

Marianne Morris and Kai Fierle-Hedrick in conversation with Sophie Robinson

Thursday December 7th, 19:30. South West London.

Sophie Robinson: I wanted to start by talking about the visual elements of Pantoume...Marianne, I was wondering if you could talk about the process of creating the pieces...

Marianne Morris: I had been wanting to make visual art for some time. Using a biography of Patti Smith as paper, I started by making an image using her legs and a photograph of a Roman bust for a head, and sewed a flower into the figure's hand. Then elsewhere in the book I started blacking out bits of the text, then painting and sewing patterns over that, and then ended up moving away from the text of the book into other things. All of the images were made on the move – on trains, over dinner – as I was working out of the frame of the book, and many of the images are sewn. When I showed them to Kai, she really wanted to work with them...

SR: Well that leads me nicely to the next question! Kai, what was your process of writing through the images, and how do you both feel that changes the context of the work?

Kai Fierle-Hedrick: Actually, before Marianne showed me the collages I was reading *Wonderwater (Alice Offshore)* by Roni Horn, a set of books where four different people have annotated the same series of titles and phrases from a bunch of Horn's pieces. The four authors (Hélène Cixous, Louise Bourgeois, Anne Carson and John Waters) underwrote the headings completely differently and reading the different interpretations against each other is really

interesting. So Marianne and I met up for a drink one night, and she showed me the images, and I really liked them and had Horn's project in my head. Plus they mixed with ideas that I wanted to write about. So initially I asked if I could annotate them...

MM: And we had planned to make a website.

KF-H: Yeah, *Pantoume* initially we thought of as a website, with the idea that it would be quite interactive.

SR: *So, when you were putting the website together, what kind of process did you go through? What I mean by that is, what kind of logistical concerns were there, in relation to the position of the text and images, and also the way that a reader moves through them?*

KF-H: Well, initially I thought about using a rollover to essentially footnote parts of the image. If you scrolled over a certain part of it, text would have appeared. But then the writing became a lot more coherent, in that it developed a linear structure. It wasn't written as a pantoum¹ at first, it was much more straightforward. And when I turned to the form later, because I wasn't happy with the structure of the writing up to that point, and it worked really nicely. That change wrecked the idea of annotating.

MM: Yeah, it was suddenly a different project.

KF-H: At that time, the essay wasn't a part of the project at all, but I knew there was still something missing after I had written the pantoum. I felt like the images and text were too up against each other, something about the relationship wasn't right.

¹ A pantoum is a verse form consisting of quotations with an *abab* rhyme scheme linked by repeated lines.

MM: Weren't we talking about how, when you are writing a poem, you have to express yourself from within that space of 'writing a poem', and you have to have a certain voice, which means you have to hide a lot of what you want to say? I seem to remember we talked about that. And then I remember saying that Kai should just write it, rather than trying to put it within a poem, to just write about why you're annoyed or why you're interested, and Kai ended up writing prose.

KF-H: There is a line in the prose part of the work which goes "neither to laud resorting to the bleak alienation of confession, nor to draw on the amputation of abstraction" - basically comparing being straightforward or 'in your face' to using abstract language, and how you lose something through either approach. The piece, as it was developing, was about pretty explicit things. Violence against women, and how this issue relates to being perceived as different or Other. It was kind of productive to write around these issues, because that hedging was a part of what the project was talking about, but Marianne convinced me this stuff needed to be said more explicitly. So the essay was written, after the poem, and that's why the website got reconfigured. I wanted the essay to be literally behind everything, behind the images and the poem, so you can read the essay if you want, by clicking repeat, but you can also cycle through the images and poem without reading it. Stick to the more run-around language.

