Re — (regarding, again and again)

Initiated in 2009, *Re —* is an ongoing collaboration between Rachel Lois Clapham and myself, Emma Cocker that presses on two writing practices to explore the process, product and performance of text. *Re —* takes its name from the event of 'regarding', 'concerning' or 'being in reference to'. It also refers to repetition, the prefix *re —* indicating an action repeated again or again and again; a backward turn or *re*turn to a previous condition. *Re —* carries with it the idea of going back to the original, but also a sense of undoing. We conceptualize *Re —* as a framework or structure within which we come together in an attempt to articulate the endeavour of practice, the making of work. We are interested in how the dialogic process of making and thinking might be recorded or archived; and in turn how that archive might be reactivated, *re*-presented. *Re —* is conceived as an iterative model that responds to and is reworked against the specificity of each invitation to perform: sometimes existing as a live reading, at other times as an installation of documents or as a score.

This paper is a proposal of four parts: (1) *Performing ellipses*: the *loop* back to and within the archive; (2) *Doubling/simultaneity*: the performance as *already* document; (3) *Repetition (against expectation)*: the question of how to repeat without repeating; and finally (4) *The autonomous fragment*: how documents might have life of their own. Referring to *Re —* this paper both proposes (and perhaps also practices) two different approaches according to which our archive is re-performed or re-activated; *firstly*, where the archive functions in germinal terms akin to a *culture* or perhaps a graft, supporting and sustaining the development of new work; *secondly*, where it exists as a collection of material fragments which have the potential for re-contextualization, recombination, restaging.

Part I. Re — performing ellipses, looping back

In 2009 I took part in *Critical Communities*, a project curated by *Open Dialogues* (Rachel Lois Clapham and Mary Paterson) working in partnership with *New Work Network*, which aimed to explore new forms of experimental writing (*on* and *as* new work). For the resulting publication *RITE*, I produced a text entitled *re-writing*, or rather I re-wrote existing writing, returning to my own archive to gather fragments and phrases extracted from extant texts, in which I had (perhaps unwittingly) been referring to the process of writing itself, its struggle or endeavour. It was a rule-based text, the rule being '*not* new work' or 'nothing new'. *Re-writing*

recycled and reused fragments from existing work that had perhaps seemed incidental or unremarkable at the time, collating them as a numbered litany of reflections about writing *as* practice. Extracts from academic texts or theoretical quotation were forced into the proximity of rather more personal, private or poetic reflections. Dislocated from their originary context the difference between became blurred, each confused for the other. The phrases functioned in the spirit of 'thought fragments' to borrow Hannah Arendt's term (which she uses in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'quotational' practice), where the act of retrieving fragments from the past might be considered akin to,

> The pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past — but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was … What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time … that in the depth of sea into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living — as 'thought fragments'.[1]

Several of these 'thought fragments' were further retrieved as a set of prompts or even 'oblique strategies', used as the initial provocation for a conversation between Rachel Lois and myself, the starting point for our collaboration.

(1)	I am not sure how to begin
(3)	It is certainly taking the shape of words
(12)	Always out of reach
(19)	Breaks things down but also leaves them *open*
(41)	Meaning to try, a tentative attempt
(55)	Haunted by memories of earlier inhabitations
(59)	In the process of writing about other things
(64)	Something has been left unsaid
(93)	Conditions
(106)	Willfully errant, a little blind
(140)	So many ways of saying the same thing
(147)	Blank spaces
(257)	Obliquely, without looking directly
(296)	Not being able to leave it alone

I refer to this pre-*Re* — moment, not to trace the project's origins as such, but to recall how the recursive return to fragments from existing work has operated as a generative strategy within *Re* — from its inception. Rather like a sourdough recipe, the working method of *Re* — involves beginning with an existing source (one's own archive) and using this as a culture from which to cultivate new work. The return to the archive unsettles its surface, scarifying its ground in the hope of bringing *new* thought to light rather than simply retrieving the old. It is an act performed elliptically, its loop like chain stitch, where the decision is one of how to draw the next work through. Each iteration of *Re* — begins with a conversation which both reflects back on a past archive (of existing work) *whilst* looking forward, searching for a vocabulary specific to the endeavour of making the next iteration. The conversation attends to what *has been* in an attempt to bring about what *might be*. Conversation becomes constitutional.

