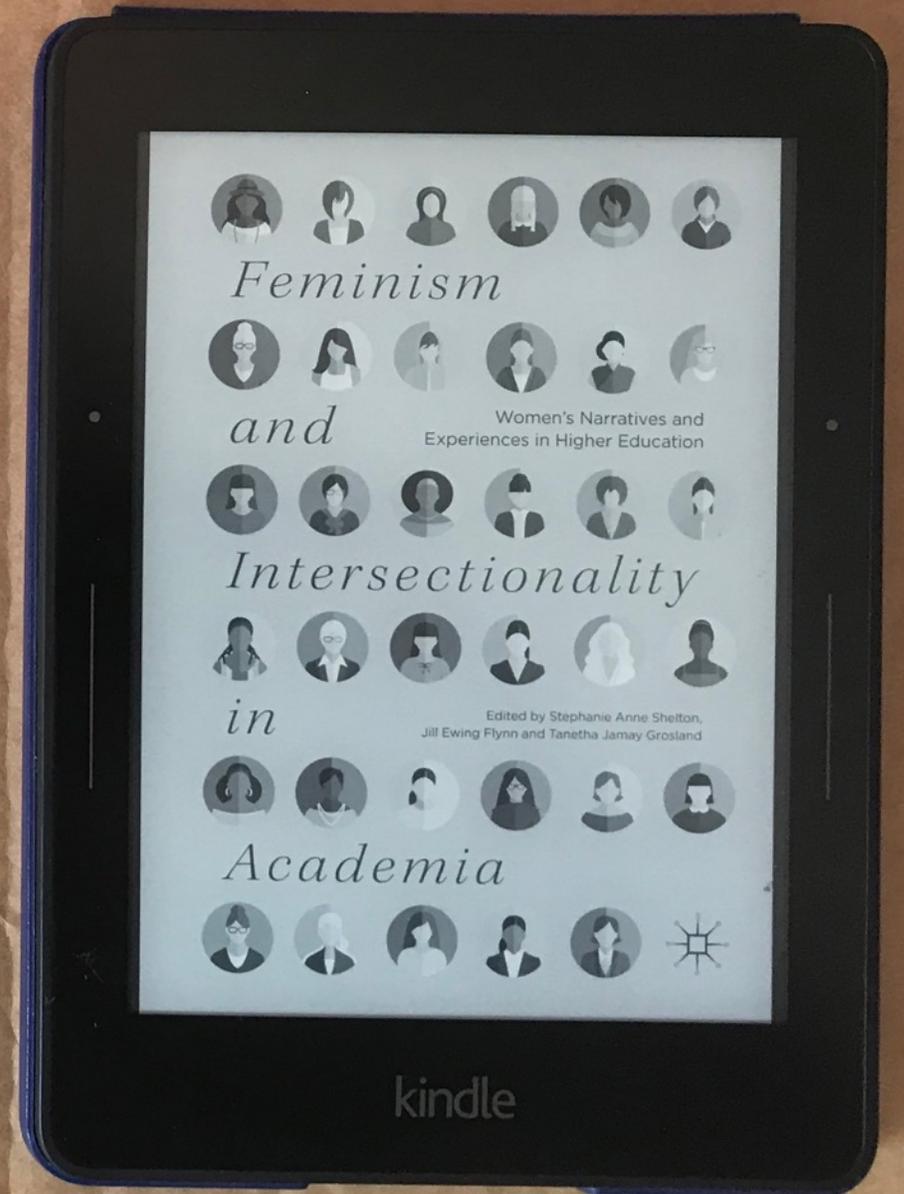
A contemporary expansion of hooks' feminist challenge to institutional structure can be found in a collection of essays called *Feminism and Intersectionality in Academia* (Shelton, Flynn & Grosland 2018). Meghan. E Barnes (2018) compares entering academia with moving from the black and white portion of the Wizard of Oz into technicolour. I identified with Barnes' story of reinvention and revelation, since our experiences (while different) both reflect a transition from one space of being to another.

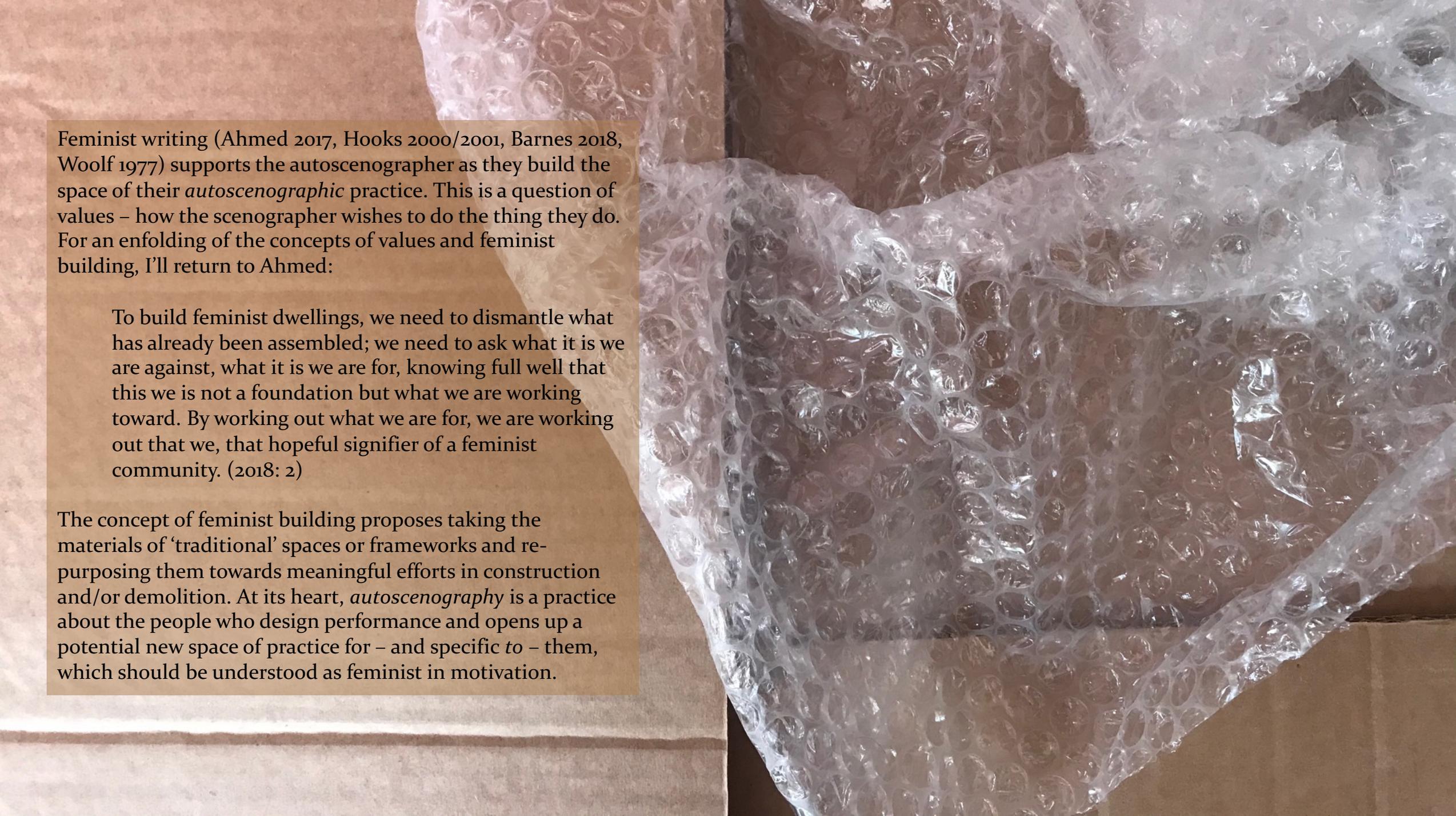
Barnes connects with Ahmed and hooks' questions about institutional structure when she asks:

In what ways do women mold their personal lives to fit and/or push against the age-old structures of academia?... How do women traverse the space between their academic and personal lives? (2018: Loc 3008)

The second question Barnes asks here can usefully rephrased as "How do women traverse the space between their professional and personal lives?" and can be answered by Conti's approach to *Her Master's Voice* which also embodies the approach to 'living consciously' proposed by bell hooks (2001: 56) – Barnes and Conti are both considering the ways in which their professional and personal lives intertwine.

Autoscenography has feminism to thank for asking questions about the ways in which structures hold and - contribute to the stories of - individuals. Feminists ask good questions on behalf of all people.



