

This chapter forms part of an edited collection, Live Art in the UK (Palgrave, forthcoming December 2019). This will be the first published work dedicated to exploring the solo language practices and performances of British artist, Tim Etchells, artistic director, writer and co-founder of British theatre company, Forced Entertainment. Two images are missing from this draft. The book is with the press and 'in process'.

**'All We Have is Words, All We Have is Worlds' - language, looping and the work of Tim Etchellsⁱ
(Sara Jane Bailes)**

I. Introduction: working words

Tim Etchells works assiduously with words: hearing, catching, noticing them, collecting and gathering them in note form, isolating, repeating them, rounding them up, dismantling their semantic structures; troubling them, deleting or reshuffling a familiar order; reversing emphasis, celebrating their precision and their endless capacity to, just as easily, say very little at all, even as they resonate and *perform* for us. It's hard to think about Etchells' writing and his compositional approach to words without falling under the thrall of what he makes language do. His list-making is contagious. His observations often feel familiar, filled with an observational boredom that's peculiarly British. His writing is filled with longing, with sharp but understated political wit, humour, everyday ambitions and disappointments. Arranged in fragmented forms, decontextualized and reframed by a specific context or site in which his language-based text works are produced (eg. gallery, public/civic space, small theatre or large concert venue), Etchells uses words to recompose or dramatize a situation, to create formal distance or intimacy, suggest ideas and propose images or else to have them appear, literally, as concrete object in the form of neons, or as sounds pushing towards abstraction. They are, in his practice as an artist, an active, live, dynamic force, whether they appear as a visual sign communicating across space and time, or as a unit or phrase within a spoken improvised live composition. In many of Etchells' projects and collaborations, ongoing since his 2001 solo performance,

Instructions for Forgetting, words function as both medium and as material; often, they become a micro-event that stages larger propositions, or they can function as a bridge to a more visual, detailed world than performance allows. Yet, as with the work he has continued to produce for over three decades with his internationally acclaimed experimental theatre collective, Forced Entertainment, of which Etchells is Artistic Director and the company's primary writer/author, language is used to illuminate the ordinary rather than to draw attention to the exceptional. As an artist who works with language and text across multiple forms, his practice extends a preoccupation evident since the mid-20th century with the idea of producing democratic methodologies and idioms in art practice that aim to soften the edges of self-conscious authorship and the distinctions between everyday (pedestrian) life and (high) art. His use of language as a material that can oscillate across different forms draws from popular culture as well as from ideas, overheard dialogue, the particular vernaculars that evolve in other media and their specific stylistic modes (eg. TV, news broadcasts, film) and casual observations: an everyday, anybody, anywhere kind of language. Inevitably, this produces its own distinctive virtuosity and creates its own casual poetry, even as its affect is one that seems to belie mastery and precision.

Considering Etchells' acute attention to the imaginary potential of a language gathered out of the ordinary (in both senses of that phrase), one antecedent that springs to mind is mid-20th century sound poet, painter and performer, Brion Gysin, who, collaborating with William S. Burroughs in 1958, developed cut-up texts as a way of liberating language, intent upon freeing the writer from subjectivism and the idea of 'owning' words. Like many US artists working in other art disciplines at that time (including music, dance and painting), Gysin's methods of composition sought to manifest and articulate those beliefs. In a brief essay in *The Third Mind*, a book he

composed with Burroughs, Gysin explains the radical dynamism of the cut-up, famously declaring: ‘You’ll soon see that words don’t belong to anyone. Words have a vitality of their own and you or anybody else can make them gush into action.’ (in Burroughs and Gysin 1978: n/p). Gysin draws our attention to several useful points: first, that language exists as shared cultural property, regardless of how it might be (individually or collectively) composed, edited or applied within specific contexts. It is communal. Language is perceived, therefore, as implicitly social, free, accessible, though its circulation and formations are inevitably bound up with ideology and (therefore) agency. Second, language can be activated and made to *do* certain things: its potential is dynamic, forceful; it produces effects. Formally, the cut-up releases language from the tyranny of narrative or a singular trajectory, something Etchells admits to having been frustrated by for many years in his work as writer/theatre-maker (Trueman 2017). Instead, to displace and (literally) cut up sequences of text to disturb their original intended order proposes a more open way of reading/hearing language, allowing it to move through the individual in a less over-determined way. Meaning can be arrived at through a dissociative as well as an associative logic. Experimenting with new compositional modes and strategies, the relationship between author/reader, or performer/spectator, can be recalibrated, by shifting the perceptive attention of the reader but also by refocusing attention from content towards the way in which ideas are filtered and distributed. I’ll return to this notion later in relation to the development of digital technologies and networked thinking.

Judith Butler reminds us that we are fundamentally linguistic beings, that is, ‘beings who require language in order to be’ (Butler 1997: 2). Though Butler is referring to language at large, within the public and social realm rather than its activity within specialised fields of art practice, to some extent the same holds true in

both domains. We exist through language, as does our apprehension of the world. In theatre, specifically Anglo-centric theatre, language has always been moderated—restricted even—by its literal use as a replication of first-person dialogue. Yet within a more generalised field of art practice, where words are used as ingredients, language can structure and reorganise our sense of place, time, relationality and intimacy, our ‘felt’ or abstracted experience of the world. While J. L. Austin’s speech act theory has become central to discussions about performativity and performance, in particular the way words can *do* more than they *say* (where saying becomes doing) (Austin 1962), artists such as Etchells deploy language in ways that excavate its performative properties distinct from the occurrence of the performative in everyday speech. While this includes foregrounding its concrete properties, in Etchells’ pieces one’s attention is often focused on the way language as a signifying practice brings a/many world(s) into being through strategies that call upon the individual, imaginative ability and corresponding thoughts and associations of the listener-reader. Is this the way that language as an event begins: as an invitation to collaborate in imagining? How does language perform ideas, things, attitudes, events in ways that other materials do not? In this chapter, I want to focus on some of the ways that Tim Etchells’ solo practice develops his interest and enquiry into the performative, spatial, social, choreographic and musical potentialities that language offers. I am thinking about these works under the umbrella of the generous and heterogeneous category, Live Art, rather than theatre where Etchells practice with Forced Entertainment usually belongs. Perhaps it is worth considering how these language-based text works belong to that less definitive category (Live Art), observing how these projects fall away from theatre to create conversations between and across forms.

The potential of language as a textual practice has always fascinated and concerned Etchells, underpinning his work with Forced Entertainment since they began as a theatre collective in the mid-1980s. In a recent interview with Matt Trueman discussing the critical value of text in the company's work, he states: 'I still care very much and take care of text' (Trueman 2017). Working independently from the group has allowed him to further explore its possibilities without the concerns or obligations that inevitably develop (a different kind of care-taking) amongst a collective of closely-knit artists over a long period of time. In his own work, Etchells is liberated from the exigencies and demands of making a group/time-specific piece of theatre that can tour and be accommodated in a range of similar capacity venues. Instead, imagination itself becomes both site and object of each performance or gallery work. In that sense, the possibilities are, perhaps dauntingly, limitless and unclear. Each project relies upon finding different containers, strategies or holding patterns that allow him to fashion language into new ways of catching the experience of a thing. Usually Etchells performs his own works either solo or in duets. Recent collaborators have included dancer/choreographer Meg Stuart, Vlatka Horvat (visual and performance artist), Aisha Orazbayeva (musician/composer), Boris Charmatz (dancer/choreographer), and Tarek Atoui (sound artist/ composer).ⁱⁱ While each distinctive project intermixes the formal structures, behaviours and limitations of these different media—primarily dance, visual art and music—the conventions of theatre are often implied in the situation created by Etchells through the texts he creates and sometimes through the processes that produce text. These pieces seem to work in dialogue with theatre performance: pushing back from it (no 'action', plot, characters being performed, no costumes, lights, etc.), emptying the space yet reliant upon a shared knowledge of its codified rules; eliminating as much as possible in

order to better understand what needs to remain, the essential material for creating an exchange. There is a commitment, for example, to invoking an ‘already existing’ situation, to *staging* something as if preempting it or arriving in its aftermath, to being here or ‘there’, locating us in some kind of temporal relation to it, retrieving parts of it, borrowing or retracing his own or an implied other’s experience, bringing not only time but place and mood into frame.