Each conversation is transcribed verbatim and then distilled, attention paid to noting the peripheral or incidental, the parts of conversation that could have gone unnoticed or that functioned as asides. In some senses, the process of conversation (and its recording) is one of archiving, a process for sharing and storing thoughts and ideas, research and references, concepts and experiences. Recorded conversation becomes a storage system or container, a receptacle for holding together a set of ideas otherwise in flux. My own process of transcription and editing involves *condensation*; the boiling down of the conversation into a series of further textual fragments, for example:

> It is a proposition *and* a proposition about a writing practice […]
> (T)rying to find the words for the live struggle [..] (;) (and) the struggle to
> find the right *words* […] (N)ot so much the struggle to find the words
> verbally as to find the words on the page, and the way that a text
> shimmers and disappears […] and comes back.[2]

Meanwhile, Rachel Lois attends to the latent gestural content, the unsaid or unspoken of what has been said. These different distillations are then reassembled as a live performance reading, each artist-writer bringing their own *versions* of the conversation together in a new attempt at dialogue. Two practices sit side-by-side, their actions mirror (if asymmetrically). Their means are restricted to broken fragments from earlier conversations and mute utterances of a finger pointing, nails pink; a spoken text of dislocated phrases; a diagram drawn; the space of breath.

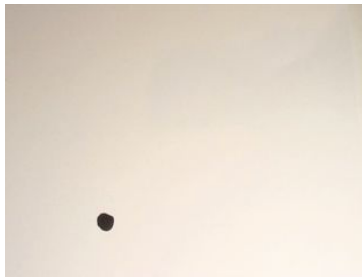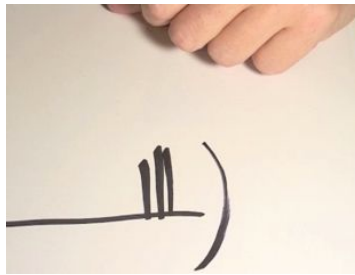*Part II: The performance is already a document.*[3]

(It) is […] unfolding. Close to memories of earlier inhabitations. It still has to mark itself out … *differently*.

(T)here is a structure […], a sense of punctuation. It has memory […]
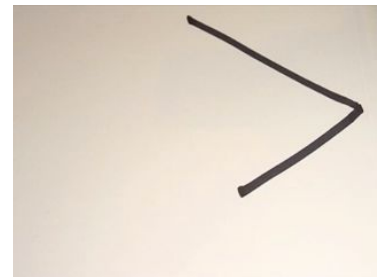
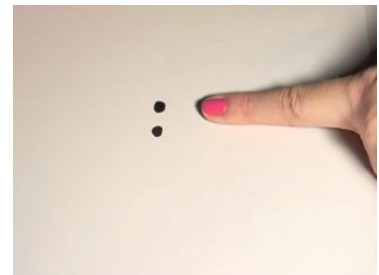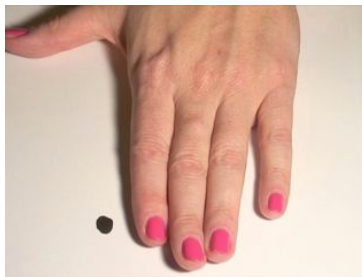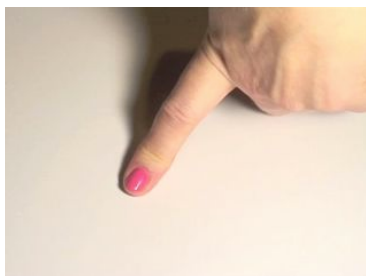(T)here is a definite attempt to get at something.

The *thing* is definitely what we are trying to get at.

It is that point *there*.

The trace of what has been before. Something (always) seeps through.

(I)t is easy to forget what goes into the making of the work, (the) things that came before.