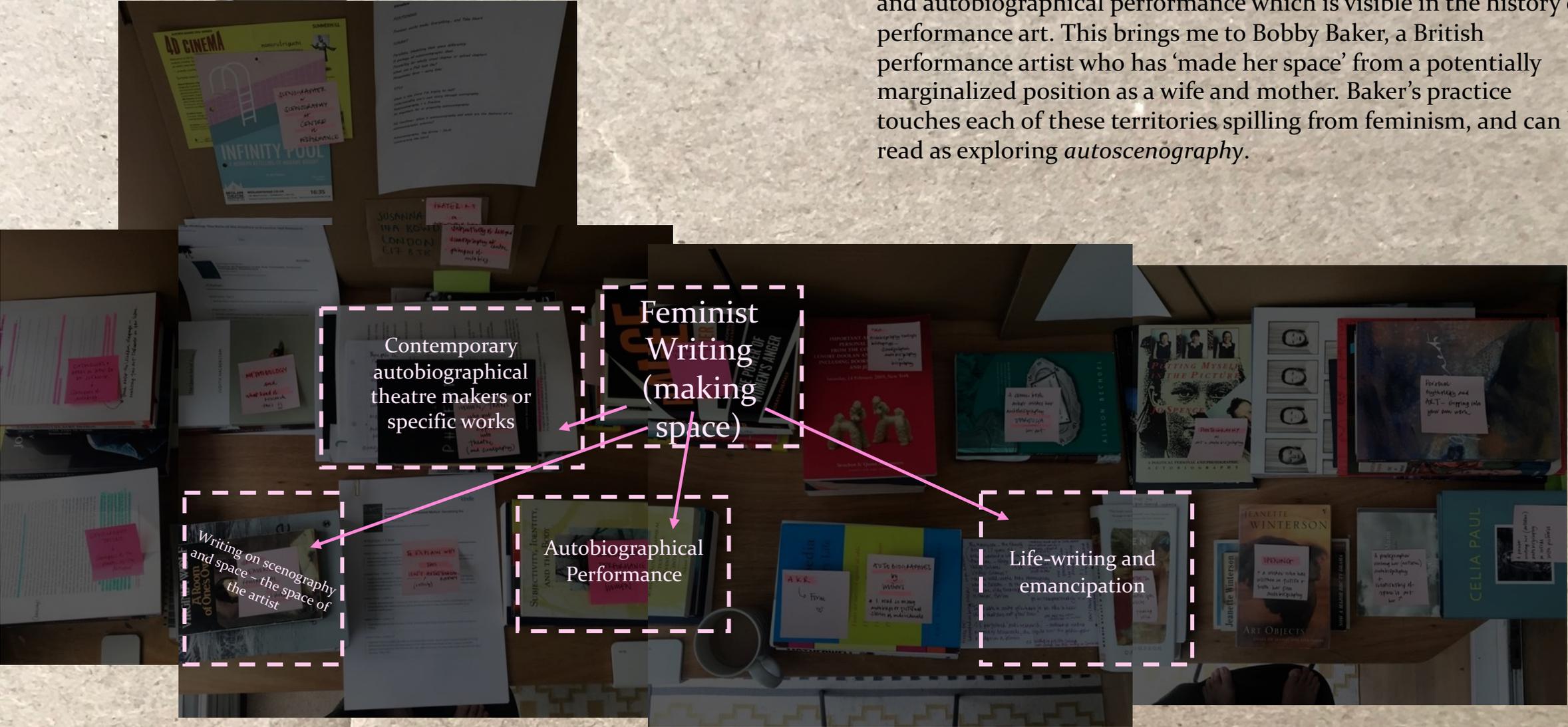


Feminist writing (Ahmed 2017, Hooks 2000/2001, Barnes 2018, Woolf 1977) supports the autoscenographer as they build the space of their *autoscenographic* practice. This is a question of values – how the scenographer wishes to do the thing they do. For an enfolding of the concepts of values and feminist building, I'll return to Ahmed:

To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this we is not a foundation but what we are working toward. By working out what we are for, we are working out that we, that hopeful signifier of a feminist community. (2018: 2)

The concept of feminist building proposes taking the materials of 'traditional' spaces or frameworks and re-purposing them towards meaningful efforts in construction and/or demolition. At its heart, *autoscenography* is a practice about the people who design performance and opens up a potential new space of practice for – and specific *to* – them, which should be understood as feminist in motivation.

There is a link between the feminist discourse about making space and autobiographical performance which is visible in the history of performance art. This brings me to Bobby Baker, a British performance artist who has 'made her space' from a potentially marginalized position as a wife and mother. Baker's practice touches each of these territories spilling from feminism, and can be read as exploring *autoscenography*.

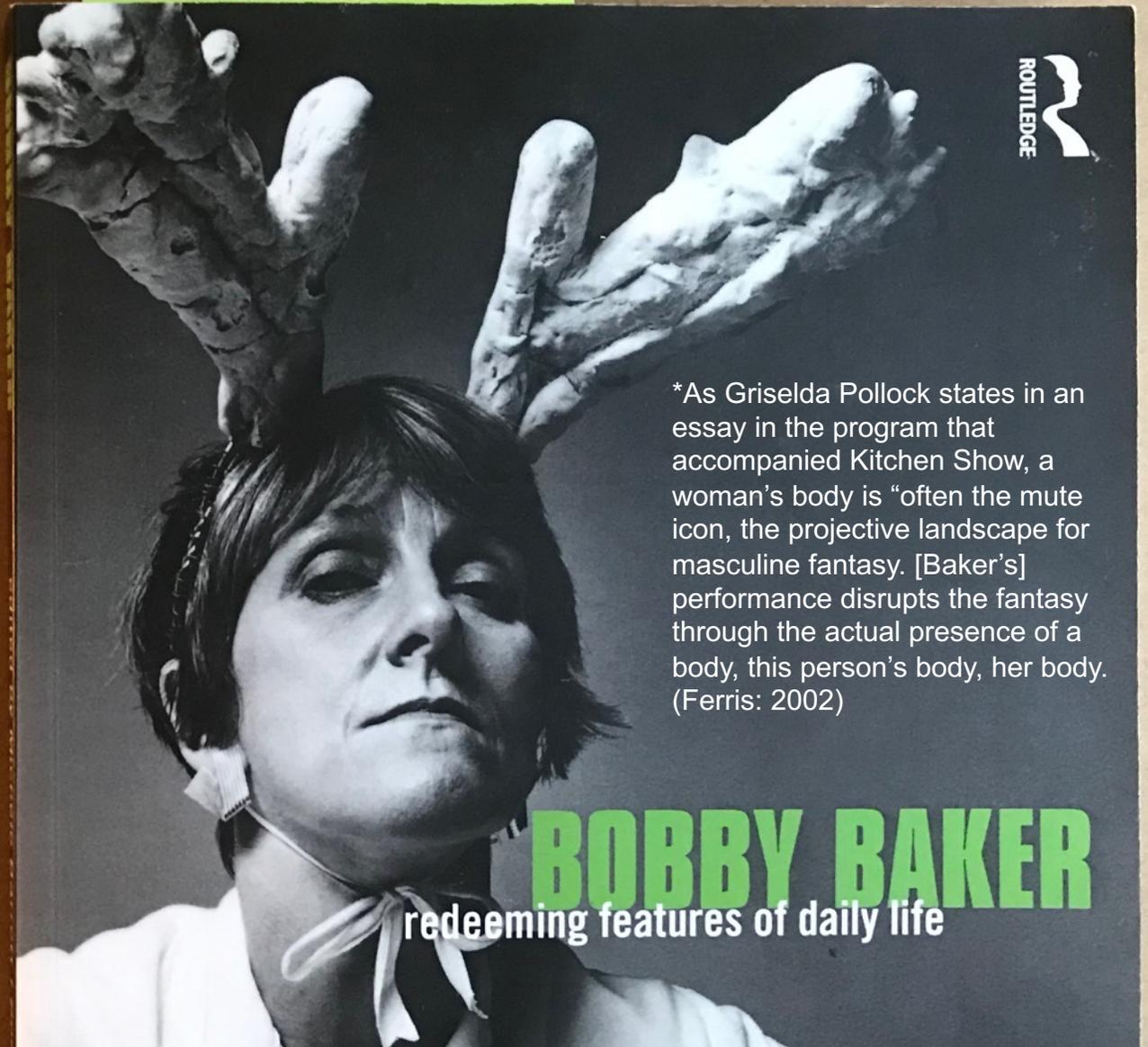


For nearly forty years, Baker has made performances that draw on her roles as wife, mother and grandmother while also reflecting on her identity as an artist. Originally trained in fine art at Central Saint Martins College in London - which we might recognise as art school 'establishment' - Baker quickly moved away from the traditions of her male-dominated training, making and occupying her space differently and deploying the practice of 'living consciously' (hooks 2001) by identifying:

I could not make myself work like others no matter how much other work inspired me. I could not be like other artists; I could only be myself. (Barratt 2007: 26)

Baker frequently references the domestic environment through her choice of performance spaces and materials. She once created a piece that happened in her own kitchen, entitled - with a nod towards the places in which life happens - *Kitchen Show*. Baker is an example of an artist creating live scenography for her performance artwork, at which she performs as 'herself' at the centre of the stage picture.*

(Barrett & Baker (eds): 2007)



*As Griselda Pollock states in an essay in the program that accompanied *Kitchen Show*, a woman's body is "often the mute icon, the projective landscape for masculine fantasy. [Baker's] performance disrupts the fantasy through the actual presence of a body, this person's body, her body. (Ferris: 2002)

While she is not a scenographer, Baker's performance art can be read as *autoscenography*. Baker is an artist who appears within her own autobiographical work, often reflecting on her practice and history as a practitioner within the fine art and performance art worlds. Baker's work has a strong visual dimension, with environments that are made by her or that reference her domestic environment. This sees the use of everyday materials and actions - often cooking-themed - from Baker's personal spaces to tell her stories. This has been read as a 'radical departure from conventional stage architecture' (Ferris 2002: 186) which makes it strange that Baker's scenography has been (as observed by Michele Barratt) somewhat overlooked within the writing on her work.

Few ... commentators on Baker's performance work, with the exception of Marina Warner, have paid much attention to the specifically visual aspects of this artist's work. (2007: 3)

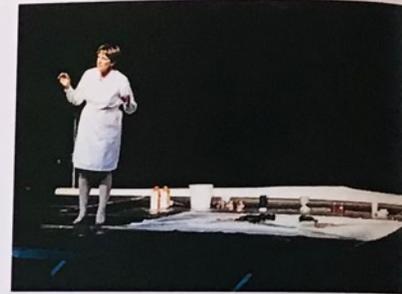
The visual dimension of Baker's work being overlooked may have something to do with its domestic referencing, and this reflecting the marginalising of women's experiences that feminist performance art has historically aimed to address. One might see Baker's deployment of the materials pertaining to feminine stereotypes alongside the textiles and embroidery that are part of the body of work by sculptor Louise Bourgeois.

BOBBY BAKER: REDEEMING FEATURES OF DAILY LIFE

check if I have everything now. There! Now, I'm ready to start. Whew! Now I'm quite hot and bothered!

I'm going to start at the very beginning with the birth of my first child nearly ten years ago. Don't worry. I'm not going to embarrass you with any nasty details. What happened was, you see and this does happen quite often I gather, is that we decided to move to a bigger place when I was pregnant and we ended up moving on the day the baby was born which wasn't a very good thing. I went into labour and we'd asked these friends over to help us pack up and it was a week before the baby was due. I'd prepared this lovely lunch ready for all of us. We had cold roast beef, cold potato salad with fresh chives from the garden - I grow my own - a green salad and then we had strawberries and cream but as it turned out I couldn't eat any of it because I was upstairs. But I think they enjoyed themselves very much. In fact, we then finished the packing up because things had slowed down a bit and we left the old house. I went into hospital in the middle of the night and had the baby which was a wonderful little girl, just what we wanted, and then we moved into the new house the next day. It was marvellous! (*Takes slices of beef from a tupperware tub and gently presses them into the corner of the sheet.*) I'm going to start with some sensitive marks, delicate impressions with some cold roast beef. Now, you needn't worry about waste! I don't like to waste money. I'll probably use this again for another drawing or feed it to the cats. I'll probably freeze it. It's a very subtle, lovely start here to mark the birth of our first child. I'm going to clear up as I go along! I'll put those away. I'm already using the cloth.

OK, so there we were in our new house with our wonderful daughter - in a sort of degree of shock but very very excited. Now I'd always thought that the one thing that would be really difficult about having a baby was whether I would be able to love it, but that came really quite naturally actually, but the thing that consumed me was this worry about feeding. It became quite an obsession! This is quite normal. I was quite lucky I was able to breastfeed. I won't go on about it. I have too much milk actually. I used to - what they call - express it and send it to the special care baby unit. It was a great feeling of satisfaction and pride. I used to freeze it



(Barrett & Baker (eds): 2007)

drop it in these possets and dribbles, which I think are so subtle and sensitive and remind me of those early days. I can feel it splashing on my legs. It's quite chilly.

There, I really like that start. I'm going to put these tops on as I put them back in the bag, otherwise the tops get lost and you have to get a whole new set. It's a bit of a rip-off, they don't give you spares.

So, here we are - with feeding established and our drawing coming on. The next major problem was - and nobody told me about this - was I used to get very hungry. Nobody planned who was going to feed me and my husband was busy rushing off to work



Previous page: *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988). Publicity photograph
These pages: *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1997). Greenbelt Festival, Lincolnshire. Cotton sheeting, plastic sheeting, assorted equipment and food stuffs.

and dealing with the rest of things. I used to get incredibly hungry. My mother lives quite a way away. She used to



henry.susannah • [Follow](#)



henry.susannah The aftermath of 'Drawing on a (Grand)mother's Experience' by Bobby Baker. Glorious. After 69 years, Bobby observes that staying hydrated might have made a difference to her mental health. Toasting her with a glass of fizzy water right now. My hero.

33w

Original Promotional Image – Drawing on a Mother's Experience
(Barrett & Baker (eds): 2007)



I saw *Drawing on a (Grand) Mother's Experience* (Baker 2015) at the Southbank Centre in early 2019. In this piece, Baker draws a representation of her experience of becoming a mother onto a large sheet on the ground, using materials – ingredients - one might find in the kitchen cupboard. It was action-painting combined with autobiographical commentary, with Baker as agent of – and ingredient within – the stage environment:

Bobby Baker... presents herself as an artwork. Instead of the idealized beauty of male fantasy, she is increasingly defaced, soiled and stained by the traces of her kitchen work. (Ferris 2007: 201)

The message of Baker's feminist action painting in Guinness, ketchup, flour, blackberries and other substances is that motherhood was a messy, abject reality, especially in the way it intersected with her mental health and life as an artist-practitioner. As per Ferris' statement above, the work of motherhood presents Baker at the centre of *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* as battle-scarred and changed through her accumulated experiences.

At the end of the piece, Baker wraps herself in the large bedsheet that has been the surface for her drawing, thereby becoming one with the visual representation of her story. This affirms Baker as a full part of her scenography – wrapped in her art and practice as a manifestation of Salami's 'sensuous kaleidoscope of knowledge' (2020), and of that same 'besideness' (Sedgwick 2002) we see in the film sequences of *Conti* and *Monkey* (Conti 2012).



Moving from the feminist dimension of *autoscenography*, and having begun the Practice Review with autobiography foregrounded within varied forms of practice, it is time to consider the relationship of *autoscenography* to its root practice of

SCENOGRAPHY

AUTOPSY AWARD 2016 WINNER

4D CINEMA

Welcome to 4D Cinema. Sporting a projector and a screen around mobile cinema to explore what is live and what is recorded and us when new technology blurs actual and virtual realities.

Intensely funny
Telegraph
★★★★★
"a right little cracker"
Guardian
★★★★★
The Stage

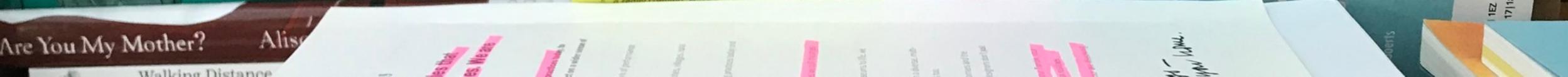
COOL

AME BOVARY

@ben_roberts #JudoPool

16:35

17/18 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28



The next section of the Practice Review will focus on scenographers and scenography and how the *autoscenography* sits alongside contemporary concerns for its root practice.