SR: *I wanted to talk about repetition in the work...I realise that it is part of the pantoum form, the way that a pantoum is structured, but I was also thinking about cycles; the 'repeat' and 'return' elements of the digital piece, and the repetition in the text. The repetition recalls the images, and then each repetition within the text recalls an 'original'...but there's lots of slippage, it seemed to me. They seem more like simulacra than repetitions in some ways...*

KF-H: Well, whenever I think about repetition, I always think of either John Cage's phrase 'repetition is a form of change', or, a section of a poem

called 'Borges and I' by Frank Bidart which goes something along the lines of 'we fill pre-existing forms, and when we fill them we change them and are changed'. I was working out of the idea that you can repeat to relive, but you can also repeat to work through things and to change. The repetition in the pantoum form relates to that process of working through.

MM: Yeah, I mean you re-write your memory of things in order to understand them correctly. You repeat them but you have to look at them in a different way.

SR: *I really like the idea of repetition as working through.*

KF-H: Mmm, and the compulsion to do this doesn't have to be that negative process that Freud describes, there is something rewarding there.

SR: *Marianne, I saw some of the original visual pieces from Pantoume on the walls at the Cambridge Experimental Women Writers' Festival, and when I first saw the piece online, I was shocked at how different the implications of the images were. How do you feel that the images translate to the screen, and in particular to the internet...the politics of putting images of the female body on the internet...?*

MM: Well, some of the images are actually self-portraits, and I didn't make them in order to show them, I made them for their own sake, studies of private moments. So, when I was at the festival, and my body was suddenly on view, it was strange. Some people have interpreted that as exhibitionism, but it's more about intimacy than about that body belonging to me.

KF-H: In the collages that visual image is also a challenge, I think. At least, that's how I found it. Particularly the one nude paired with the phrase 'a pose that is sexual'. For me the lure of the pose is undercut by the caption. Plus it's not particularly *sexual*, aside from the fact that the

body's naked. There are some amazing assumptions or gut-reactions that happen with female bodies, and with femininity.

MM: You can feel that in an audience too, when the images come up, just a slight 'uh...', a little move back. Which is funny, because "this is the nineties!" (*Laughter*) But that response was possibly context-based.

KF-H: When I introduced the piece before I read it at Cambridge, that was a point I wanted to make, about how I read the collages. It was funny because somebody afterwards made a comment that indicated he was surprised with my interpretation.

MM: As a gender thing?

KF-H: Maybe because of my attention to the female image issue? But for me, that was one of the things that jumped out immediately: that issue of how we are judged according to the way we look, and this association of appearing too 'feminine' with being less powerful, or a target for violence, criticism, whatever.

MM: When I made these images, or when I make anything, in fact, I don't do it 'as a woman'. Obviously it can't really be helped, but I don't set out to do things from that idea, like, 'I'm making these as a woman and this is primarily a gender issue'. I mean, I could do that, as it has been done so well before, but I don't think of it that way. So I think this is where that issue of context comes in. I really wanted to keep some of the images I made separate, as nameless, faceless, sexless ideas or stories. Not that I'm against dealing with issues of gender, but just because the pieces are made by a woman doesn't mean that a study of them has to be gender-oriented.

KF-H: It's like that term 'woman writer'. I don't consider myself a 'woman writer', but, inevitably, I write out of being a woman. You write what interests you, what you engage with, but what you engage with and

what becomes important to you has to do with your experience and that experience is unavoidably gendered. It's also class and race specific.

SR: But, unfortunately, your work is also judged in that way. I'm thinking of a conversation I had with somebody about my own work, which often deals with female sexuality, and this person remarked that if my work was written by a man, it would be unacceptable. Because of the way that the female body is presented in the work, I guess. Do you think that there are ethics of writing and representation, gender-wise?

MM: I think you have a choice whenever you're making something, whether you're a man or a woman. You can either write out of an inchoate idea of something, an idea of yourself and who you are, or you can write with that idea, but behind it thinking also about the larger issue of gender politics, so as to influence the expression of that original inchoate idea. You make that choice, don't you? I mean obviously, you write out of being a woman, but there is that choice. Either you're talking about gender, or you're not.

K-FH: That person might have interpreted the work as misogynistic, because they made an assumption about the relationship between work and writer, but if the work itself is not communicating that, then it's not an issue. I have a huge problem with using the writer to interpret the work. I was really concerned about performing *Pantoume* in Cambridge, about linking a voice, a face, someone to look at, with this work.