(T)he time it takes to make the work (is) condensed into the time that it takes to perform it. What we are saying is responding to earlier gestures.

Only that thing might change.

(C)ontinuity is a construct.

Taking away in order to reveal … the taking away.

(The) performance is (already) a reworking; things always come from other things.

The performance itself operates as the archive of an earlier moment of conversation; the performance is *already a document of* a dialogic thinking-making process the happened elsewhere, at another time. One performance becomes the document of another. Moreover, within *Re —* the process of documenting performance is part-built into the process of the performance itself, performing documents do not come after or supplement the live event rather they occur synchronously.
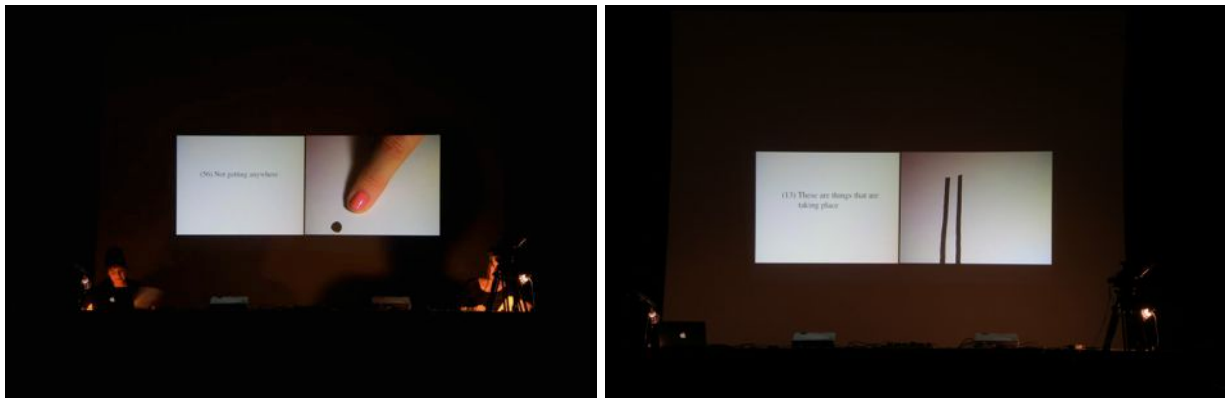
The performance unfolds as two parts: a live reading with actions projected real-time against spoken word, repeating immediately as a recording of the action but with the embodied presence of hand and voice absent. The live body and its document *perform* as one event; performance joined by its image. Following the performance immediately by its document, creates a sense of interval or delay not entirely unlike the Duchampian concept *infrathin*, best articulated through example, such as "fire without smoke, the warmth of a seat which has just been left", or else the pair of trousers that still holds the shape of the body once removed.[4] However, the separation or interval of difference between performance and document (the 'liveness' of the body and the 'not-live' of the document) *is* perceptible. By failing to capture the totality of the preceding live reading, the performing document actively draws attention to that which is now missing, to the absent body, and to the silence that now stands in place of words. The document is deliberately lacking or rather, there is now *space* or a gap in the place of what was once. In *The Sensible Stage*, Bridget Crone argues how within certain art practices, the articulation of separation between the "live presence of the body and the mediated presence of the image", between "the 'live' unfolding performance and the quoted or re-enacted material"[5]; is used as a device for drawing attention to whilst actively questioning "what is live and what is mediated?"[6] *Re —* attempts to perform its documents as part of the performance, playing the mediated image immediately back within a context what is considered live.

The performance document archives the 'becoming past' of what is taking place whilst waiting to be inhabited again (differently). Each new version of *Re —* repeats and reworks elements of previous performances, blurring the line between the documentation of one performance and the beginning of another. The spoken text of one iteration of *Re —* is distilled into textual prompts or cues for the next, the provocation for our next conversation. *The process repeats the process*. Every performance of *Re —* contains the trace or residue of previous iterations. Whilst the recursive nature of *Re —* has a certain economy of means, with each new work produced from the *distillation of* and *reflection on* a previous performance, the danger within any closed system is one of impending entropy. Here, self-reflexivity risks becoming overtly introspective, even hermetic. Increasingly, we have come to think of *Re —* as a repeating or returning structure or even as a rule-based approach, where the frame or conditions of the work remain constant, recurring, whilst an attempt is made to actively produce something different therein. Whilst *Re —* is based on principles of reduction, distillation and the act of paring things down, we are also interested in strategies for rendering the work more *open*.