Theatre with the scenographer or scenography at its centre

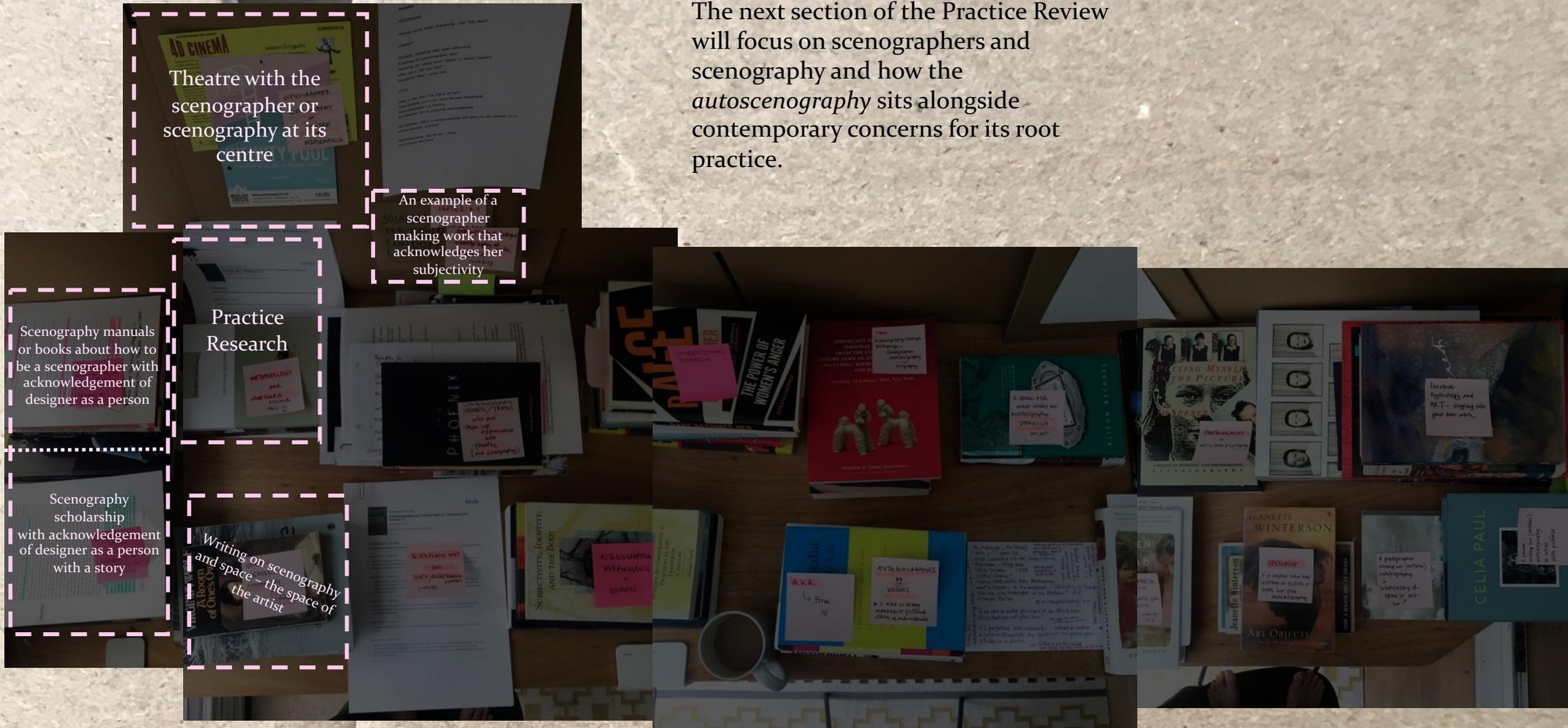
An example of a scenographer making work that acknowledges her subjectivity

Scenography manuals or books about how to be a scenographer with acknowledgement of designer as a person

Practice Research

Scenography scholarship with acknowledgement of designer as a person with a story

Writing on scenography and space - the space of the artist



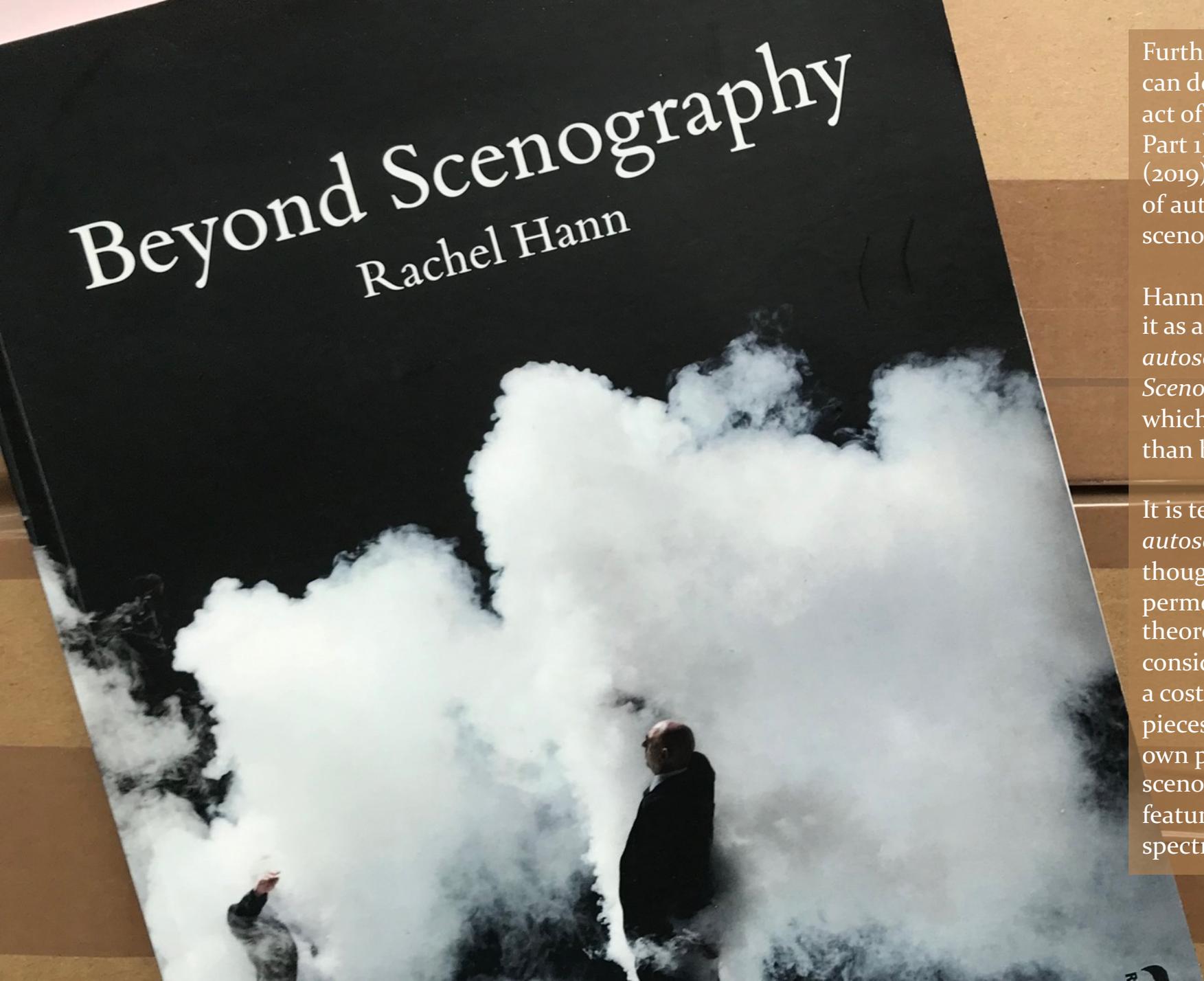
Beyond Scenography

Rachel Hann

Further to offering a model for the way in which we can define and understand *autoscenography* as an act of spatial re-orientation (see Practice Review Part 1) Hann's monograph *Beyond Scenography* (2019) contains examples of the 'extra-daily' event of autobiography within the building of scenographic theory – *autoscenography* in practice.

Hann theorises scenography rather than practicing it as an art form. The expressions of *autoscenography* contained within *Beyond Scenography* are situated in the words through which Hann's practice-theory is articulated, rather than being a visual phenomenon.

It is tempting to look for examples of *autoscenography* only within artistic practice as though this kind of output is more open to permeation by *autoscenography* than a more theoretical or philosophical output. But if you consider theory as designing a conceptual space or a costume for others to wear (or at least try on, or pieces of costume that they can adapt towards their own practice) then it feels right that a range of scenographic outputs might usefully demonstrate features of *autoscenography*, reflecting the full spectrum of scenographic practitioner.