SR: There's also this real issue that...um...I'm afraid I can't really avoid the phrase... 'women writers' in particular face, which is perhaps a backlash from second wave feminism, which seems to me to have left a residue of connecting writer and work in quite a direct way, which really still seems to influence readings of work by women. The image

of the female in a text is all too often directly linked to the person writing, no matter what kind of practice they have.

KF-H: Sure a lot of women's writing, particularly during and following second wave feminism, testified to women's experience. That was a specific, often political and valuable choice. But *Pantoume* wasn't put together for women, to record women's experience per se. It's about women's experience because the subject is plainly that, but it was also trying to make a point that the sex-specific label 'violence against women' masks the fact that it's everyone's problem. That's a confusion I was concerned about when I showed *Pantoume* in Cambridge. I felt in a way, because of the issues it engaged, the piece risked coming across as niche. The conference was expressly on women's writing, and to show *Pantoume* in such a gender-specific context felt tricky since it deals with a set of issues that I think belong to both men and women.

MM: That's the strength of the piece. It's not a soapbox, feminist bashing. It's not a tirade that comes from a pre-assigned position. Even though it's about an issue that's really easy to genderize and throw out of the window, it's not written in that way, because it doesn't have that ego or pretence to it. It's just trying to work through the issue. I had nothing to do with the writing so I feel able to say this. It's a very honest piece of work and it doesn't have any pretensions, which is why I think it's powerful. There's also a difference between talking about violence and talking about violence against women, because [the latter] has such a glorified and specific historical background. There's this book from the 1970s called *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller, which is just all about rape. It's basically 500 pages of gratuitous case studies, endless case studies through history...and violence, it's seen as a completely separate thing, for some reason. It is less stigmatized and infinitely more general. Violence against women is its own phenomenon.

KF-H: And it too often becomes a private experience.

SR: *Sure, yeah. In the introduction you gave to the piece at the reading you did in Cambridge, you mentioned the workshop you ran with teenagers in Angel, discussing violence against women, and how there seemed to be a huge gap between public and private language that they didn't seem to be able to fill. I was thinking about Pantoume in this context, and how it seems to incorporate both something very intimate, and also a kind of 'public' theorizing? You also mentioned earlier that violence against women becomes a private experience. So I was wondering if you could talk about notions of public and private in relation to the piece?*

KF-H: I should probably start by describing the workshop. I run workshops for the East Side Educational Trust, and this one in particular I co-ran with artist/writer Ceri Buck. We were working with teenagers, and the subject was creative speechwriting. It consisted of a week of full day sessions, and built into the workshop was a trip to Amnesty International. Amnesty put us through their workshop on the arms trade and gun control and introduced us to their other major campaigns, one of which fights violence against women. After we left Amnesty the group had this discussion, meant to inspire the students to write their speeches, where we went around in a circle and shared which issues we all felt most passionately about and why. Quite a lot of the students wanted to talk about violence against women, and it became clear this was an issue that they related to. The thing that really struck me, and it was something I had been thinking about for quite a while, was that as we talked we jumped between these two modes of conversation. One of them was confessional, emotional...based in personal experience or that of people we knew. The other handled statistics and facts. One was rational and controlled, and the other let people fray a bit and there didn't seem to be a middle ground. This seemed a real problem to me. I mean, 1 in 3 women in the world will be affected by domestic violence, so that means possibly one of us sitting here right now... and that alone makes violence against women a norm, part of our social fabric. Yet we're still struggling to

develop an everyday, non-alienating language with which to address this regular violence.

MM: And the danger of it is that because it's such a genderized thing, the minute it even looks like it's becoming a genderized thing, you get all of these polemic attitudes and it gets ignored, people start justifying it by saying 'oh you're just being a feminist—'

KF-H: The attack described in the essay actually happened, and I experienced that event and know other women who've experienced attacks or assaults, as being very personal. The experience is sited in the individual, and to talk about it, even in a non-emotional way, is quite alienating. One of the first reactions I received was pity, I was suddenly perceived as a victim, not as I was sitting there talking but as I was during the event I was talking about. When describing what happened I've often encountered this sudden response of 'you are over there, this happened to you', or 'I don't know how to engage with this', or 'I can't possibly relate, I don't have the experience'. There is this real gap that intrudes. An othering.