Central to these pieces, whatever form they eventually take, is an attempt to make the spectator actively complicit in the occasion. They explore the way that narrative and subject position are intrinsic to, but not limited by, compositional practice: one is always speaking *to*, speaking *of*, speaking *from*, *about*, *for* or *with*. They pay attention to the dramaturgical possibilities of text even as they work to include the visual, choreographic and sculptural, to expand our understanding of performance as multidisciplinary or even post-disciplinary. Certain questions guide this body of work and sustain it in particular ways: How does language become performance, or, how might performance dwell within the formations and arrangements of its limitless constructions? Is language ever anything other than fictional or *fictionalising*? How does meaning shift according to the different rules or strategies we apply to words, or the way we might locate them within different forms and platforms (eg. neon, live broadcast or performance, gallery or wall piece)? Functioning as a time-based vehicle rather than as dialogue, how can language expand our understanding of narrative?

In the following sections I’ll consider Etchells’ broader history as a writer whose practice has been situated in, and developed through, theatre and performance. I’ll then focus on compositional discoveries encountered through these works. The chapter then offers a detailed consideration of two performance pieces made in recent

years: the solo work, *A Broadcast/Looping Pieces*, originally made and performed in 2014, and the collaborative duet, *Seeping Through* (2015), made and performed with composer and violinist, Aisha Orazbayeva. Both pieces can be performed in different versions (as durational or as shorter version, for example), produced in different sites and contexts (gallery, theatre, for radio). The second work builds on some of the components and strategies that underpin *Broadcast*. In order to consider the development of these works, I'll refer to earlier solo works by Etchells as well as relevant shows by Forced Entertainment. In conclusion, I suggest ways to situate Etchells' work within diverse genealogies and contexts of practice.

II: Words as Worlds

'You can make anything by writing' - C.S.Lewis

As an artist, Etchells established himself and has become internationally recognized for his more than thirty-year history with Sheffield-based theatre ensemble, Forced Entertainment. As Artistic Director, he writes, directs and sometimes performs. The group's work is programmed, discussed and taught within theatre, performance and Live Art contexts, nationally and abroad, and in recent years the group (and Etchells individually) has garnered a number of prestigious awards.ⁱⁱⁱ His 1999 book, *Certain Fragments: contemporary performance and Forced Entertainment*, written by Etchells and inclusive of the shared histories of the group, is arguably the most significant, and undoubtedly one of the most widely read collections of published writings on experimental theatre and performance in the last fifty years. Inventive in ways that echo the formal collaborative experimentation of their theatre-making, it reads as a kind of disjointed, cultural, company biography from the perspective of its six members and their work, sometimes reframing them as characters (playing

themselves, as they do in performance) in their own (semi-fictional) history. Together, the collection creates a kind of first and second person, plural mythology of their professional and sometimes personal lives together as a company, often failing (intentionally) to differentiate between private and public experience. It considers the theatre work they have made and processes of making, the performances and artists who have influenced them, experiences of touring, reflections from Etchells' personal narrative (the birth of his sons, for example, and the influence of this on the work made) and other significant events that have shaped the group. Cast against the political landscape of Thatcher's Britain and its aftermath during the 1980s and early 90s, the book itself bears witness to the aggressive privatisation, withdrawal of funding and diminished power of the public sector which defined that epoch, moving deftly and poetically between historical, cultural or personal fact and fiction. As both document and history of a specific and geographically-located performance scene that prizes open the social, political and popular culture and the desires, behaviors and events that influence one theatre group, it intertwines making life/making theatre as two distinctive but interrelated, generative modes of experience: consciously or unconsciously, we fictionalize 'what happens' through each effort to recount lived experience, to narrate or tell. In that telling, or, if you like, in the different versions attempted, we inevitably absorb the histories, ideas and expression of others in order to create and engage a desired and desiring listener/reader. In other words, we repeatedly compose and recompose our 'selves'.

In addition to providing a compendium of accounts and critical archival material from the company's first decade of work (including loosely-told memories, photos, scripts and programme notes), *Certain Fragments* established Etchells as a writer of distinctive and considerable brilliance. It demonstrated his ability to read and

critically reflect upon the group's practice while contextualising it more broadly within late 20th century performance histories without compromising the creative vision the group had evolved together collectively. The book is structured in a way that plays with form (and varying degrees of formality), with the distinction between real, fictitious and exaggerated events. It offers an innovative exploration of the way a performance history might be gathered that reflects and corresponds with a company's performance style as an extension of its aesthetics: its suspicion, for example, toward the idea of a singular 'truth' or account of events, its interest in popular culture and its various forms, and its concern with testing, breaking down and expanding theatre so it becomes a relevant contemporary cultural form. A willingness to play with and find poetry in the collision of materials that don't belong together is evidenced throughout *Certain Fragments*, just as it is practiced in rehearsals and repeatedly dramatized in the group's numerous theatre productions, documentation and durational works.

For Etchells, writing/text has always functioned as a critical and concrete tool in the development of his practice. In many Forced Entertainment theatre shows spanning their performance history, such as *200% and Bloody Thirsty* (1987), *Emanuelle Enchanted* (1992), *Club of No Regrets* (1993), *Hidden J* (1994), *Pleasure* (1997) and the long video that followed it, *Filthy Words & Phrases* (1998), *First Night* (2001) and *Real Magic* (2016), and in durational works such as *Speak Bitterness* (1994) and *Quizoola!* (1996), text appears in a range of concrete and dynamic ways: as large, hand written sign, as neon/backdrop, as script that is written and erased and rewritten on chalk boards, on paper, or in the form of a crumpled, hand-passed note. The writing and reading of text—that direct relation between hand-held page and performer delivering it to us—remains part of the dramaturgy, set,

action and as structural component of the piece. Nowhere is the sense in which language can operate as both material object and immaterial surrogate for things beyond that object demonstrated more clearly than in Etchells' shift from work with the company to working with neons, as in his recent neon commissioned for the exterior of the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens. Titled *All We Have (Double Line)* (December 2016) and written in the classic 'red fierce of neon', two signs, one above the other read: 'All We Have is Words/All We Have is Worlds.' Etchells notes that the Beckettian slip and repetition between the two parts of the phrase, activated by the addition/subtraction of the letter 'L', alerts us to the implicit relation between the extent to which our understanding of 'world' is intrinsically related to our ability to name or describe it: words are all we have (website, accessed November 2016). They evoke and often exceed the invention of more than they signify. Etchells' gesture towards Samuel Beckett is significant. In Beckett's work as theatre director and writer (of plays, poetry, prose, critical essays and dialogues) limitation, rule and the attempt to express the most with the least possible focuses our attention towards the potential minimalism of language and its ability to touch upon the most indescribable of states or philosophical questions (what it is to exist, for example, or why we go on). Etchells' interest in the abbreviated economy of the neon produces word-as-image and as concrete art object just as it examines the ability to conjure images and dramatic situations through words. His earlier neon works spring to mind here, such as the declamatory, rather dramatic, *Wait Here* (2008, full text: Wait Here I Have Gone to Get Help), and *Please Come Back* (2008, full text: Please Come Back I Am Sorry About What Happened Before), or the curt imperative of *G.O.* (2010) which reads 'Get Out'. The neon signifies through a redacted economy, amplifying the commercial operations—the hard sell—of capitalist mass production. Here, the most

intimate or throwaway phrases appear on a scale that exaggerates the significance of their meaning, projecting them into a kind of shared, 'forever' state of ubiquity.