Beyond Scenography is punctuated by first-person stories - written as though unfolding in the present - of lived experiences that have advanced or that underpin or illustrate the arguments made in the book. This was highlighted briefly earlier in this thesis in the film *Autoscenography, She Wrote*. In Chapter 6: *Scenographic Cultures*, Hann tells us about a moment of looking out of her window while writing *Beyond Scenography*, seeing her partner planting lavender in the garden and making a connection between the act of gardening and the intention and execution of scenography:

I am sat at home writing this chapter on a sunny day in mid-April in 2017. The window from my home office looks out onto a garden that I share with my partner. I can see from the window my partner planting flower cuttings that we had bought earlier that day at a local garden centre. (2019: 111)

Places and neutral back-
ground in rela-
tion to the action is a
stage and is the
highlighting how
theater personality or
owners/crafters). Burn
through the normativity
of the place. This process is
the of the restaurant or a
understanding the scenog-
environment, the fields of
restaurant design isolate hu-
through their capacity to be
that is crucial to how immen-
tively are constructed for the
an individual compliant to the
which they reside.

planning of the garden's future design (the flowers are not yet in bloom), as well as the crafting of the grass to appear ordered and well kept. As I look upon the garden, I can see the labour that she has put into its plan and upkeep. The concise quality of the garden's order is in direct relationship to her intervention, her work and decision-making. I realize that the act of gardening and the decision-making that this act engenders is scenographic in intention and execution. I note that this crafting of scenographic orientations is also curatorial in purpose. My partner has conceptualized and executed a distinct curatorial plan that will afford a shift in the orientations that our garden sustains. My partner's plan and actions are an act of scenographic curation.

Gardening and scenographic curation

I am sat at home writing this chapter on a sunny day in mid-April in 2017. The window from my home office looks out onto a garden that I share with my partner. I can see from the window my partner planting flower cuttings that we had bought earlier that day at a local garden centre. She clears an area in the garden that we had bought earlier that day at a local garden centre. She plants a cutting...

with notions of performance before it, curation has been adopted as a post-disciplinary concept that has become potentially borderless and applicable to all areas of contemporary culture. Art historian Mike Tokumitsu aptly summarizes this in an article for *New Republic* magazine entitled "The Politics of the Curation Craze": "Blogs are curated. So are holiday gift guides. So are cliques, play lists, and restaurant menus. "Curated," a word that barely existed forty years ago, has somehow come to qualify everything in our lives" (Tokumitsu 2015). Tokumitsu observes how practitioners have witnessed this expansion of the word, with many taking either negative or positive positions on the subject. Unlike performance, which has a history of curation occurring as a curatorial practice. In...

This sets the scene.

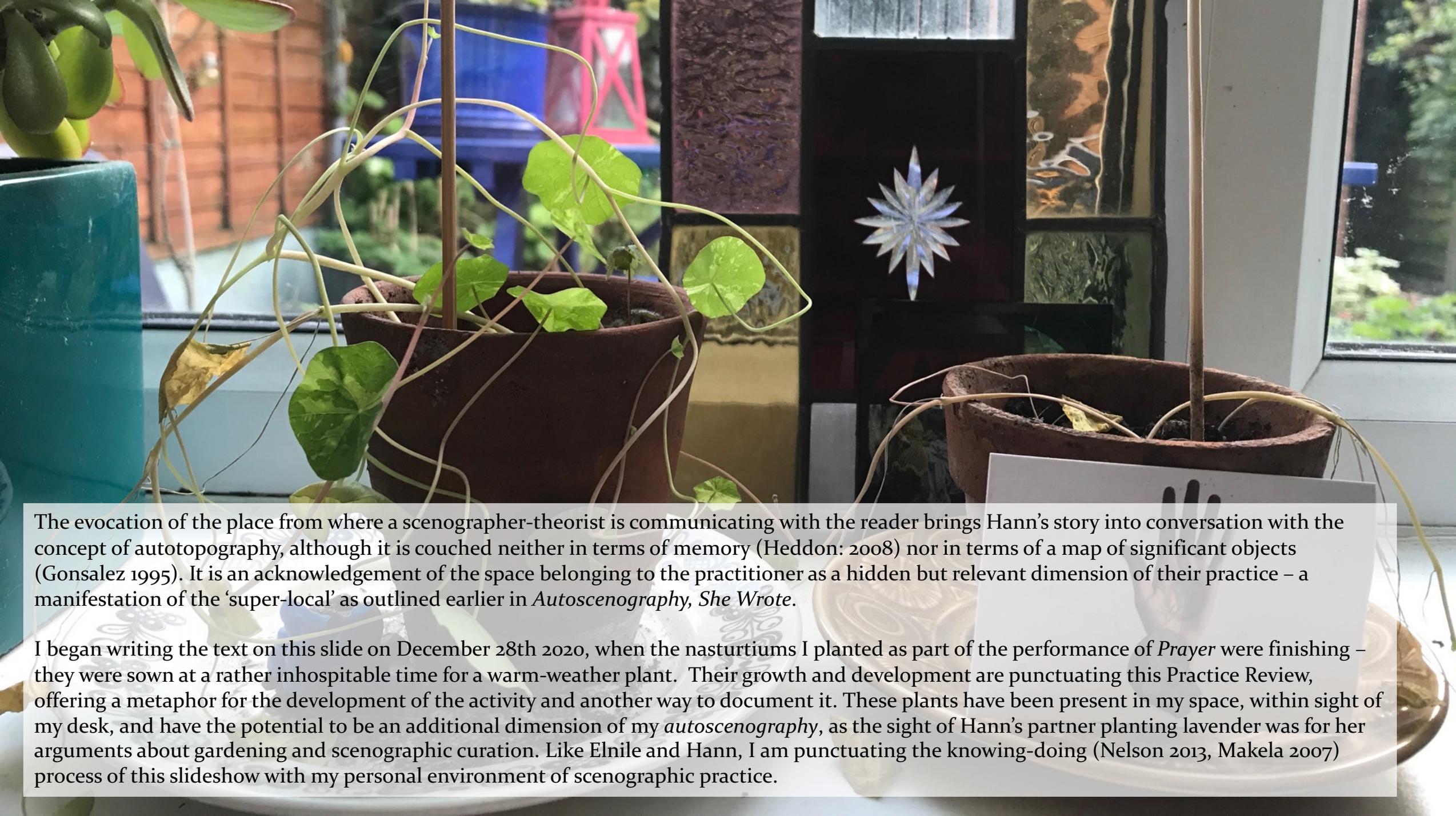
Following a section where Hann sets out the thinking behind the planting of lavender in their shared garden, she comes to the additional meaning the garden scene has for the chapter she is writing:

I realise that the act of gardening and the decision-making that this act engenders is scenographic in intention and execution. I note that this crafting of scenographic orientations is also curatorial in purpose. My partner has conceptualized and executed a distinct curatorial plan that will afford a shift in the orientations that our garden sustains. My partner's plan and actions are an act of scenographic curation. (2019:111)

As with Bechdel, we find ourselves with the scenographer at the super-local 'somewhere' (Heddon 2008) of her desk, in her home. She is not only a theorist or the author of a monograph, she is a person with a partner and a home and shared future plans, and those things are imbricated with the scenographic theory Hann is engaged in developing. Here, the domestic scene and the personal dimension do not merely frame the act of scenographic theory building, they are part of the conceptual and intellectual environment that brings the scenographic theory into being. This evidences both a 'knowing-doing' approach (Makela 2007, Nelson 2013) and a layering of influences that point to the 'sensuousness' (Salami 2020) of scenographic knowledge production.

This example evidences the potential for a scenographer's lived experience to frame their conceptual space, to offer a source of support or respite but also to provide inspiration or another dimension to the work. Hann's example demonstrates the confluence of practice and lived experience in scenography, in a way that echoes the cited work by Elnile but also the approaches of Conti and Bechdel.





The evocation of the place from where a scenographer-theorist is communicating with the reader brings Hann's story into conversation with the concept of autotopography, although it is couched neither in terms of memory (Heddon: 2008) nor in terms of a map of significant objects (Gonzalez 1995). It is an acknowledgement of the space belonging to the practitioner as a hidden but relevant dimension of their practice – a manifestation of the 'super-local' as outlined earlier in *Autoscenography, She Wrote*.

I began writing the text on this slide on December 28th 2020, when the nasturtiums I planted as part of the performance of *Prayer* were finishing – they were sown at a rather inhospitable time for a warm-weather plant. Their growth and development are punctuating this Practice Review, offering a metaphor for the development of the activity and another way to document it. These plants have been present in my space, within sight of my desk, and have the potential to be an additional dimension of my *autoscenography*, as the sight of Hann's partner planting lavender was for her arguments about gardening and scenographic curation. Like Elnile and Hann, I am punctuating the knowing-doing (Nelson 2013, Makela 2007) process of this slideshow with my personal environment of scenographic practice.

JOCELYN HERBERT

A THEATRE WORKBOOK

Glimpses of autobiography and allusions to the value of the story of the designer are found in texts which are commonplace in university or art school libraries and which are often the starting point of a deeper engagement with the practice of stage design. This suggests that who the designer is and what they do is of some – though glancing – interest within theatre design training. These three examples were highlighted through *Autoscenography, She Wrote* at the beginning of this thesis.