SR: *I was thinking about this as well, about these moments where a conversation turns from the theoretical to the personal. I've had so many moments where I've watched it turn from one to the other, with a kind of confession that seems almost desperate. It's excluded from the everyday, and the result is that these intensely emotional and repressed confessions have to happen. You're right, it really is a moment of othering...*

KF-H: Yeah, you become a 'victim'.

MM: And when you try and talk about it in a social context, or in an artistic way, you become like you're on a soapbox or something, and the delivery can be accused of being precious or an over-reaction.

KF-H: Yeah. To be attacked is a very personal event, but it's not unique. Still, it becomes isolating because of the fact that we don't talk about such violence normally or frankly, even though it is a regular occurrence. I believe there has to be a language that reflects that regularity. And not an abstract language. A daily language.

MM: That's why I think this sort of work is important, that it can bring about real change, because, I mean, that book *Against Our Will* that I talked about...say you had a book about childbirth, which was just hundreds of accounts of childbirth...on the one hand that is really useful, but it can also be incredibly alienating. Very little analysis and a lot of personal experience.

KF-H: But there's something very powerful about realizing that there is a network of others who have been through similar experiences. For me, contextualising my attack as part of a larger problem was crucial.

SR: *But the language you are given is so inadequate. The language you are given reminds me of cheesy American films. It's confession, the moment of revelation, a point at which you divide yourself from everyone else by saying 'this happened to me.'* It's such a common experience and it does hook you up, but in conversation it's not allowed to be discussed in that way.

KF-H: In my experience conversation puts the onus on me because by speaking about it I bring the violence close. And, well, violence is difficult to face. You know, when my attack comes up in discussion I'll flat-out say I don't need any pity, which can diffuse that tension, but I *still* find myself negotiating for some ground between confessional and distanced language. Trying not to put people off.

MM: Well we've been quite down on the confessional, but, I mean, therapy is confession, and sometimes you need that emotional release. It can be

quite validating. It doesn't necessarily belong in the sphere of critique or poetry or analysis, but it's not a bad thing at all.

KF-H: Definitely not. I'm not trying to undervalue therapy or the importance of seeing through the emotions triggered by an attack.

SR: *Well, in terms of the work...I think it was Robert Duncan who once described the poem as 'an object to think with', and this work seems to do that so well...working between forms and using repetition as a way of working through...do you think that hybrid or intermedia works are a way forward? Something which works between modes of expression, as a kind of step towards new or recombinatory articulations, artistically and politically?*

MM: The reason I think that the images are important in this piece is that if you look at the kinds of images we are forced to look at every day...in East London at the moment, there's this huge billboard advertisement for Matalan, with these three gorgeous women...

KF-H: Were they in underwear?

MM: Isn't everyone?

KF-H: If it's the one I'm thinking of, someone has got to it with a marker and turned them hairy! There's hair poking out of their underwear and a few have dicks now.

MM: Good! Well my first reaction was wanting to get a huge can of white paint and just cover it over. It's the element of control over the way that we should relate to sexuality and the body; I find it disgusting. I'm not a complete moralist, and I'm not against pornography per se, but the way that we are told we are supposed to understand female sexuality is just bullshit. So these images came out of something quite private, I mean I was very shocked in a way when I saw them in public,

but they come out of a private exploration of what intimacy and sexuality is to one person, not in consideration of audience. Kai's writing sort of takes the piss out of women appearing in that way; there's a lot of irony in it related to hair and clothing...

KF-H: What's feminine and what's not...

MM: So there's a parallel between the way that people don't talk about this issue of violence against women, and then meanwhile daily are subjected to these fucking naked women on billboards the size of a house.