Cultural historian Raymond Williams, observes that language should be understood as an active process, at its sharpest best capable of exacting acute precision through the identification of thought, feeling, objects, ideas, emotions and conditions (1983). At the other end of the spectrum, according to writer Luc Sante's definition, language is also the purveyor of 'information,' where information is understood as 'the elusive stuff that circulates incessantly between consciousness, document and cyberspace' (in Calle 2009: 72). Its value resides 'in minute specifics and fugitive shades of meaning' (ibid). Etchells draws on a full spectrum of possibility between these two definitions, in particular the potentially radical juxtaposition of genres, lexical fields, and status that textual composition reshuffles. Language relies precisely upon that inexhaustible sea of information that carries and accompanies us, for the most part unconsciously, through everyday life. Equally, it depends upon our ability as audience members/observers to recognise genres, styles, registers and the multiple contexts from which meanings and associations are being drawn. We are able to find resonance or meaning even as text is dislocated or fragmented, endlessly recycled and redeployed.

Considering Forced Entertainment's history as a company, it's easy to identify the way Etchells' interests have developed through the projects he currently pursues. One has only to think of the endlessly generative list of questions in the durational *Quizoola!* (1996) which runs for six, twelve or twenty-four hours, and which creates an endlessly renewable formula for an 'open' performance improvisation. The text (and holding structure for the performance) consists of thousands of questions listed on typed, printed pages, which the performer-interrogator draws on, but in no fixed

order. An interrogator (the role switches throughout) addresses a second performer who responds with improvised answers. Thus the drama evolves in the tension between the scripted question and the unknown, or at least unpredictable, answer. In the earlier *Speak Bitterness* (1994), third person plural confessional statements are delivered over the course of one or many hours (when performed as a durational piece for up to six hours). The performers ‘own up’ to everything ‘we’ (and they as ‘we’) might collectively be able to think of or be guilty of. As in *Quizoola!* the hundreds of statements are printed out on countless pieces of paper which are strewn across a long table, their sequencing improvised in each performance. The statements propose different economies of confession in terms of scale, fantasy, status and ambition, and allude (indirectly) to the specific cultural contexts where confession is used as a convention. These include lofty (and unlikely) statements of belief (‘We worshipped cruel Aztec Gods’), opinions, petty misdemeanors (‘We wrongly prescribed medicines,’ ‘We were loud drunks and fornicators’), ludicrous and impossible lies related to wars and significant historical events (‘We were at Tet and My Lai’), irreverent, inconsequential incidents or sci-fi fantasy roles (‘We said the Lord’s Prayer backwards,’ ‘We missed a train,’ ‘We were death mechanics’), the collision of mismatched words and worlds (‘We confess to trade routes, comedy scenes, kitchen knives and libel’), commonplace anxieties (‘We had butterflies’) and poetic musings anchored by references to popular culture (‘We dreamed of Tokyo, snow monsters and John Ford on his deathbed’). The often filmic, graphic and familiar worlds brought to the stage include genocide, infidelity, stealing, racism, identity theft, murder, plastic surgery, pornography, bank jobs, love (too much, or not enough) and unhappiness (Etchells 1999: 181-190). *Speak Bitterness* accomplishes its impossible ambition—an attempt to take ownership of and lay claim to *everything*—by creating a

frame for imagining (the repeated confessional structure ‘We...’ followed by a statement) in which that other ‘we’ (the audience) might wish to be implicated, or from which we might otherwise want to distance ourselves. Pleasure arises from that ongoing dynamic and our proximity and identification with each statement. *Speak Bitterness* encompasses the encyclopedic and endless desire and capacity to ‘name’, as if naming itself were an admission of guilt, a record of all that can be thought, done or experienced.

Etchells’ interest in the fragment as a unit of meaning has always been central to the way he composes work, layers moods or scenes, or pieces together unlikely ways for meaning to emerge. Fragments require no context, yet the relation to that original context remains fundamental to its potency (the way a fragment recalls its origin). A fragment, by definition, remains broken or incomplete. In that dislocation, however, it acquires its potency. As Marcus Boon points out discussing the heterogeneity of elements within both montage and DJ mixing, the power of montage or collage corresponds to ‘the peculiar nature of fragments as vehicles of contagious mimetic energy, and the possibility that one can play with fragments in such a way that the active viral power of the fragment is not limited by being too quickly absorbed into a new fixed form’ (Boon 2010: 151). Unpacking Boon’s suggestion, the fragment is defined by its self-sufficiency and isolation from an original context. It is also contagious: its force moves beyond its micro-world. Words can be held together, activated within a structure or frame or by applying a specific treatment or pressure: looping, repetition, or (in verbal delivery) shifts of intonation, stress and emphasis. Returning again to the ideas of cultural historian Raymond Williams, words have complex histories: they are part of a system that chronicles the world. Their internal resonance is the residue of their ‘experience’ and the social, cultural and political

meanings they contain.^{iv} Carefully attuned to the histories and lexical fields that phrases and words ‘belong’ to, Etchells’ method of working shifts our emphasis towards the way formal strategies can redraw meaning by consciously disregarding or mixing genres and temporalities together. Language as information sits alongside the sometimes poetic, sometimes banal (or both) resonant histories of phrases. He plays with its countless uses and applications, attentive to the creative misuse and effects of the dislocation of terms while remaining alert to a specific mood or set of associations released by a phrase. Moving between ‘consciousness, document and cyberspace’ (as identified by Sante above) Etchells’ recent solos and duets trawl everyday experience and its different vernaculars, as if the whole of human affairs were a database from which meaning can be extrapolated, held for a moment then released back into the endless flux of textual abundance that the Web, new media and digital technologies immerse us in. Working with improvisation in performance within self-imposed structures he discovers low-fi analog ways to compose the multiple temporal and spatial realities of memory and information.

In the following section, I focus more broadly on specific compositional discoveries and developments that characterize Etchells’ solo practice, drawing attention to what distinguishes them from his collective practice with Forced Entertainment. To begin this discussion, I borrow a useful term from Claire Swyzen - ‘database dramaturgy’ - a term which identifies significant shifts in performance’s ability to think in response to digital and web technologies (2015, 59).

III: ‘Database Dramaturgy’

In an essay considering Etchells’ recent work alongside other artists and performances relevant to her discussion, Swyzen proposes a new kind of performance-making she

calls ‘database dramaturgy’ and riffs on the idea of a ‘database aesthetics’ in this work. For Swyzen, dramaturgy is understood as ‘the principle of guiding the creative process of the performance *as well as the performance itself*’ (my emphasis in Swyzen 2015: 61, 66). To some extent, the database is synonymous with memory, except that it implies an order or logic that enables particular kinds of access and coherence rather than the shapeless sprawl of memory over which any sense of conscious control is surely more dubious. But there are clear parallels. In Swyzen’s reading, a database structure might be adopted in the compositional stage of generating an artwork (her discussion focuses on theatre performance) but, significantly, it can also inhere in the actual performance so that the (improvised) activities of access, retrieval and replay remain critical to the integrity of the work. Focusing on Etchells’ *A Broadcast/Looping Pieces* (2014), Swyzen’s broader project examines the way computer concepts and structures have profoundly impacted upon, and altered, the way we conceive of performance practices, in particular processes of authorship and material generation. The database, then, becomes a paradigmatic model and a way of analysing dramaturgical and compositional modes in performance, a new kind of non-hierarchical information architecture (perhaps building on the more rudimentary, non-hierarchical, arbitrary form of the earlier cut-up, or Cage and Cunningham’s aleatory techniques) that informs both the content of a practice and the structural mechanisms that set a performance in motion (ibid: 61). The computer allows an almost infinite iterability of materials, which the mind can, to some extent, replicate. Performance itself then manifests as a process of navigation amongst materials, much as working at a computer (or on smartphones) we frequently find ourselves involved in a multitude of simultaneous unfinished journeys between materials, with multiple tabs, documents or windows open. In the use of these

technologies, hierarchies amongst content flatten out into horizontal planes. This is similar to the (internet) practice of ‘folksonomy’ (coined in 2004 by Thomas Vander Wal), the literal combining of ‘folk’ and ‘taxonomy’ as a way of referencing the practice of applying tags to online items in order to retrieve them.^v This allows a user-led system to develop, based on those particular tags and their frequency of use, rather than one determined by the owners or generators of the content. It creates a form of social indexing or ‘bookmarking’ that reflects the user’s vocabulary and interests, democratising the way information can be organised.