So
You
Want
To Be A

THEATRE DESIGNER?

Michael
Pavelka



WHAT IS
SCENOGRAPHY?

PAMELA HOWARD

Jocelyn Herbert includes the everyday as an incidental frame to her home practice as stage design. As a mid-twentieth century stage designer, Herbert might have found the independent practice of *autoscenography* surprising, but the fleeting acknowledgement of her roles as wife and mother - and the impact of these upon her practice - suggest a (feminist) awareness that Herbert's work as a scenographer happened within a framework that was particular to being a woman - a contextual fact worthy of note, if not a reason to explore *autoscenography* at that time.

Michael Pavelka acknowledges the potential 'usefulness' of designers' roots whether providing scope to build from or reason to escape. I would argue that *autoscenography* offers a place from which to explore such 'usefulness'.

Elsewhere in *So You Want to Be a Theatre Designer?* (2015) Pavelka suggests a survey of designers' 'stepping off points' (2015: 98) or origin stories as worthy of a future research project. *Autoscenography* claims that territory, licensing scenographers to perform forensic work on their own 'stepping off points' as part of a reflection on practice.

JOCELYN HERBERT

A THEATRE WORKBOOK

So You Want To Be A

THEATRE DESIGNER?

Michael
Pavelka

Pamela Howard would regard *autoscenography* as reflective of the contemporary expansion of scenography to encompass a spectrum of practices and contexts, while acknowledging something Howard begins to argue in *What is Scenography?* (2002) - that the scenographer can take a greater degree of autonomy and control of their practice than is found in the limited contexts and experiences Howard describes.

WHAT IS SCENOGRAPHY?

PAMELA HOWARD

'She was a most graceful and wonderful cook. To watch her prepare anything, simple or complicated, was always to observe an exercise in self-awareness, every action beautiful.'

JENNY WEST,
HERBERT'S DAUGHTER

~~1/2 lb Butter 5'~~
~~1/2 lb Sugar~~
~~3 lb~~
~~4 Breadcrumbs~~
~~8 oz Flour~~
~~8 oz Sultanas~~
~~" Raisins~~
~~" Currants~~
~~6 oz Mixed Peel~~
~~4 Chopped Almonds~~
~~4 Brown Sugar~~
~~2 1/2 Mixed Spice (2 Teaspoon~~
~~1 Cinnamon (heaped)~~
3 eggs
w/1 stamp
Brady.



Staged at the Roundhouse in London and also filmed, this production of *Hamlet* was directed by Tony Richardson with a cast including Nicol Williamson in the title role, Anthony Hopkins as Claudius, Judy Parfitt as Gertrude and Marianne Faithfull as Ophelia.

'Jocelyn made the Roundhouse gleam with colours and richness, which wasn't easy. The costumes were jewel-like in colour. There were wonderful decadent details: flagons of wine everywhere, music, torches, bowls of fruits piled high. Somehow she really did create Elsinore in London! At the Roundhouse!'

MARIANNE FAITHFULL

40 Farthing 2011: 40-41

In *The Sketchbooks of Jocelyn Herbert*, (Courtney 1993) the editor took care to present some of the everyday evidence of a life alongside the creative life – here alongside a sketch for a costume is a recipe for Christmas pudding. It is paired with a caption from Herbert's daughter which suggests a parallel between the way Herbert approached the tasks of cookery and stage design. As a seasonal *autoscenographic* offering, and a further example of the kaleidoscopic 'sensuous knowledge' of the practitioner (Salami 2020) I placed this example within my Practice Review on December 29th 2020.

Interpreting Herbert's sketchbook pages as a playful form of life-writing invites resonances with the works below, from an artist, a writer and an illustrator respectively.

(opposite)

Roma aeterna città divina. Oh, in my redemption's pain,
I can feel Thy might again -- Roma aeterna città divina.



Life? Or Theatre? (completed 1943) by German artist Charlotte Salomon is a visual autobiography which is communicated through a series of paintings, arranged as a storyboard for a speculative film.

Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life

I have not survived against all odds.

I have not lived to tell.

I have not witnessed the extraordinary.

This is my story.



AMY KROUSE ROSENTHAL

Two autobiographical works from Amy Krause Rosenthal (2005, 2016) are presented as an Encyclopedia and a textbook. There is sense of the impossibility of containing a life via a system of categorisation or taxonomy, but this is manifested nonetheless.



sktbook

Amy

Krouse

rosenthal

Ordinary Life

a memoir

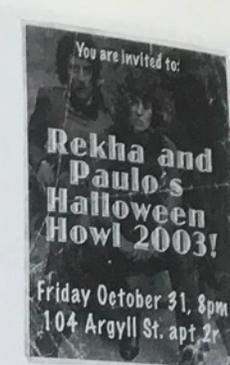
Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris (2009) by Leanne Shapton is a fictional story of two lovers told through the photographing and presentation of the author's own objects and partner. It is presented as an auction catalogue.



105



107



1106

LOT 1105

A handwritten list

A list on yellow foolscap paper in Doolan's handwriting. "Plus: Fun, good sex, different world, interesting people, Depressive—drinking? celebrity fixation, traveling, doesn't care about food, withholds sex in half five times. 14 x 8 in.

\$10-15

LOT 1106

An invitation

An invitation to a Halloween party, given by Morris's close friends Rekha Paulo Vitale. 5 1/2 x 4 in.

\$5-10

LOT 1107

A photograph

A snapshot of Morris and Doolan with Braddock and Mrs. Robinson. Photograph has been folded. 6 x 4 in.

\$20-30

LOT 1108

A photograph

A photograph taken at a farewell party for Doolan's coworker Adam Bainbridge. Photograph has been folded. 6 x 4 in.

\$20-30



Beyond textbooks, allusions to the lived experience of researchers in scenography can be found in the papers, presentations and books they write. Those who research, write about and practice across the scenographic spectrum are concerned with how scenography is received and the process by which it is brought into being, and frequently appear themselves within their writing to bear witness to these experiences.

This is not a focused subjectivity of the designer in the sense that Elnile expresses it, but the presence of the people behind the practice points to their personal experiences being more than just mere background to exploring their craft. Following are five examples of the ways in which the story of the scenographer can be glimpsed within the research in scenography.

Chris Baugh

Chris Baugh used his grandmother's button box as a prop when delivering a paper (Baugh 2003) at the Centre for Performance Research in Aberystwyth in 2003. The paper was part of a symposium called *Pastmasters - Craig and Appia: Sculptors of the Modern Age*, which had a heavily historical flavour. The appearance - and the story of - the button box provided an enjoyable disruption to the norms of academic presentation as well serving as an effective visual metaphor in Baugh's presentation. The memorable utilisation of the button box metaphor within the sphere of academic scholarship is evidence of a key benefit that *autoscenography* proposes - that one's practice may be materially enhanced and informed by the consideration and inclusion of autobiographical material.

Natalie Raven

Presenting at the Theatre and Performance Research (TaPRA) Conference 2019, Natalie Raven presented a project which combined fabric and movement (Raven 2019). As part of the discussion of the project, Raven explained that there is a maternal history of working with textiles in her family, which gave life and context to the feminist dimension of her project. *Autoscenography* offers a way to frame the autobiographical dimension present within the work of scenographic practitioners like Raven.

Tanja Beer

Presenting online as a guest of the University of Aberystwyth, ecoscenographer Tanja Beer shared images from her forthcoming book on ecoscenography (Beer 2021). The book was being illustrated by her sister, Gisela. Beer discussed being open to the 'local and serendipitous opportunities that are around you' as part of an ecologically sustainable approach to performance design. I asked whether working with her sister was a way to activate super-local or familial relationships in the name of ecoscenography. Beer responded that she hadn't thought of it like that but that writing a book was a lonely project. She added that she had just wanted to work with her sister. In this sense the familial collaboration is an unintended *autoscenographic* expression of Beer's practice.

Joslin McKinney

At the TaPRA 2019 conference, Joslin McKinney presented a series of images and reflections framed around her walk to work at the the University Campus in Leeds. An investigation into urban scenography, McKinney's presentation described becoming attuned to looking at the city through her eyes as a scenographer (2019). McKinney's subjectivity is in-built to the act of walking and looking. This is not the first time McKinney has brought her own subjectivity into her research – it is present in her article *Scenographic materialism, affordance and extended cognition in Kris Verdonck's ACTOR #1* (2015) which examines audience immersion –using McKinney's own kinaesthetic experience of the work as a case study.

The practice of *autoscenography* frames the subjective experience present within McKinney's accounts of walking the city or experiencing the work of others as a potential locus, allowing the scenographer to reflect on their subjectivity and then feed it back reflexively into their practical work.