KF-H: That's what I picked up from the images...you use all of these 'feminine' things like sewing and pressed flowers, but you do it in such a powerful and empowering way, piercing and managing the images. You made the materials very strong. Appearance was one of the things that was really connected to my discussion of violence, there's a section in the piece that talks about how you use the way you interpret people's visual appearance as a way to other them, essentially; for example 'this person's behaviour is not feminine according to my culture so I don't have to treat them as respectfully as I would a woman from my own culture.' Making that distinction almost always comes down to appearance and language.

SR: *What's the difference between a 'gender tag' and a 'tender gag', then?*

MM: Well that was a stroke of luck, partly, but the source text for the image is a page from a book about Patti Smith, who completely redefined the idea of the 'sexy female' in the 70s. She looks like a boy, and she totally didn't give a fuck, and she never took her clothes off for mass media or anything stupid. She was in a suit, really wiry and just shrieking and hollering poetry all the time. So I was trying to respond to some of those things, and the book talks about her being able to avoid a 'gender tag'. Laid over that page of the book is an image of a breast and, next to

it, a towel ring which looks exactly like a breast. The woman looks like she's been pierced or something, or is considering being pierced. The image was a bit of an accident, so I guess in that way it is a bit of a gag...

KF-H: Well, it's like, are you going to look at the nipple, or the towel ring that looks like a nipple? *(laughter)*

MM: It's not really what I intended but I think that when you work intuitively and trust your context you get good coincidences. Things become a bit more light-hearted when you aren't trying to work towards an idea of something, but rather are working compositionally.

SR: *I guess it's another way of working through...if you aren't going into something knowing that you want to explore a certain philosophical concept, but rather just start with some found materials and seeing where it takes you, it becomes quite an organic process of working through. There's a philosophy there but it comes out of a practice.*

MM: And that's the difference between a 'gender tag' and a 'tender gag' – you're not starting off with a designated site of exploration, you are working with your basic impulses. The tender gag is the process of making the portrait. The gender tag is how it's boxed after the fact.

SR: *I want to go back to advertising, which was something we talked about a while ago, and which I was thinking about in terms of a 'tender gag'. I was re-reading Sianne Ngai's essay 'Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust' recently. She talks about disgust as a political tool, and how capitalism has deliberately limited our ability to express our abhorrence to the images we face. There are so many words for desire, but expressing disgust is hard to do in language.*

MM: That's definitely true. It's like that billboard. Because you see it so often you are saturated with it, you never have a window where you are

not being bombarded with these images, so it's very hard to work out how you feel about them.

SR: Well, related to that, I wanted to talk about pop culture. I think there are quite a lot of pop culture references in the work, both the images and the text, and I was wondering why you thought it was important to deal with 21st Century London in quite a direct way in your work?

MM: I write about that so much in my work. It was partially because I was living in London and temping, and I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I was experiencing that horrible 9 to 5 shit of being the slave of getting a shitty pay cheque. I have been thinking about Debord, and how he drove himself to death by drinking because he hated Paris so much, but he refused to leave because he wanted to be able to describe this disgusting morass of shit that he was living in. I do think that as a writer that is one way to express yourself. If you're living in London right now then I do think that you have to immerse yourself to some degree. You have to look at what you're living in. You have a duty to try and understand it. By the way, shall I mull some wine? I can shout from the kitchen.

SR: Sure, that might work. I wanted to talk about collaboration, and I also wanted to talk about community, and then we can eat. I was wondering why you thought collaboration was important. I mean tonight, so far, it seems like you have a lot of common overlapping interests, but you obviously have differences, you're not just working out of exactly the same interests and viewpoints...

KF-H: Yeah, we argue!

MM: Well, I'm not sure how important it is to me. I haven't been in the position where I have developed an original idea with someone else, I'm quite selfish about my work in that I will have the idea and just need to go off and do something alone. Kai, I know it's important for

you to work in that way and you have collaborated a lot, so you're probably more equipped to answer the question.