In his introduction to an anthology of conceptual writing (*Against Expression*, 2011) Kenneth Goldsmith further considers the development of the Internet in conjunction with the database and the impact of its modalities of navigation. In particular, he questions the way that our understanding of writing as a practice may need to shift. Goldsmith suggests that with the rise of the Internet, writing faces its greatest challenge since Gutenberg and the invention of print in the 15th century, but that the strategies that writers might use to respond are embedded within writing processes (2011: xviii-xix). Thus, in recent years, methods that explore copying and appropriation, cutting and pasting, mimic the operations of the computer. In music, sampling provides a corollary to this, and sampling as a process has easily migrated across to writing and performance. With broadband (as a progression from dial-up Web access) the ability to copy and appropriate multiplies exponentially: access can be instant, constant, and the possibilities of information retrieval/transfer unlimited and simultaneous. In this environment, the very act of ‘writing’ alters. No longer ‘content’, it is, rather, the process of filtering and selection that becomes critical in the design and execution of a work: the management of language, choices made, the mechanisms of reorganisation and the material uses to which it is put. This major

shift, Goldsmith suggests, enacts ‘a basic change in the operating system of how we write at a root level’ (2011: xxi). If methods of distribution have profoundly altered, then so are what he calls ‘platforms of receivership’ which, where writing and performance are concerned, ask us to reconsider the structures, manipulation, movement and the sharing and reception of text in performance and in conceptual art practices.

It has, in recent years, become evident the extent to which the Internet as a highway or flow of unmediated ideas, information and popular culture, and the idea of the database as a dramaturgical paradigm, alters and reconfigures models of authorship within live performance as in all other art forms. But this is surely an extension of the cut-up from the 50s and from so many earlier experiments in more heterogeneous, non-authorial methods of composition. Performance itself can be understood as a flexible and fluid site of writing or inscription: the body writes; the performer is a mechanism or set of operations that signify; the entire performance apparatus (audience included) is involved in the processes of signification where meaning can be openly negotiated. Performance is both a language *and* a container for (other kinds of) language. These ideas provide a useful way to reflect on and situate several of Etchells’ recent projects, but also to connect this work to earlier interests. I am thinking specifically about the way the retrieval of language, and its consequential misuse or reappropriation through different forms of composition, anchors his experimentation across forms. It allows him to explore authorship in ways that push beyond binary oppositions, as not necessarily bound by concerns with the individual or the collective, nor with originality or subjectivism. Instead, authorship becomes a way of accessing experience gathering from multiple directions and sources. Often in miniature or fragmented forms, language and its ‘performance’—

that is, its enunciation and (re)framing in a particular context—creates a dramatic situation, not in the traditional sense of that term but in so far as a dynamic within the compositional process activates meaning. Something relational is at stake. ‘We’, the spectator/onlooker/listener, are called into a process of exchange. Language, as the promise of shared access to, or complicity in, meaning-making, evinces the social nature of communication and exchange. It foregrounds the speech act/speaking out as a fundamentally social and collaborative act. Specific collaborations have enabled Etchells to interrogate such ideas further. One of the most significant of these was with French choreographer and dancer, Boris Charmatz.

In 2013, Charmatz invited Etchells to participate and collaborate in an extended performance experiment/event called *brouillon* (February 2013), which took place at Argos Gallery, Brussels. Incidentally, the French word, *brouillon*, means ‘draft’ or ‘first draft’ (noun), and ‘disorganised’ or ‘unmethodical’ in its adjectival form. Etymologically, it tethers itself to the act of writing and iteration so that the sense of a thing in process or unfinished is evident in the title of this project. The second of two practical enquiries instigated by Charmatz into the status and properties of ‘exhibition’ as a form, *brouillon* questioned the structural, formal limitations and assumptions of different disciplinary, institutional and architectural frameworks. In each version of these collaborative experiments, mounted in a number of different international venues, Charmatz has sought to develop new kinds of temporary, flexible and exploratory structures within the apparently ‘fixed’ structure of the gallery/museum, investigating the possibilities of creating a dancing/moving exhibition, or dance as exhibition, as ‘exhibition in motion.’^{vi} For *brouillon* at Argos (Brussels), Charmatz and Etchells were joined by five other artists of different nationalities, disciplinary backgrounds, age and experience. The project consisted of

two distinctive phases: a ‘closed’ workshop period where the artists worked together, and an open phase where the public joined the artists in the exhibition space/gallery/museum. Within the project, each artist was invited to operate within a specific but loose structure, developing her/his own practice in the context of a broader design within a gallery setting and in relation to existing art works. Etchells’ participation in *brouillon* triggered new language-based projects that have since developed further in other performance collaborations. Indeed, Etchells’ encounter with Charmatz, through *brouillon* and the earlier *expo zéro*, marked a significant shift in his orientation towards performance and its relation to language, space, and visual culture. What elsewhere Etchells has described as ‘imaginative authorship’ combines, in Charmatz’s approach towards expanded choreography, with (static) works in a museum or gallery context (Etchells 2016). He notes: ‘I focused mostly on two improvisational processes through which I animated or remixed words in the exhibition using spoken and written languages’ (2016: 2). He produced, then, a kind of ‘exhausting verbal dance’ trapped by the constraints of materials he was either describing, attempting to relay or else animate (ibid). Since *brouillon*, critical conversations with other collaborators, such as Lebanese sound artist/composer Tarek Atoui, with whom he collaborated on Forced Entertainment’s show, *The Last Adventures* (Ruhr Triennale, International Festival of the Arts, 2013), have impacted not so much upon the direction of his work as his understanding of it: the possibilities shared by, or more or less prevalent in, one or another discipline, through its particular strategies, technologies, applications and effects. Etchells describes Atoui’s computational systems used in the sound composition, *Metastable Circuit* (Documenta 13), ‘designed to access the entire database of his sound archive, breaking, compounding and combining tiny slithers of the recordings and feeding

these to Atoui in real time' (2016: 3-4). As Etchells notes, effectively, Atoui's construction 'ensures his encounter with the unexpected and the unfamiliar and parallels the non-computational structures that we've explored at Forced Entertainment to related ends' (ibid). What often guides Etchells' decision to engage in a new collaboration or the development of a project is a desire to discover ways to generate improvised material through mechanisms and constraints that facilitate and preserve unpredictability. This has always remained a central objective, as noted in earlier references to the durational works, *Speak Bitterness* and *Quizoola!*. So, too, has working with repetition and the cut-up, and the ordering and looping of statements that draw from movie scenes, quoted dialogue, titles, and news headlines since earlier Forced Entertainment shows already mentioned, notably *Club of No Regrets* and *Emanuelle Enchanted*. One can trace a direct link between such works and *Broadcast*. In two memorable sections of *Emanuelle*, for example, the performers gather in the construction of a temporary set with microphones and read texts 'to camera' (looking out to the audience) in a scene that vaguely and haphazardly alludes to a (mashed up) TV news broadcast. Then, as more recently in *Broadcast*, Etchells directly pulled the statements from his 1993 (manual) notebooks, the texts for both shows arriving less from rehearsal improvisation and more directly from his writing. The listing and looping of statements in *Emanuelle* becomes increasingly fragmented and distilled until eventually only one performer (Robin Arthur) delivers them. Included in the mix of statements are several texts from the error message manual of Etchells' first Amstrad computer: 'THE ERASE COMMAND LINE FORMAT IS INVALID' and 'NO SUCH FILE TO RENAME' appearing in list form between the phrases, 'secret love' and 'sergeant, who's in charge here?' (Etchells 1999, 2017). The refrain 'I'd like to talk with you, I'd really like to talk, I know we're talking now

but...’ originally appeared in the 1993 Forced Entertainment show, as it does later at the beginning of *Broadcast*. These experiments in manufacturing unpredictable compositional methods in the creation of text were, as noted earlier, explored by writers Gysin and Burroughs in the mid-20th century, but they trace a continuity that precedes this dating back to Dadaist Tristan Tzara’s work in the 1920s at a surrealist rally, where Tzara pulled words out of a hat in order to create a poem. Some thirty years later, Burroughs noted: ‘You cannot *will* spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors’ (1978: 29). The development of these principles and techniques characterize both *A Broadcast/Looping Pieces* and *Seeping Through*.