David Shearing

David Shearing cites his own experience of walking a city he is making a piece of scenography about in his article *Scenographic Landscapes* (Shearing 2014). A clear relationship is made between the need to walk and the making of *If anyone wonders why rocks breakdown* – it is a way to think through the project, as well as an embodied extension of it. It is a glimpse of the scenographer stepping into their work and making themselves and their particular interests visible in the process, though not explicitly through the performance outcome which is driven by its own parameters.

The lived experiences of scenographers inflected within practice

Autoscenography offers an opportunity to shift the subjective habits and tastes present (but not explicitly explored) within every scenographer's process to the foreground of their project making.

A distinction can be made between *autoscenography* as an intentioned practice and the life experiences that scenographers can bring to the projects they are engaged to work on. Life experience might be brought to bear on projects without an autobiographical focus, such as Elnile's design for *The Wolves* at Stratford East, which Elnile explicitly stated (Elnile & Hann 2021) was a strong vivid green in reaction to the traditional feel of the theatre space and followed reflection on her own design training, which had discouraged used of bold colour on stage.

The lived, embodied experiences of scenographers might also influence their engagement with specific projects – a female/black/queer/disabled designer will have insights to offer a project that is thematically oriented towards those experiences. This is an opportunity for companies to collaborate with scenographers based in part on their autobiographical insight, which might yield scenography richly inflected with those lived experiences, but the focus here is not an intentioned creation of *autoscenography* – rather, it might yield a scenography that displays *autoscenographics*.

Having identified individual scenographers whose practice glances the intersection of autobiography and scenographic practice, I'm going to move to looking more generally at scholarship within contemporary/expanded scenography that proposes or otherwise creates space for *autoscenography* as a practice.



Within the scholarship of scenography or in the wider sphere of performance, there is no particular call to hear the autobiographies of scenographers, beyond a desire to document the professional histories of stage designers of note. Until recently there has been little acknowledgement, even within practice research in scenography, of the subjectivity of the stage designer. This gap in scholarship with respect to woman practitioners is identified by Gale & Gardner in *Auto/biography and identity* (2004):

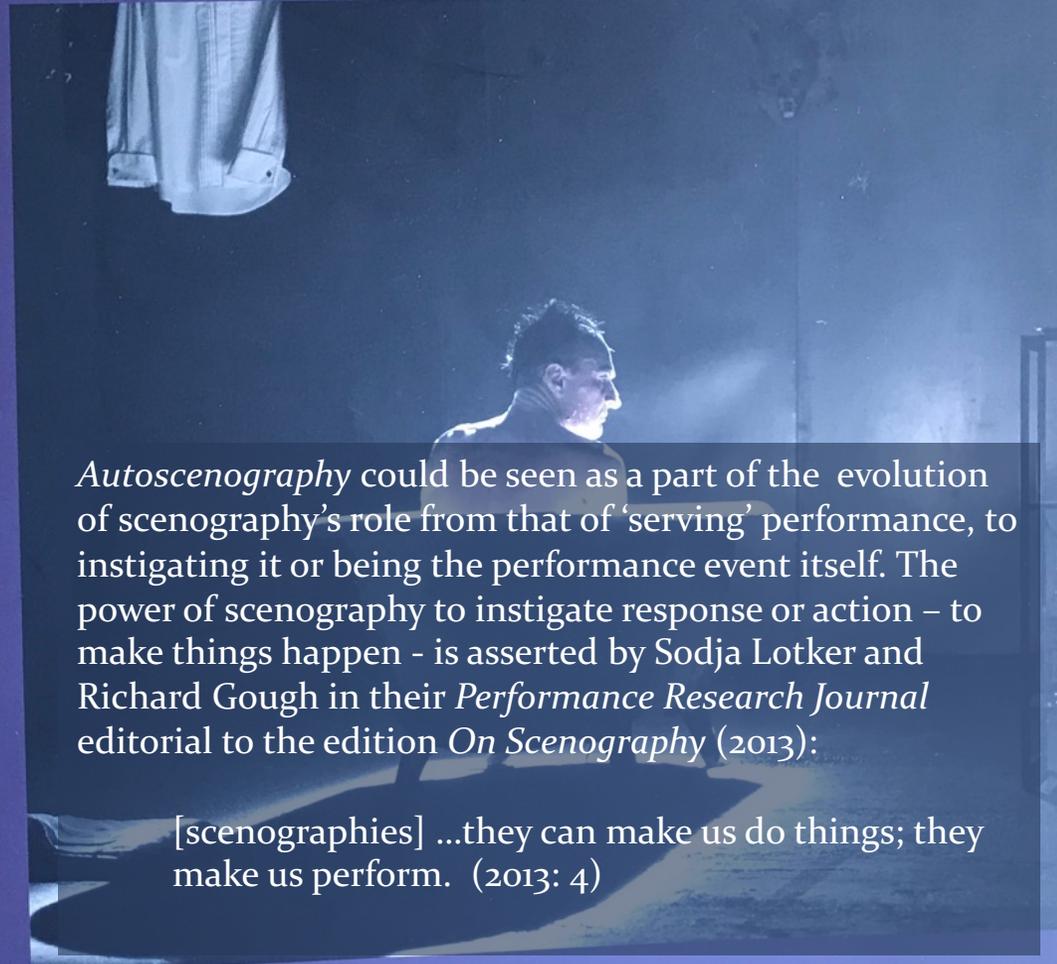
Very few publications have looked at autobiographical writing in relation to women actors' or other female theatre worker's lives, the analysis of self in a professional or a national context, and the relationship between autobiography as evidence and historiographic practice. (2004: 2)

We might view the quietness around the story or subjectivity of the stage designer as reflecting the fact that stage designers have historically been part of the mechanism by which other stories are told, rather than telling stories from their own lived experience.

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On Scenography

Performance Research



Autoscenography could be seen as a part of the evolution of scenography's role from that of 'serving' performance, to instigating it or being the performance event itself. The power of scenography to instigate response or action – to make things happen – is asserted by Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough in their *Performance Research Journal* editorial to the edition *On Scenography* (2013):

[scenographies] ...they can make us do things; they make us perform. (2013: 4)

The designer was formerly proposed as an invisible agent of decoration, and therefore the scenographer is often considered more in terms of their set of skills than as an artist with a subjective view. This is quite different to the way we have historically thought of the fine artist, whose subjectivity and lived experience often infuses their work, and is visible and a routine part of the fabric of arts scholarship and discussion. This is even true where the artists resist their art being defined as autobiographical, as with Louise Bourgeois.

It is less usual to be confronted with who the stage designer is and their values, history and perspective, much less these things informing scenographic output. However, there have been periodic arguments, spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, for increased visibility, agency and status in the role of the stage designer, which begin to acknowledge the scenographer as an agent of performance, beyond a set of skills in service to it, such as this from Thea Brejzek:

The scenographer emerges not as the spatial organizer of scripted narratives but as the author of constructed situations and as an agent of interaction and communication. (2010: 11 - quoted in Hann: 2019)

... and London: Duke Uni-
... Location of Culture. London
... ge.
... J. (eds) (2012) *Performing
Politics, Place, Practice*. Basing-
... llan.
... Participation. London: MB:
... v. Greisenegger and L. Wallen (eds), *Space and
Desire: Scenographic Strategies in Theatre, Art and
Media*, 4-9. Zurich: Zurich University of the
Arts.
Brejzek, T. (2015) "The scenographic (re-)turn: figures
of surface, space and spectator in theatre and archi-
tecture theory 1680-1980". *Theatre and Performance
Design* 1.1-2: 17-30.

**We build the content. We tell the stories that
sell the tickets. We make the memories. We are
the storytellers now...**

Staging Places celebrates the diversity of performance design and making practices today, to inspire young people to invent it for the future and to acknowledge its impact on a wider sense of place and community.

The Society of British Theatre Designers (SBTD) supports and celebrates the work of performance designers based in the UK.

Staging Places will celebrate what we make and who we make it with in towns, cities, villages, rural and remote communities here in the UK and around the world.

Staging Places aims to celebrate the diversity of performance design and making practices today and to inspire young people to invent it for the future...

U.K. Performance Designers are 21st century polymaths with a global reach.