KF-H: I think it comes up a lot for me because I like working between media...sound, image, installation et cetera. I did an MPhil in Architecture and the Moving Image in Cambridge and I worked with video, and when you work with video you work with groups of people. Even before that, in Montreal, I worked with a group, and there we were playing with pairing text and images. What I loved about that experience was that it challenged me to use language differently. Becoming too comfortable with my language makes me edgy. Collaboration is a way to constantly keep that challenge up, but also to really make sure that you don't get...

MM: (*from the kitchen*) complaisant!

KF-H: Yeah, complaisant. You can't get too comfy with a particular discourse or perspective. You really have to keep it relevant. I'm inspired by working with others. I get bored with myself.

MM: Reading a poet that you love, and writing out of that, is also a kind of perverse collaboration, isn't it?

KF-H: The one piece I haven't done collaboratively in the last few years was *Motion Study*, but that was written in and out of so many texts. There's something about being able to bounce off other people's ideas that keeps your own fresh. You really interrogate everything you're doing.

MM: No-one really makes anything in isolation, though. Even if you're on your own in the middle of a forest, there'll be people whose work you are following.

KF-H: The *Pantoume* piece is starting off as poetry but it's really using poetry as its base to experiment with how we can communicate differently.

Language is functional, it's communal, and if you don't consider those qualities in your practice...if you don't let the implications of those qualities work themselves in and challenge, then, for me at least, the practice becomes redundant. But collaboration demands this kind of exchange.

SR: Sure, sure. How do you think that works in terms of community? I mean...there are global artistic communities that have thrived on the internet, like How2, but there are also local communities, artistic and social. How do you think that collaboration relates to those sorts of communities in London today?

KF-H: Do you mean to a specific creative or poetic community?

SR: Well I suppose I was referring to a poetic community, in terms of the group of people who organise and attend poetry events in London, but I also meant social communities that build up in various areas of the city.

KF-H: Well, these past years I've met and been able to work in various ways with great people in London who share my interests in mixed-media practice. There's Marianne, of course, and Ceri Buck who I mentioned I ran workshops with, cross-media poets like Dell Olsen and Kristen Kreider who I first got to know through a workshop that used to meet in Bedford Square... and I've also put projects together with composer Panayiotis Demopoulos and my good friends Giorgos Artopoulos and Popi Iacovou (both are architects, but incorporate film, installation and dance into their practices). In my experience collaboration demands a kind of dialogic practice, open communication, people who are willing to talk, change their ideas, adjust to the project at hand... without this sense of community or mutual interest the work's just not possible.

MM: And if no one is interested in poetry, then there is no poetry!

SR: *Who would be your ideal audience, or reader, for Pantoume? Do you imagine one?*

KF-H: I think the piece is pretty flexible in a way, because of its three different parts. The images, the poem and the essay all communicate differently and people probably take to each differently, that's something I really like about it. Maybe back to your intermedia question... I do think the more we see crossovers and dialogues between different people and media modelled in creative practice... the more likely this kind of open-mindedness or active ear will work its way into daily practice. But for me above all an ideal reader of *Pantoume* would be anyone who is willing to engage with and continue to talk out the subject matter.

MM: Also, if you look at what we both got out of making it, quite aside from performing it, and it becoming a finished piece, which was a nice surprise and wasn't necessarily going to happen. I mean, Kai, what you got out of it was the ability to express your ideas about a certain subject in a way that you needed to express them. And it allowed me to understand some of the impulses that led me to make the work.

KF-H: It was definitely a valuable process. I love that poetry serves as that open field where you can play with language and try to figure out a different way of talking about things.

MM: But then we come to that terrible question of why you write, why you make work.

SR: *That's an important question, though.*

KF-H: I make it to understand.

MM: Yeah, me too. Well, I make it in order to not have to kill myself.
(laughter)

Artists & Organisations Cited

Amnesty International in the UK:	www.amnesty.org.uk
Ceri Buck:	www.openbracket.org.uk
East-Side Educational Trust:	www.eastside.org.uk
Giorgos Artopoulos:	www.geocities.com/geoloss/
Kristen Kreider:	www.unnameable.org
Panayiotis Demopoulos:	www.panopiano.co.uk

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