In our most recent iteration of *Re —* (performed as part of the event *Strategies for Approaching Repeating Problems*, in conjunction with the exhibition *Accidentally on Purpose* at Quad, 2012) we wanted to reflect on the way that chance and accident might enable us to repeat without repeating.
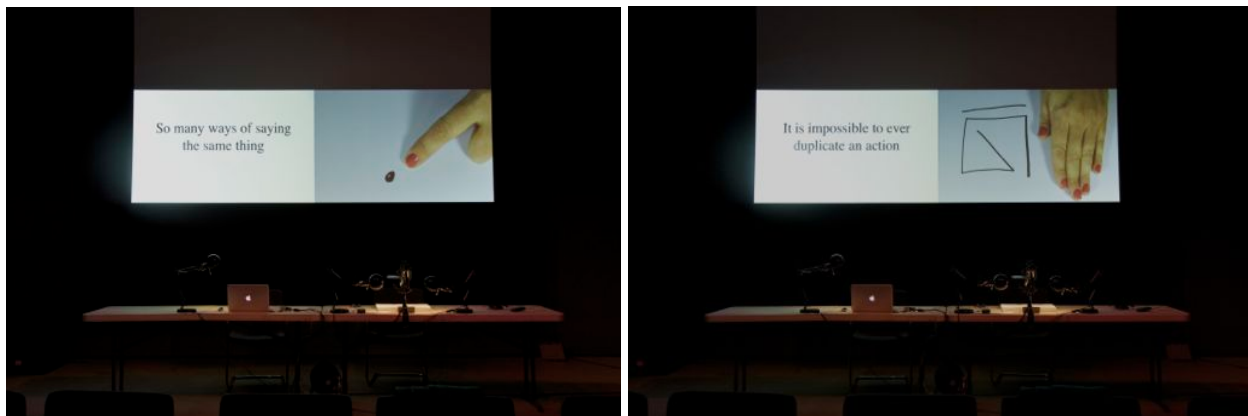
However, within our work *accident* is not so much to do with the risk of deviation, misfire or mistake emerging in the gap between rehearsal and live performance. For us the phrase 'accidentally on purpose' spoke less of error willfully courted, but more of purpose accidentally found. Paradoxically perhaps, within our work the rehearsal or refining of the performance operates as a device for enabling its documents to become more unruly.
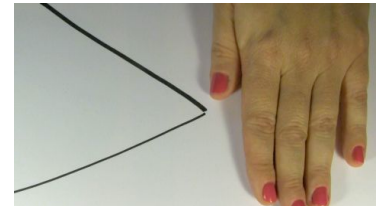
Part III. How do you repeat without repeating?[7]

(D)istraction … shapes
(things) in ways that you
couldn't anticipate.
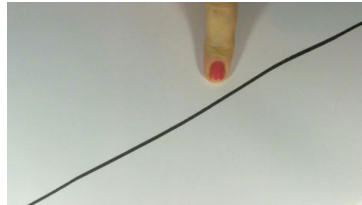
(It) is something to do with
the way that the gesture
deviates from its plan.

Its purpose *swerves* (;) (i)t is
accidentally found.

(W)hat does it mean to
prepare for the unexpected?
Being open to (the possibility
of) letting […] something in?