More recently (at the time of writing) a larger sound installation, *Together Apart*, commissioned by Kunstverein Braunschweig in Germany (4 March - 14 May, 2017), further examines some of the concerns taken up in these smaller, more intimate, live performances. Spread across fifteen different galleries, language becomes the object of the exhibition and a protagonist, as it does to some extent in the live performance works. In the installation, Etchells is absent (in person) but present through the twelve-channel recorded sound track that plays through the galleries. Similar to his performances, the installation works with repeated words, phrases and sentences, in this instance phrases and idiomatic expressions that invoke things that are ‘done’ with parts of the body, amplifying their absurdity/effect when heard out of context and in repetition: ‘Watch your tongue’, ‘Keep your eyes peeled’, ‘Shout your head off’, ‘Hold your breath’. The recorded phrases—each minutes’ long but interwoven and looped together as a weave of texts playing while the spectator moves through the different galleries—interrogate the way that engagement and perception

shifts through repetition and saturation, between literal comprehension through to absurdity and abstraction, as syllables become sound and sense shifts to nonsense.

While *Broadcast* is a solo, structured and then improvised by Etchells, *Seeping Through* proposes a structured improvisation consisting of a dialogue between the sounds and broken music played by violinist/composer, Aisha Orazbayeva, and Etchells' spoken text fragments which loop and repeat. The latter performance extends Etchells' collaborations with theatre performers, dancers and choreographers to investigate the framework of live musical improvisation, composition and language/sound experiment. Both works share certain elements and formal propositions: the principle of sampling texts from Etchells' notebooks (already experimented with more than two decades earlier as noted above); looping and repeating textual fragments that function as statement or as isolated fragment of an abandoned or incomplete narrative, or a text drafted in from another situation; and improvising within a structure. Performable in different durations (*Seeping Through* has been performed as a four-hour durational piece, for example, but also as a fifty-minute work), each piece can also be staged in a range of locations including gallery, theatre, museum or studio. Both *Seeping Through* and *Broadcast* form part of an ongoing series of improvisational works with language, fragments, improvisation and looping. Both, along with other more itinerant and occasional performances, draw on writing and observations gathered in his notebooks.

IV. Live writing: A Broadcast/Looping Pieces and Seeping Through

I first saw *A Broadcast/Looping Pieces* in Oslo, programmed as part of the Ibsen International Theatre Festival 2016,^{vii} where Forced Entertainment were recipients of

the prestigious International Ibsen Award. About an hour long, the performance reminded me of earlier solo works by Etchells, in particular *Instructions for Forgetting* which I had seen in the early 2000's and which makes use of a similar formal proposition, refined and simplified in *Broadcast*. Etchells, dressed in jeans, long sleeved t-shirt and old trainers, stands in an empty black box space, upstage behind him a small table with a glass of water, some small index cards and pieces of paper. The performance consists of Etchells remaining standing, looking out into the audience, mixing and reading sampled, fragmented texts from varying combinations of the index cards. This is interrupted (twice) by longer sections of narrative text read from sheets of A4 paper before the shorter looping fragments of text continue. Those longer narrative sections plunge us into a half-rendered, deliberately ambling detective story, a ride in the back of a cab at night, the precise details of the story left incomplete and inconclusive.

In *Instructions for Forgetting*, his first solo performance sixteen years earlier, Etchells sat at a table wearing a red Manchester United football shirt, his 'script' typed and hand-written on sheets before him.^{viii} At first redolent of Spalding Gray's seated performance monologues, several of which I'd seen performed in New York in the 1990s, the piece located itself somewhere between an informal lecture and a performance. It drew down more on a kind of performance art monologue delivery than the more artificial conventions of theatre: Etchells as 'himself' sharing materials that he has chosen and edited, spinning biographical stories around these. It established a kind of informal, at times mischievous, at times quietly adversarial, performer-identity that has continued to define his practice. During *Instructions*, Etchells navigated his way through a series of edited, written accounts and events collected from friends, family and acquaintances in different parts of the world in

response to an invitation from the artist for them to contribute either a story or a videotape of interest to them. The only stipulation was that the material must be ‘true’. The topic could be anything. It could take the form of a short report on things that had happened, or (if a tape) something that already existed as opposed to being made specifically for the performance. This afforded the use of an episodic structure, the incorporation of found or documentary materials, second hand stories/accounts, and ideas or images already of interest that may not have been shared before.

Combined into a collaged performed essay, in part determined by the format of video tape,^{ix} Etchells bound the disparate materials together into one long wandering but cohesive narrative: extracts of the video clips, letters, fragments of fiction and disclosure framed and, significantly here, edited and filtered through his own speculation, observation and commentary. The arrangement of the disparate materials and the range of anecdotes and recounted stories moving between narrated account and (video) image—an amateur striptease, a hospital experiment, the slow-motion detonation of a beached whale, the downfall of George Best—created an assemblage of disparate experiences: sad, amusing, revelatory, and ordinary. What is significant in this, as in more recent pieces, is that the arrangement of the materials and the surprising juxtapositions they fashion, rather than their exceptional content, *create* the work. Etchells role was primarily to sample, edit and compose the materials he had been given, to filter and then orchestrate it.

In *Broadcast*, Etchells once again draws from an eclectic range of materials. This time, however, the source is singular though multitudinous, adopting an inverse compositional strategy to *Instructions*. He uses a decades’ worth of notebook material gathered over time into a single Word file. The result is a sequential but disconnected, accumulative (it is always ongoing) collection of thought and observation. Where

once he manually wrote (in physical notebooks), in more recent years he types, or copy/pastes material: ideas, overheard exchanges, dialogue, moments, titles, scenarios from movies, names, textual fragments, observations—all manner of recording the world with the particular noticing and attention Etchells brings to such a task that is (originally) without specific motive or intention. An open database, in other words, without implicit taxonomies or categories, though as he observes, in the physical notebooks the permanent page division means that ‘once a page is filled it retains its content, sequence and visual composition’, while a Word file page layout adjusts as materials are added and the document recalibrates (2016). Though mining his own collection rather than editing material donated by friends, the principle remains similar to *Instructions* though refined and bound by the present: to create a performance out of the moment-to-moment navigation and movement between disparate materials and their sequencing, and to shift emphasis away from each moment in isolation or the provenance of the texts to the accumulation and associative links of words and the images and thought patterns they construct. The work interrogates the primary function of authorship in performance as a process of filtering, sequencing and looping material into repetition.

Broadcast's text consists almost entirely of short repeated phrases and longer sentences or statements written on the index cards Etchells holds in his hands. He begins: ‘I want to talk to you, I really want to talk to you, I mean, I know we’re talking now, but I *really* want to talk to you’. He looks out at us. The sentence repeats. And repeats again, each time emphasis or intonation shifting, a light pause, meanings multiplying. With this opening, the rules set in motion by the piece and the possibilities this might propose begin to animate the space. Etchells speaks to us as a performer reciting but that ‘self’ seems to multiply: Etchells is Etchells quoting a text

composed by Etchells which may have been written or said by somebody else; there's talking, and then there's *talking*; there's *this* talking (here, now in a performance space) but then there's *really* talking (for real). In a matter of minutes and through various repetitions, the piece amplifies with meanings and possibilities that are more complex, layered and humorous than the economy through which it reveals itself. Repeating the sentence (looking out, pacing back and forth a bit, facing the audience, looking down, looking up, half smiling, sometimes serious, vulnerable or over-emphatic) it repeats, shifts gear, breaks a little: 'I know we're... I know we're talking now but... I mean, I really, I really want to talk to you' 'I do *really* want to talk to you' 'I know we're... we're talking now, but I really want to *talk* to *you*' - repeating for what begins to feel like a long time until it snaps to another fragment: 'I'll still be here if you change your mind, I'll - I'll still be here if, if - you change your mind.'