**We invent imaginary worlds and extraordinary environments in the staging places we call theatres
and in the ones we don't.**

We animate cities, we fill theatres, arts centres and opera houses, we bring museums to life, we transform heritage sites and urban spaces

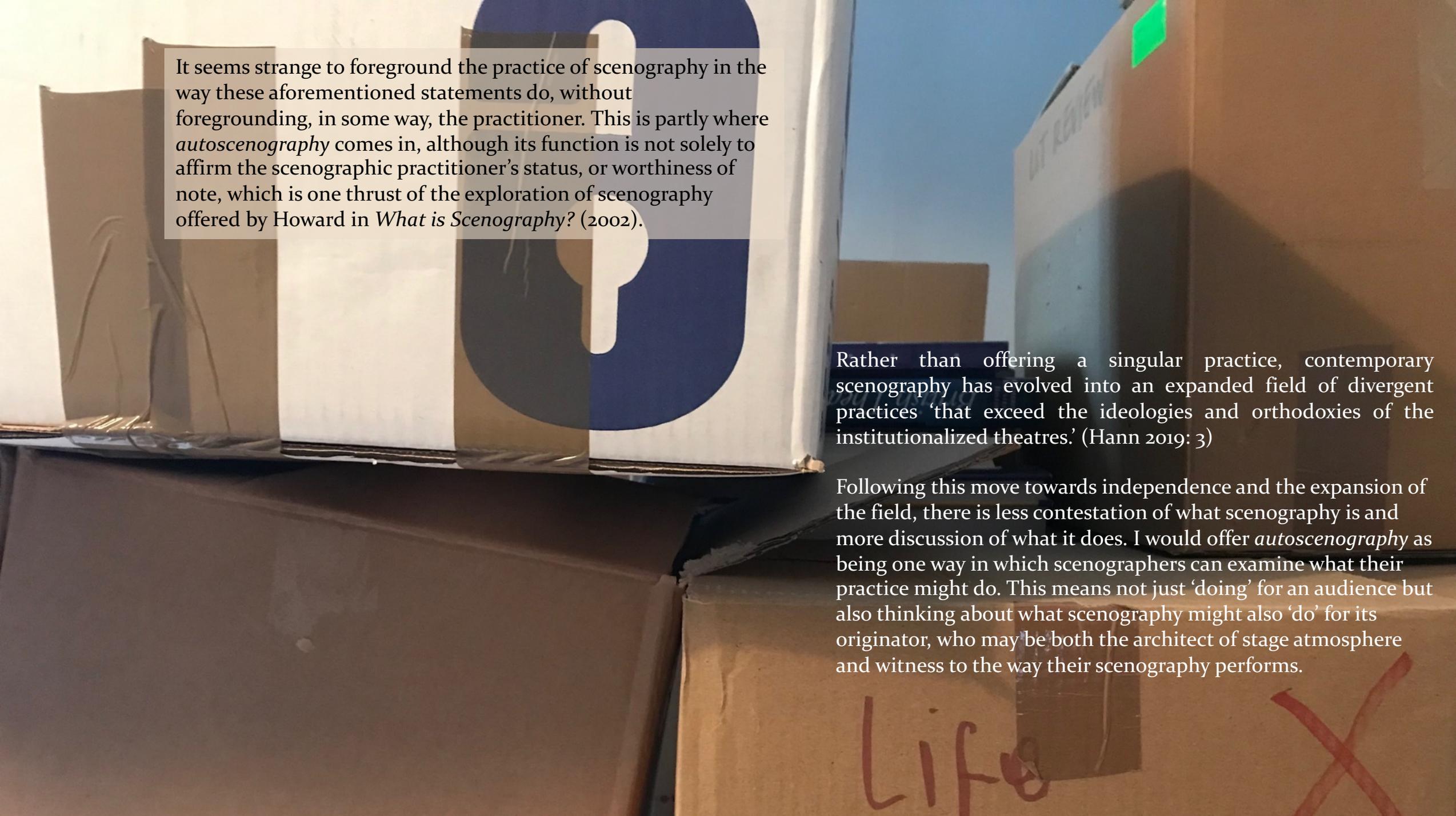
and we enliven globally broadcast stadium pop concerts and sporting events. In a diverse, multi-

We might imagine those arguments as beginning with Edward Gordon Craig's positioning of the scene as an active part of performance (Craig 1911) and recently coalescing in the confident flagship statement of the Society of British Theatre Designers online platform *Staging Places*, configured in 2019:

Our work exists on your blog, your Twitter feed, your Instagram, your Facebook, your Tumblr, your Flickr, your YouTube channel, your livestream, in your augmented and your virtual realities.

**We build the content. We tell the stories that sell the tickets.
We make the memories. We are the storytellers now... (2019)**

Think about the Lockdown Stagings -



It seems strange to foreground the practice of scenography in the way these aforementioned statements do, without foregrounding, in some way, the practitioner. This is partly where *autoscenography* comes in, although its function is not solely to affirm the scenographic practitioner's status, or worthiness of note, which is one thrust of the exploration of scenography offered by Howard in *What is Scenography?* (2002).

Rather than offering a singular practice, contemporary scenography has evolved into an expanded field of divergent practices 'that exceed the ideologies and orthodoxies of the institutionalized theatres.' (Hann 2019: 3)

Following this move towards independence and the expansion of the field, there is less contestation of what scenography is and more discussion of what it does. I would offer *autoscenography* as being one way in which scenographers can examine what their practice might do. This means not just 'doing' for an audience but also thinking about what scenography might also 'do' for its originator, who may be both the architect of stage atmosphere and witness to the way their scenography performs.

Acknowledgement of the way scenography performs on the audience has become a significant part of scholarship in scenography. Often the scenographer who is writing (McKinney, Hann, Shearing) writes of the effects of scenography from the perspective of being in the audience or experiencing the scenographic offering of others. If a scenographer can place themselves in the audience for scenography, then they acknowledge a subjective, kinaesthetic and emotive experience of their craft. This is obliquely acknowledged by Lotker and Gough:

...this looking is not merely a detached visual activity for the spectator. The looking happens with the whole body, the movement through space and the kinaesthetic experience of space together with the sense of movement inside oneself as an experience of the scenographic. (2013: 5)

and this statement from McKinney and Butterworth, which evokes the description of 'sensuous knowledge' outlined by Minna Salami (2020):

Scenography is not simply concerned with creating and presenting images to an audience; it is concerned with audience reception and engagement. It is a sensory as well as an intellectual experience, emotional as well as rational. (2009 :4)

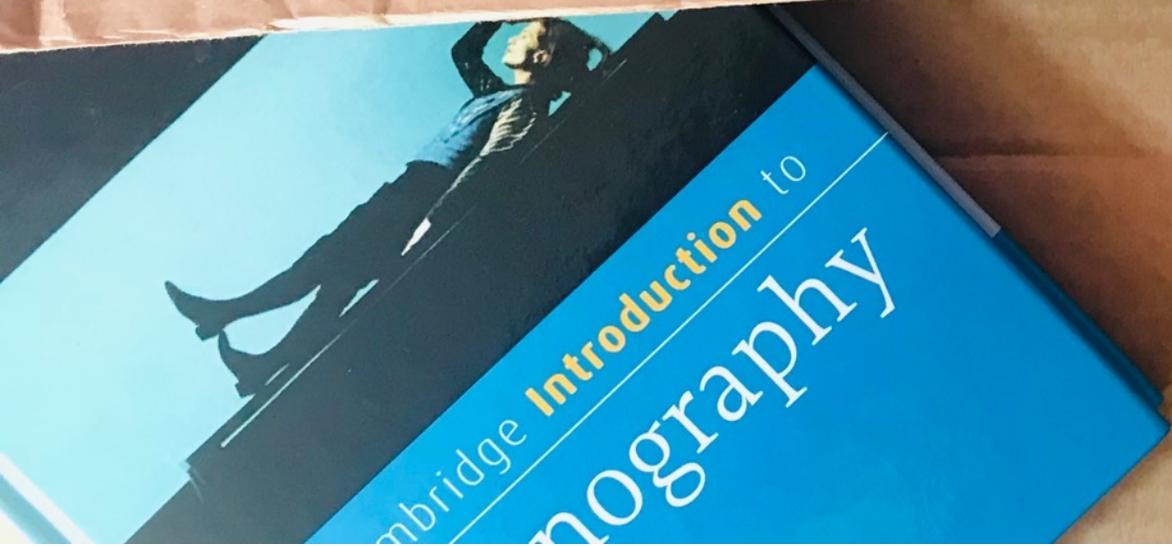
On Scenography



 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

In this way the designer moves from being an unidentified manipulator of, for example, the properties of time and space to recognising themselves as a fully present and subjective participant in the scenographic and theatrical experience. The scenographer provides the scenography, but they also experience, unpack and discuss the scenography from their own subjective viewpoint.

For Part 3, attention will shift from the territory of 'expanded scenography' towards parallel artistic practices where the autobiography of the artist is made visible through designed 'spaces' of different kinds. This is relevant to a project where the design of space is foregrounded within the scenographic practice.



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End of Part 2