(T)here is a repeating
structure, but […] how do
you have change within that?
How do you repeat *without*
repeating?
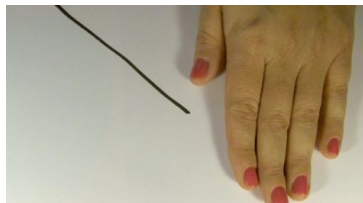
(T)here is a blindness (;) a
grasping or a groping.
(O)ther things will always
come in.
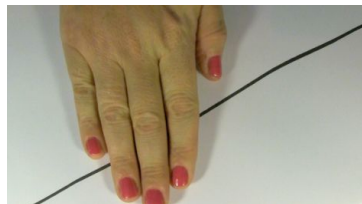

There are forms of purpose
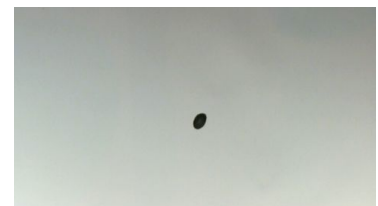that are deliberate […] and
forms … that *emerge.*
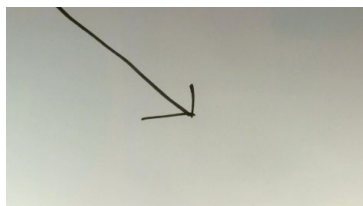
(Each) gesture has infinite
purpose.

It could be anything *and* […]
nothing.

(T)he gestures […] are
insistent, but the way that
they insist is necessarily
different each time. (T)he
difference is in their *intention*,
(in) what they are intimating
towards.

At times, the reaching out is
purposeful […] but it doesn't
quite know what it is going
to get.
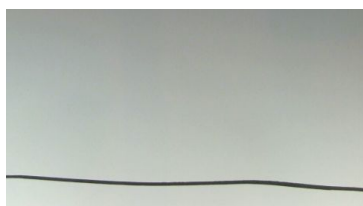
(We) are in the territory
between what we have
already done (and) the
possibility of what might be.

The performance itself strives purposefully for a certain precision or control, attending to the particular relationship or resonance between the various components of spoken word and gesture, image and sound. The performing documents *do not* perform with the same intention or attention. Precision becomes a device for creating illusory relationships that can then be immediately abandoned or undone, new connections and associations form by chance as image and text fall out of sync.