Jumping from loop to loop, retaining the sense of the previous loop or else abandoning it, the spectator's mind makes connections and associations, each text fragment floating by as the suggestion or remnant of a discrete, miniature world standing in for the one that's forgotten or lost. The sparseness of the visual space in front of us—Etchells, the index cards and the small table—allows the imagination to listen, to play, to dwell inside the language. The invitation is for us to *think*, or be thinking, along with Etchells. Over the next hour, the looping fragments continue, jumping from one territory, mood, register or voice to another: interior worlds, imperative statements, private, intimate words, philosophical or banal observations, all the time shifting direction, rhythm and mood. The piece constantly draws attention to its own looping mechanism; each series of loops bores down into the semantic and abstract properties of language. Its improvised nature, its unpredictable turns of phrase, hold our attention.

Some statements arrive with the truncated ambition of a dystopic broadcast statement: ‘New calculations concerning the accurate dimensions of hell..., NEW calculations concerning the accurate dimensions of hell...’ where, as listener, you’re plunged into the mimetic energy of the fragment. There’s an invitation to supply a context from your own repertoire of experience to establish meaning within and across sentences or phrases: ‘Rooms with walls as thin as cardboard, rooms with walls as thin as cardboard...’ (I think of the fictional ‘world’ of this phrase, of the flimsy theatre sets of theatre shows, and of hotel bedrooms); ‘He will remain in London to oversee the uncertainty...’ (now I’m hearing newspeak, recalling Brexit and the chaotic fallout in its immediate aftermath), to something about drone footage and ‘people like ants,’ to ‘The kind of dead that are talked about in numbers... The kind of dead that are talked about in numbers...’. Even as the sentences and phrases float out as incomplete fragments, zooming in and out, they release a deliberately chosen and identified resonance. In this last run, for example, there’s a cumulative sense of meanings that develop, partially suggested by each fragment and completed in the listener’s mind: from the reckless irresponsibility of politicians and government, reassuring us with empty platitudes, to anonymous killing by drone in foreign countries and the nameless dead constantly reported and televised as ‘collateral damage’ as a consequence of war. At other times phrases jump between territories and ideas. The imaginative poetics of a plausible idea ‘When you die the house is haunted by all your forgotten passwords’ sits next to wry observation, ‘They forgot to focus-group the ending’ or ‘A bar that only serves chloroform’ to ‘The parable of the probable son’, repeating like a language game permanently snagging upon its own clever errors and reverberations. Death often drifts up from this litany of

words: those we have witnessed, those we can't imagine and those that wait ahead of us.

Reminded again of the cut-up as a precursor to this kind of work, a technique which allowed 'literature to catch up with painting,' Gerard-Georges Lemaire observes the following: 'Acting as an agent of simultaneous integration and disintegration, the cut-up imposes another path on the eyes and on thought' (in Burroughs/Gysin 1978: 13, 21). Here, Etchells' spoken and accumulated fragments impose a path of thought created through the process of editing that hovers between the construction and demise of each fragment's meanings. The looping repetitions drive the language to perform like a musical composition. One thinks of the paring down of minimalism where a delimited series of notes repeat in compositional units exploring the way development or change occurs not so much in the notes as in the mind of the listener. The tension between threads and drifts of meaning coming together to produce an image-thought before fading out ('an agent of simultaneous integration and disintegration') resonates as a performative manifestation of the anarchic agency of the cut-up constrained by the repetitive logic of the loop. *Broadcast* develops the encyclopedic database dramaturgy proposed compellingly by Swyzen earlier, releasing the agency and determination assigned to authorship while at the same time discovering a structure for performance that relies upon liveness, the performed moment, and which acknowledges what's both in and outside of the room, the community of the 'audience' and the community of those beyond the room, what Etchells refers to as 'the nature of the social construct or imaginary that we occupy together, the bigger society that surrounds the theatre itself.' (2016, unpublished interview, unpaginated).

The looping sits in tension with an impulse towards narrative meaning and logic in two longer sections within the piece. These consist of the previously mentioned rambling narrative about a man in the back of a cab. The ‘story’ is reminiscent of a detective noir, one which, however, fails to gather meaning or direction. As an aside observation, I became bored and impatient during these sections, not conscious at the time that release from the driving insistence of the looping fragments into a contrasting, meandering rhythm of text and temporality might be productive to the compositional process of the performance and especially its reception. The narrative, composed in sentences, seems to hold out the promise of character, action, and plot development, though nothing coalesces. It comes as a relief to return again to the miniature economy of the fragmented loops and the instantaneous meanings that repetition nudges into the space. Yet it is precisely the contrast between these two forms of writing, their dynamic shifts in rhythm, tempo, as well as the different demands addressing the audience, that enables *Broadcast* to achieve a dramaturgical balance. There’s a tension between the different modes of thinking and attention required. Citing new media theorist Lev Manovich (2001), Swyzen describes the way that Etchells performs what Manovich calls ‘two competing imaginations, two basic creative impulses, two essential responses to the world’ (Manovich 2001: 233, in Swyzen 2016: 70): the narrative imagination and the database imagination (Manovich 2001: 239). The distinctive semantic economies through which each form delivers ‘content’ and the promised (but withheld) delivery of narrative provide an overall structure for the work. Each loop peels back the different possibilities of a thought: ‘There will be time for this; there is no time for this’. Language measures time even as its occupancy swallows it. Occasionally the content brings us back to the situation of the spatiotemporal economy of the

performance, the ‘here and now’ of its improvised production. Swyzen refers to the encyclopedic quality of the data collated in the work as a kind of ‘paratactic dramaturgy,’ where parataxis implies a mode of connecting elements in a non-hierarchical way (2016: 70), where there is neither coordination nor subordination of the material elements. In discussing the evolution of Happenings in the 1960s, Michael Kirby refers to this as ‘alogical,’ where separate component parts of a performance or an event are not dependent on each another for legibility (1987: 30,119). Meaning is neither co-dependent nor (necessarily) logical, moving between sense and nonsense.

Broadcast reflects something of the way the mind seems to move of its own accord when we stop paying attention to it, when it isn’t consciously focused on a particular task or driven towards an outcome and instead functions as an (unconscious) repository. It gathers, assimilates even, but without a predetermined logic or coherence, prompted but without cues, following drifts and currents, much like the notebooks from which material is later drawn. Sense follows retrospectively. The performance simulates different technologies of narrative construction and modalities of authorship: a lens that opens and closes its aperture in order to refocus; the alternating navigation at a computer moving between opened documents, windows, search engines and mail programs; a series of penned (or typed) and always incomplete notes as a way of capturing what one sees or hears. The performance winds down through a series of repetitions that record a mind deliberating in the construction of a hovering image: ‘the sound of a helicopter in the darkness outside, the sound of a helicopter in the rain and the darkness outside, the sound of a helicopter in the darkness outside, the sound of a helicopter in the rain outside’. And finally, ‘the end was good, but a little too easy somehow.’

Several weeks later I see a different performance: *Seeping Through*, an improvised duet performed by Etchells and violinist, Aisha Orazbayeva, at the Tom Thumb Theatre in Margate. Before offering some closing thoughts, I include observations from this performance to consider alongside *Broadcast*. Since aspects of this performance overlap with *Broadcast*, notably the mechanisms for generating material and the performative style of Etchells' text delivery, I'll focus on the piece as improvised musical composition and duet.