Part IV: The fragments have a life of their own

Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re —* , installation and performance reading, *Unfixed*, curated by *Reading for Reading's Sake*, Flattime House, John Latham's Archive, 2010. Photo Credit: courtesy of the artists.
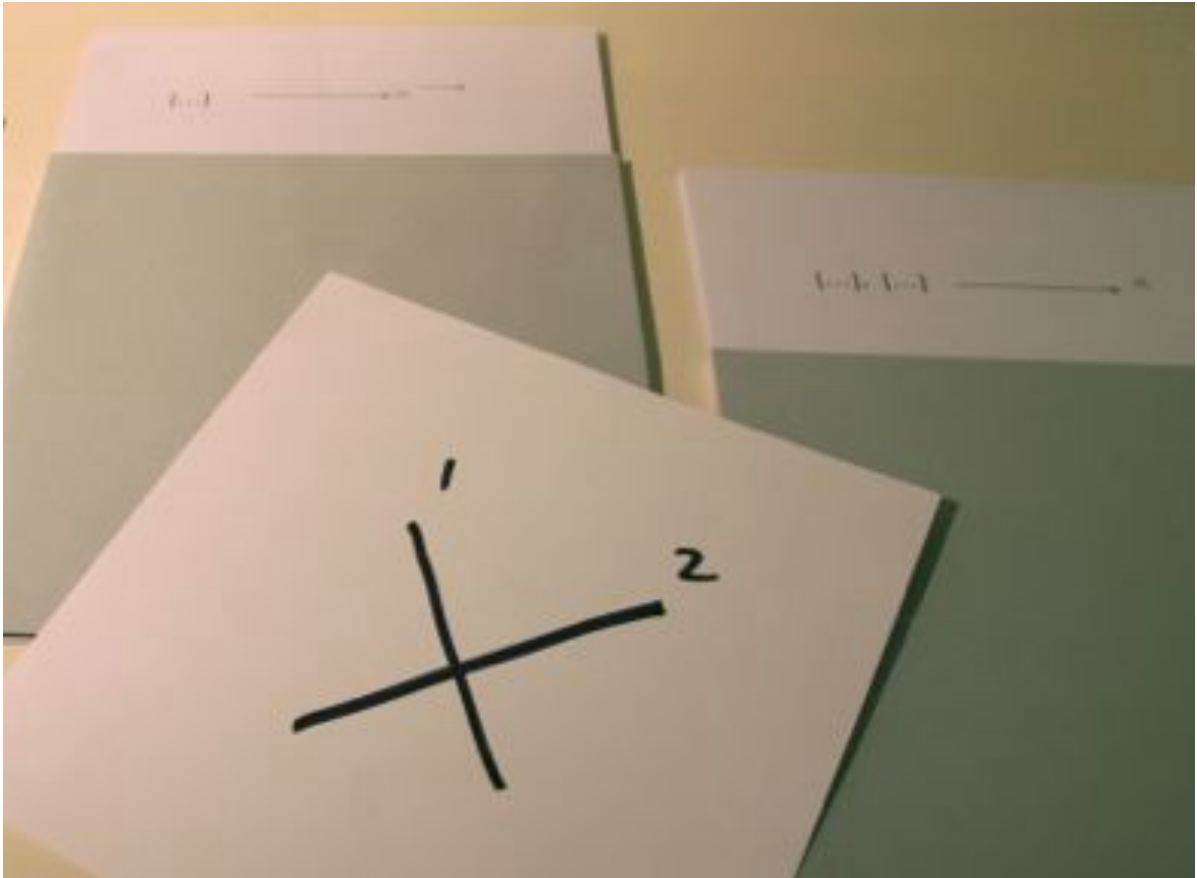
Alongside the performance readings, *Re —* has evolved towards the installation of 'performing documents'. We are interested in ways of liberating documents from their role of simply recording or preserving performance, investigating how the dislocated fragments might themselves perform. Documents can be *split* from their originary contexts, recombined as new assemblages. It is through association that new meanings gather. Presented side-by-side, two monitors relay fragments of a performance, two facets of the same event rubbing up against one another: the promise of dialogue. A live spoken reading fluctuates in and out of the installation — sometimes as a scheduled reading, at times unannounced, at first attempting to synchronize with the elements presented on the monitors, but gradually failing to keep pace over time. New readings emerge in the lag or discrepancy between original and its restaging, productive gaps open up between what was remembered and what is experienced second time around.Adding and removing elements creates stretch and slack, give or yield. Body and voice are removed from the frame of the document, and then re-inserted (differently). Their absence becomes noted only in the moment of their return, like the missing person whose absence is noticed as they *reenter* a room, rather than when they left.
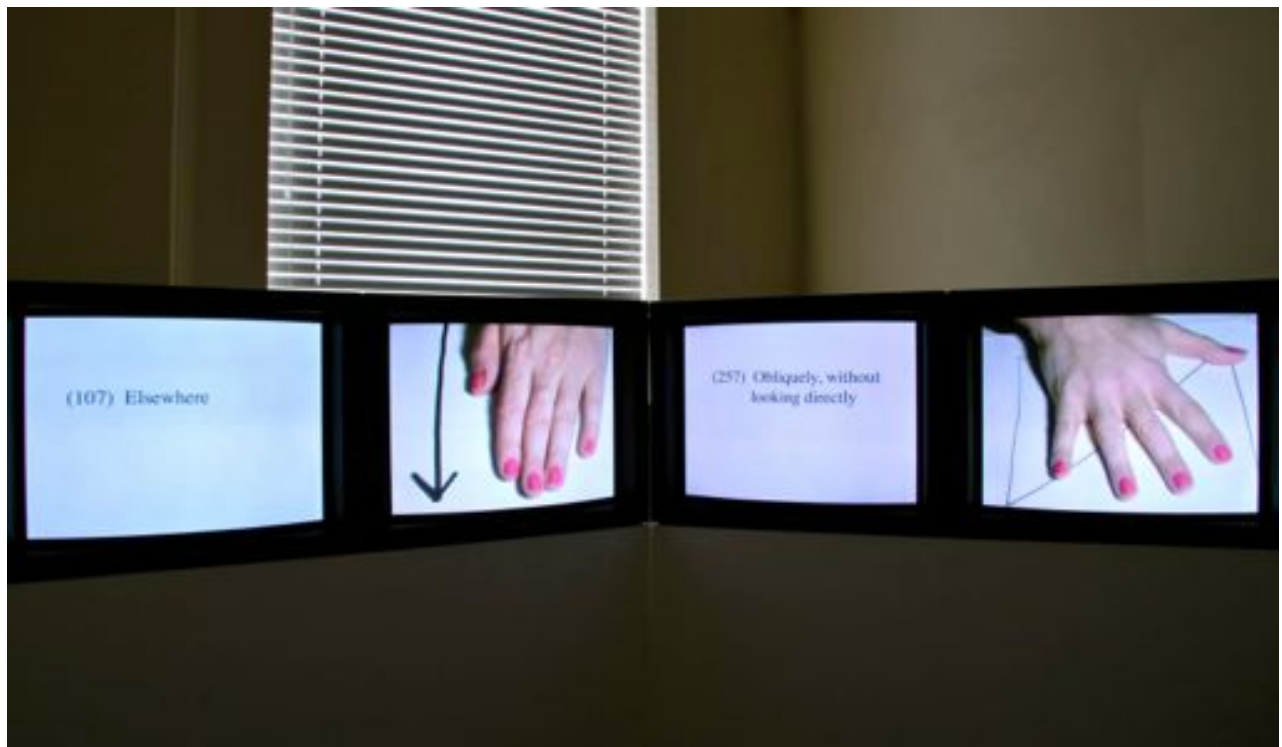
Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re* —, installation of 'performing documents', *Writing (the) Space,* Wild Pansy Press Project Space, Leeds, 2011. Photo credit: courtesy of the artists.