Framed by two small but lavish sets of gold and red curtains, Etchells stands on a tiny raised stage next to composer/violinist, Aisha Orazbayeva, who is seated on a stool to his left, scraping, bouncing, strumming and scratching the bow across her violin as she listens to Etchells. The sound she produces is sometimes quiet, barely audible, a scratch, full of wiry air instead of tone. It creeps along beneath Etchells' words. At other times it rises to become vibrant, melodic, and drowns out the spoken text. The decorative ambitions of this compact, tiny theatre both contrast and complement the modest, stripped back, simplicity of the performance and the deconstructed staccato languages—musical and spoken—it animates. Etchells delivers lines from his index cards, and each one contains a selected series of short sentence/phrase texts that are typed, cut out, then stuck onto the cards he holds and works through. As in *Broadcast*, this allows him to select at random but respond fully to the shared, improvised moment.

At times, Orazbayeva appears to follow Etchells' looped sequences, while at others the sounds extracted from her violin lead or dominate the performance, though this hierarchy of listening doesn't seem relevant to the way the piece achieves its form. It's contrapuntal rather than homophonic. Etchells' voice becomes

instrumental—an instrument, in fact—in this work. Each performer has to ‘deal’ with the presence and sound of the other, responding to the directions and proposition of what each singularly produces. Sometimes they drown each other out. Sometimes both seem to shout. Sometimes they creep tentatively into a note or a loop. ‘I’m listening to Aisha, negotiating what I do with her, feeling for rhythm, tone and connection’ observes Etchells (2017). Orazbayeva sometimes pauses as he loops a phrase, at other times crashing down heavily into his vocal drive. At times the duet feels fluid and invisible, at others more concrete, full of weight and materiality. The violin’s presence has a dual function: as much a thing of wood and gut with horsehair bow strings that snap in a frenzy as an instrument capable of producing sound that soars into the more familiar, melodic phrases of a classical repertoire. Etchells voices the looped texts read aloud from the same index cards he draws upon in *Broadcast*. I catch and remember some of the phrases from seeing *Broadcast* in Oslo: ‘the kind of dead that are talked about in numbers’ and ‘I’m taking your time, I’m taking *your* time’, He is, of course, taking our time with each performance. Watching these solo and new collaborative works by Etchells, ghosts from past performances, many years of them, are present in the space: newsreel always seems to feed through in startling or quiet fragments; an adopted way of speaking or the drama of everyday ordinariness, an ongoing background Rolodex of information passing through. It is precisely the technologies of production—the way minds can rally around a multitude of sources binding them together and letting them fall apart—that always seem to be under investigation: how to translate the movement and patterns of thought rather than thought itself, and how to round them up and play with them. Some days later, Etchells tells me he remembers using the following phrases: ‘a kind of manual for living with defeat’, ‘something to lose sleep over, and nothing to lose sleep over’ and

‘we’ve seen better days’ (2016). There’s a sense of individual but also inclusive loss, a social ‘we’ that the audience member can feel part of.

Etchells and Orazbayeva make striking performer-companions, and though they correspond in this improvised duet, each works independently, alone together, creating a dialogue through deconstruction. Live writing. Live scoring. Live art. In this work, musicality and the listening it requires alters the reception of the performance. Part of that shift indexes the way music makes different listeners of us, pulling us into a different kind of attention. Orazbayeva and Etchells’ performance interrogates the elements of composing, performing and listening, challenging what they may or may not have to do with each another, stretching them out (often to breaking point) and bringing them together again. Each performer brings her/his own performer intuition, intelligence, experience, opinion, taste, prejudice and sensibility to the moment. We see them, together and separately, ‘go to work’ in different languages: Etchells rallying between over-confident stridency and tentativeness, from rational, clichéd phrasing to the irrational breakdown of sense; Orazbayeva powerfully sawing her bow, driving jagged edges that cut through the text, at times obliterating the words or else moving around it with delicate, lattice-like aural formations, scraping, scratching, creating what Etchells describes as ‘atmosphere’. Often, they play at the threshold of decomposition. Etchells writes

What we each do is a ruin, a half-broken thing, and that allows space for the other element. It allows the dialogue. The mutual seeking for completion. If I was telling whole stories, Aisha would struggle, just as I would struggle if she was playing whole melodies or complex pre-formed musical scores. The fact that we are both assembling something from shards seems important’ (email correspondence, 2017).

A collaboration that began in 2014 and which continues developing, it’s apparent that in *Seeping Through*, originally performed as a four-hour durational performance at Forest Fringe (Edinburgh) in August 2015, both artists have discovered a way to

compose/perform together, to share the same instant through structured improvisation, allowing language to draw sound out of the music, and music to ‘pull language out of the everyday’ (Etchells 2017). It is a kind of live assemblage, a new form of Language Writing in the attempt to thread words and music through each other.

V: ENDNOTES

A creative restlessness drives Etchells’ inquisitiveness and his precision as an artist; he has an ease that comes with hard-earned knowledge and a curiosity concerned with formal architectures and dramaturgies within and beyond performance: what makes something work, how does it do its thing, or not do its thing? Can I pull it apart and reassemble it differently? What are its limits and possibilities and how might we find them? Many of his pieces sit comfortably at the crossroads and intersections of several experimental art and music histories, in particular language experiments (Language Writing or Language Poetry, for example) and visual art that works with text in order to break apart, combine and reassemble text and image. Assemblage, as a method or strategy that creates a new artifact or art work from fragments or preexisting objects or forms, is hardly new. It remains a key practice and principle of modernist aesthetics since the late 19th century onwards. The forms that assemblage takes, however, are constantly transforming. Etchells’ practice responds acutely to the present; mutating; absorbing the system of elements and conventions at his disposal in the different contexts for which he is invited to produce work. His practice invokes conceptual and visual art histories where text and language as visual signifier or as concept operate as a defining aspect of the work. One can think, for example, of artist Jenny Holzer’s textual practice manifest through posters, LED’s and projections of ‘statements’, where the ideas and provocations of the text are crucial to their impact

and effect: they appear as large-scale installations, on billboards, in Times Square or installed in galleries, as broadsheets and as public posters, projected onto buildings and as illuminated light works. Until the early 1990s, Holzer's authorship of the texts remained an important part of her compositions, while more recent work adopts and redacts literary, government and declassified US Army documents. Increasingly, the political dimension of the work has taken on a greater level of social critique. In particular, Holzer's earlier 'statement' signs remind me of Etchells' neons and the phrases that loop around in some of his recent performances. The 'broadcast' aspect of Holzer's pieces, collapsing intimacy (the message) with declamation (the medium) also finds form in Etchells' work. Or the work of John Baldessari in the mid-1960s, which adopted appropriation as a principle, in works that combined the narrative potential of images with the associative power of language; and the works of Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt, and Fluxus artists in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Think, too, of British walking artist, Hamish Fulton's translations of his extensive walks into text and other media writ large on entire gallery walls: NO TALKING FOR SEVEN DAYS or ROCK FALL ECHO DUST. Part instruction, part document of these ephemeral performance walks, they compress time and space. The transmission of an experience and its detail, no matter how vast, is distilled into language, but the visual display of the text contributes to how we (the spectator) 'experience' the walks. French conceptual artist, Sophie Calle, also comes to mind, in particular projects where text and image stand in for experience. Calle apparently invites us to share the intimacies of her life through precise documentation of experiences that are often marked by loss, disappointment and grief.^x In addition to these visual, conceptual and performative art histories, Etchells' structured and improvised language compositions resonate with the practices of significant 20th

century writers, some already mentioned, notably Gysin and Burroughs (and Tristan Tzara and the Dadaists before them) but others such as Georges Perec and the literary experiments invented by the writer's collective, Oulipo, of which Perec was a member. Oulipo's interests were concerned with developing restrictions, strict rules, obstacles and constraints, in order to liberate language from its literary forms (the novel in particular) and to stretch the conventions of genre; to, in a sense, reinvent literature and discover what it might be or become rather than reaffirming what it already knew how to do. Perec's works, which discovered a poetics of inventory based on the city, and which Etchells' writing has extended into the dimensions of performance text, examine possibilities through the exhaustion of one particular rule or objective: listing the entire contents of each room in a house; the details visually perceived on a particular journey or route, or food ingested within a particular time frame. For three days in October 1974, Perec recorded everything that occurred and came into his field of vision at Place Sain-Sulpice, Paris, providing the content for *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (2010). The text creates an 'Outline of an inventory of some strictly visible things' (Perec 2010: 5) combined with brief reflections and fragmented thoughts, recorded actions, the quality of time passing, all of which appear in the form of a list. The result is a detailed and exhaustive inventory which Perec refers to as 'the infraordinary', that is, 'the markings and manifestations of the everyday' (Marc Lowenthal in Perec 2010: 51).

Considering these various histories as they intersect with Etchells and his prolific output as writer, theatre-maker, performer and solo artist, it's difficult to know how to position his practice let alone summarise it. The distinctions we rely upon to categorise different art forms and events may no longer be useful or relevant. In fact, it is the shared predilection towards certain strategies, politics, formal interests

and economies of what and how an artist chooses to make work that begin to suggest a more useful way to make sense of the affinities amongst artists and their practices. Increasingly, these underpin the impulses that lead to collaboration, rather than the disciplinary formation in which each artist's practice originates.

As I began writing this essay in the late summer of 2016, the sixteenth of September marked the twentieth anniversary of the UK release of DJ Shadow's album, *Endtroducing*, released in 1996 on James Lavelle's Mo' Wax. Hearing it, I remember sensing that a new kind of music began (and also ended) right there: the idea of the 'original' as we thus understood it would soon reach a new degree of obsolescence. At the time, I wasn't conscious of the compositional principles at work, nor what their consequences might be for popular music or other art forms. Though not by any means the first to use sampling,^{xi} Shadow's *Endtroducing* was the first commercially successful album composed entirely of samples from preexisting tracks, many of which were salvaged (so the story famously goes) from fifty-cent bins in record stores across America. The list of included samples is eclectic, unpredictable, obscure, familiar; a deep forage into music's twentieth century histories of funk, rock, horror sound tracks and jazz. *Endtroducing* proposed a collection of samples pulled together in a database dramaturgy of sound.

This twenty-year index seems more relevant than theatre history might be when considering Etchells as a prolific, multidisciplinary artist in the context of this book and (therefore) in consideration of some of the broader current issues, concerns and directions within experimental, interdisciplinary performance and Live Art in the UK. Five years after the release of *Endtroducing*, sat in Sheffield's Workstation with members of Forced Entertainment as they began work on a new piece, Etchells blasted the title track of the CD by Australian band, The Avalanches, titled *Since I*

Left You. It's estimated that the entire CD, consisting of eighteen tracks, integrates approximately 3,500 samples from different musical genres from all over the world. Within four years, sampling had become commonplace. We could no longer even 'hear' it as that. The impulse to take apart, slice, appropriate, copy, mimic, alter or repurpose, throws the world into a state of ongoing recomposition; it drives the spectator/listener down into the textures of material, discovering new ways to use or activate experience. Etchells' work is always concerned with discovering mechanisms that release something into a dynamic, that sets a thing going, rather than attempting to invent a static or otherwise 'complete' world, with fixed identities, opinions or versions of events reflected back at us.

We are now two full decades into a tradition of sampling—if we take *Endroducing* as a marker here and the point at which sampling is absorbed by mainstream culture—and centuries into histories of assemblage (think of mosaic), cut-up, collage, montage, remixing and mash up. Since 1996, a time just before computers were commonplace and smartphones invented, modes of communication, reception and perception have radically altered, changed beyond recognition even within generations. It's impossible (almost) to remember life in a pre-digital, pre-networked era. New aesthetic practices and creative models are emergent that refocus us from content to process-oriented works of art. We occupy new spaces of multiple authorship, transmission, transition, personhood, gender and sexuality, with new kinds of creative engagement that are participatory, complex, virtual, unstable, collective and interactive, issued through networked, locative and distributive technologies that are, as new media theorist Carolyn Guertin notes, extending our consciousness (2012: 30). As Guertin observes, medium specificity has become increasingly irrelevant as all media are (increasingly) digitised, and the act of

searching for materials becomes a primary part of the creative event: ‘What we ‘own’ in the act is the process not the content. Searching and the subsequent creative remixing of existing content has become the dominant mode of talking back to television, music and networked culture’ (ibid). Ultimately, Guertin questions whether ‘creation’ is obsolete as a category, since everything is recombinant. Our thinking, seeing, imagining and making filter through processes that respond to the networked screen-life we inhabit. In Tim Etchells work, however, the presence of the human figure as a machine for arranging and upsetting semantic order remains: insistent, a talking machine, a 21st Century Krapp from Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, remembering time past and its (broken) future promises through the rewind and fast forwarding of years. We are shaped by the extension and limitations of the technologies that enable us to retrieve and abandon, remember and forget. But instead of Beckett’s lonesome, regretful character, seated at a desk full of spools of reel to reel tape, it’s Etchells in a pair of worn Adidas and scruffy jeans, standing looking out at us, shuffling through a bunch of index cards on stage: rewind, play, repeat. Pacing the line between now and then, here and there, us and them, you and me; between a performed present, past and an imagined future present, between memory and all that it allows us to forget. Thankfully.

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ⁱ Thanks to Tim Etchells for his generosity with time, materials and discussions in person and by email, and for waiting on a 'last draft'. Thanks also to Christof Migone for useful suggestions in the early stages of research.

ⁱⁱ There are exceptions to this, such as his collaboration with choreographer, Boris Charmatz, where the collaboration extends to a larger number of individual artists performing separately but contemporaneously. Generally, however, works are made alone or with specific collaborators or projects in mind.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2016 Forced Entertainment were awarded the Ibsen International Theatre award (Oslo). In the same year, Etchells won the Spalding Gray Award (US) noted for being 'a fearless innovator of theatrical form' (Ben Harrison, for American Theatre, 23 February 2016). In addition, he has received many other accolades, awards and commissions acknowledging his outstanding and sustained contribution as an artist.

^{iv} Williams posits this throughout his Introduction to *Key Words*, pp.11-26.

^v I am grateful to the editor of this collection, Maria Chatzichristodoulou, for bringing my attention to this category of tagging and retrieval.

^{vi} These observations are gathered from Charmatz's descriptions of these event-workshop-performances, and Etchells' essay which reflects on working with Charmatz, 'Go, Slowly, Go: Some Thoughts on Boris Charmatz's *expo zéro* and *brouillon*.' See also a description of 'brouillon - An Exhibition in Motion' at the Argos Centre for Media and Arts website: <http://www.argosarts.org/program.jsp?eventid=e6ac2fc25ce34092b32f9214da323ea3>

vii *A Broadcast/Looping Pieces* was performed at Black Box Teater, Oslo (22 September 2016). *Seeping Through (Margate)* was performed at Tom Thumb Theatre, Margate (11 November 2016).

viii The shirt connects to a series of 'where did it all go wrong?' anecdotes relating to football player, George Best, which Etchells relays as part of the performance. He reminded me of this in an email exchange, February 2017.

ix Fellow Forced Entertainment member/performer, Richard Lowdon, operated the video players, rewinding/fast forwarding between different materials, extracts appearing on one of three TV monitors throughout the piece.

x Forced Entertainment took Calle's project, *Exquisite Pain*, which had been produced as a book with images/text and published in the UK (2004) and created a (seated) theatre performance based on its text and its rules of repetition. Calle's project unfolds as the description of a failed relationship, the end of an affair, where she is stood up by a lover at an appointed date and time in a hotel in New Delhi in 1985. The experience is measured out in days leading up to and after the unhappy event, as an attempt to rid herself of the pain.

xi Sampling's antecedents began to reach wider audiences in the late 1970s, exploding with hip hop, rap and DJ culture. In 1979, German musician, Holger Czukay (co-founder of influential experimental rock band, Can) released *Movies* on which the track, *Persian Love*, famously sampled a Persian love song happened upon while tuning through radio stations. David Byrne and Brian Eno's 1981, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, further experimented with sampling from non-musical sources, including a religious exorcism. For a detailed and extensive analysis of the history and aesthetics of sampling, see Eduardo Navas' *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (2012).