Technology makes the work live again or *alive*; the re-staging of what was *once live* thus develops a life of its own.[8] The material unfolds using a combinational or permutational logic, a looping system in which everything repeats yet *differently* each time. The loop and repeat structure sets up the conditions for unexpected chance encounters. Fragments proliferate and multiple, scatter or disperse any coherent memory of the originary event. *Re* — explores the impossibility of singular, panoptic forms of documentation (and knowledge) that attempt to capture or archive the totality of an event, focusing instead on the performing document as fallible fragment, where (analogous to memory) the shattering or splintering of a performance into manifold parts resists reassembly or recollection, remaining partial, incomplete.

Herein perhaps lies the dilemma for a research practice, for the artist-researcher. In *Interruptions*, a mediation on the fragment and on living fragmentarily, Hans Jost Frey asserts, "One understands the fragment at the expense of its fragmentary nature … the fragment that has been understood is not a fragment anymore. By being ordered into a context it is done away with".[9] Frey identifies the reparative imperative in the archaeologist's piecing together of broken pots, and in the philosopher's desire for a totalizing system. Or perhaps too, there is a danger of the reparative within the artist-researcher's attempts to expose or explicate the operative nature of the fragment within her practice. Some document-fragments are unwilling to be performed in such terms, preferring not be ventriloquized, preferring to remain rather more mute.

Certainly, the play between the idea of fragment (*noun*) and fragment (*verb*), and an interest in the performativity of fragmentation plays out within *Re —*, an interest shared perhaps by scholars such as Camilia Elias who have attempted to create a taxonomy of the fragment, identifying different 'species': the *coercive, consensual, redundant, repetitive, resolute, ekphrastic, epigrammatic, epigraphic, emblematic, epitaphic*.[10] However, interrogation of the fragment should be undertaken with due caution, for through interrogation the fragment is irrevocably changed. Indeed, as Frey asserts,

> Understanding the fragment would mean: giving it meaning […] But the
> fragment is what it is precisely because there is no context for it. No whole
> can accommodate it […] All the attempts to explain it turn it into something it
> is not and end up in contradiction with their own aim.[11]

List of works

Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re —* , documentation of a performance, *Afterlive*, Norwich Arts Centre, 2010. Photo credit: courtesy of the artists.

Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re —* , *Strategies for Approaching Repeating Problems*, in *Accidentally on Purpose*, Quad, Derby, 2012. Photo credit: courtesy of the artists.

Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re —*, installation of 'performing documents', *Writing (the) Space*, Wild Pansy Press Project Space, Leeds, 2011. Photo credit: courtesy of the artists.

Rachel Lois Clapham + Emma Cocker, *Re —*, documents, *Writing (the) Space*, Wild Pansy Press Project Space, Leeds, 2011. Photo credit: courtesy of the artists.

Endnotes

1. Hannah Arendt, 'The Pearl Diver', in *Men and Dark Times*, (New York, 1968) cited in Cecilia Canziani and Ilaria Gianni, *A Performance Cycle: archiving, gathering, exhibiting, recording, remembering, loving, desiring, ordering, mapping* ((Nomas Foundation, Rome, 2011), p.42.

2. Extract from performance script from *Re —*, *Afterlive*, 2010.

3. Extract from a performance reading, *Re —*, *Afterlive*, 2010. This section of the paper was presented as a spoken script performance against video footage of gesture and text.

4. Duchamp's concept *Infrathin* is discussed in the publication, *For the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat that isn't there, (*Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, 2009).

5. Bridget Crone, *The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image*, (Picture This, 2012) p.6.

6. Crone, 2012, p.8. Alongside the performance readings we have been developing a series of *readers*, a form of document that operates in dual terms, as a record of one performance, *at the same time as* a proposition or instruction for another. Each reader has two parts: part one consists of both the script and diagrams produced during a performance, thereby performing as both score *and* record. Part two consists of an empty frame, expectantly awaiting the next iteration of the project. The readers inhabit the border between times, simultaneously past *and* prospective, occupying the space both before *and* after the event, remembering *and* preempting action.

7. Extract from a performance reading, *Re —*, *Strategies for Approaching Repeating Problems*, in *Accidentally on Purpose*. This section of the paper was presented as a spoken script performance against video footage of gesture and text.

8. In the panel discussion *Performance Writing* within the *Performing Documents* conference, I proposed the concept '(a)live' in relation to the performing document; not 'alive' but rather the term 'live' preceded by the prefix 'a'. In conceptualizing the notion of non-knowledge (*avidya*) Sarat Maharaj notes how the prefix *a* signals towards a form of neutrality, the suspension of binary terms. Maharaj gives examples of the neutral prefix *a* including 'typical <atypical> untypical' and 'moral <amoral> immoral'. Thus for Maharaj, the Sanskrit term *avidya* is not the opposite of *vidya* (knowledge or 'to see-know') but rather its neutrality, a state *between* ignorance and knowledge. See Sarat Maharaj and Francisco Varela, 'Ahamkara: Particules élémentaires of first-person consciousness', in *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*, (Koenig Books, 2012), p.73. Likewise, between the supposed *live* of performance and argued *dead* of the document, I posit the *alive* of the *performing document*.

9. Hans Jost Frey, *Interruptions*, (State University of New York Press, 1996).

10. Camilia Elias, *The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

11. Frey, 1996, p.25.

Biographies

Emma Cocker is a writer, artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Nottingham Trent University. Her writing has been published in *Failure* (Whitechapel/MIT, 2010), *Stillness in a Mobile World* (Routledge, 2011), *Drawing a Hypothesis: Figures of Thought* (Springer, 2011) & *Hyperdrawing: Beyond the Lines of Contemporary Art* (I. B. Tauris, 2012) and performance-lectures presented at M_HKA, Antwerp; NGBK, Berlin; Stadtpark Forum, Graz & Flat Time House, London. not-yet-there.blogspot.com. not-yet-there.blogspot.co.uk

Rachel Lois Clapham produces writing on and as performance with UK collaboration *Open Dialogues,* writes a regular column for *Dance Theatre Journal* entitled 'Inside Performance' and curates radical writing with the Arts Council partnership In a Word. Her own practice points..., punctuates movement and presses on physical gestures as text. In 2013 she is developing a contemporary performance handbook for Oxford University Press. opendialogues.com