

L. N. 8 mai

Dear Karen, you spent some time with us last March. We invited you to give a conference in which you presented certain important milestones in your work. The invitation was given in the context of a series of activities focusing on *art and the written word*. To start, I'd like to go back to a moment that particularly caught my attention. While you were presenting a projet inspired by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, you recited one of the dialogues in a very theatrical, very striking manner. How does the performative fit into your work?

k. e. s. 9 mai

Good Day Lisanne,

Yes! And thank you for such a wonderful invitation. I do remember reciting those lines of Vladimir as he reaches out in a sudden and violent gesture to grab the character referred to as "a boy." This is the moment in *Waiting for Godot* where Vladimir seemingly questions either his own visibility or the "realness" of the boy and by extension, Godot and us, the spectators.

For the conference, the re-performance of the lines and gesture seemed to be the best way to transmit both the meaning of the words and the transition from uncertainty to violence.

Performance, and what in English we call the performative, are central to my research and my methods of dissemination. I am interested in interrogating what moves us, what we "do" – from an internal subjective perspective (why do I get up in the morning? how did I arrive at this place?) and also, an external material perspective. Is Vladimir performing or is the location and the context performing him? How much agency does Vladimir have, what roles can he actually occupy?

L. N. 11 mai

If I'm not mistaken, the video work entitled *vérifiez que*¹ precedes the use of writing in your work, although literary references are already important. Words are given prominence. How did the passage from the orality to the written text occur?

k. e. s. 12 mai

Dear Lisanne! You are making me work here! It is true *vérifiez que* was an installation preceding what I would now call my text-based work. However, I am hesitant to say "literature" as such was important. Or rather, the pull of a text was not based upon literary merit. Or again (to complicate the answer) if we say my appropriation (theft) of a text was oriented towards those works which already carried a designation of literary merit, i.e. the texts were already valorized, my theft of the words of others would have to speak to my lack. We do not steal what we do not value and we do not steal what we already possess. I would like to think I was stealing "words" and not a position, or place. But as I write this, I have to question my own logic. For of course I was positioning myself as somehow worthy of responding to the landscape of the text.

And I am seduced by how writers, well, all of us in fact, string words together. We all have the same material – words – it is merely the way we put one word in front of another word, this

sequential ordering, this simple placement of one word placed next to another word... and from this we create worlds. It is magical.

During the period when I entered a sense of myself as an artist, I felt there was a taboo regarding mixing the visual and the textual. I had the sense that the two worlds were not to be contaminated, the one with the other. A choice had to be made. I had chosen the visual and I had to honour that choice. Text, the written word, carried, for me, a sentiment of betrayal to the path I had chosen. (This was before I realized the artist does not actually have a lot of choice in their artistic path. You have to follow the art, the art leads you.) Performance, spoken word², cracked open my carefully constructed world.

L.N. 15 mai

So then, what was the first project in which text, words, appeared?

k. e. s. 16 mai

Hi Lianne,

Hmmm, the first project where text, words appeared? We would have to go back to 1995/1996. The work *evolutio*, (1995) which transformed into *strong enough* (1996) was looking at the female body and the social/medical construction of motherhood using my own experience as a point of reference. The work included a video recording with a spoken text first shown at Artcite Inc. in Windsor, Ontario. The video was subsequently presented at Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, as part of a group exhibition called Fertile Ground curated by Jan Allen. *strong enough* (1996), another iteration of this work, was shown at Galerie 303 in Montréal, Québec – here the video was not shown, but rather hand embroidered words on small rectangles of an old bedsheet, and small black and white photographs with brief text excerpts penned under or alongside the images.

(Lianne, below, in the body of this e-mail, is the only online digital information i have for *evolutio* (1995)

for *strong enough* (1996) i have no online information.

these are the two works i reference in the answer to your "trick" question... :)

Karen Spencer's installation EVOLUTIO examines the artist's use of the recorded image to create personal journals. Using the media as recording tools, the artist explores the demarcation of time and the inherent narrative of her own pregnancy. While her photographs almost clinically chronicle her nine months, a film loop of the artist speaking to the camera, talks about her relationship with the father of the child and the tone is altogether more intimate– more personal.

<http://artcite.ca/history-archive/1995/>

L. N. 26 mai

I wasn't aware of this work. What strikes me is that the practice of journaling was already very present at that time. In your talk, you spoke, among other things, of the project *has not yet arrived*, in which riding the commuter train between Montréal and Sainte-Thérèse (which you did several times a week for two months) is recounted in written correspondence.³

k. e. s 30 mai

Lisanne, I received a shock when I read this question. The words “protocole du journal” struck a blind-spot, or a self-blinding, to this aspect of my work. I never would have made the connection myself – even though to an outsider that may seem unbelievable – as it is probably quite apparent now that the words have been said. I have a discomfort with acknowledging my very own self-exposure. I would probably have talked about using my body as a “stand-in” for the female body (saying I was too shy and too poor to ask another person to pose), and my experience is put forward merely as one example amongst many of the female experience.

In the conference I spoken of the *has not yet arrived* work and its link to the daily newspaper as a way to “pin down time.” I am interested in the how we, as humans, pinpoint the date, the hour and place of our actions. I am not sure if this interest in pinning down time is because I want to place this event as outside of myself – now I can see where the event was so the event no longer resides in me and I am positioned as no longer connected to the event, or if it is because I want to position the event as contextualized within an even larger circle of activity. Maybe both.

L. N. 31 mai

Karen, you recently sent me a publication in newspaper format along with a soundtrack, both of which are part of a project entitled *sittin' with cabot square*. I think it spans the years 2012 to 2017. Allow me to quote a passage:

*rain i think its gonna rain on
rainy days the park is empty of people and full of puddles
the sole person in the park sits on the bench newspaper overhead...*

What strikes me is that this highly delimited space, very constrained, allows you to open in a very intimate, subjective manner avenues of reflection that simultaneously touch on the observation of the day to day, an almost voyeuristic regard, politics, questions concerning public space... Tell me, how does the written text here coincide with the sound project entitled *the sitter*?

k. e. s. 31 mai

Lisanne,

Initially I sent you the soundcloud link the sitter because the structure of the work resembled the earlier works around the pregnant body (*strong enough* (1996)). I was quite... well... shocked to see how similar the structure was in these two works which span more than twenty years – both were long term projects where my body was implicated, both investigated the medical establishment and the power of authorities over one's own body/life, both spoke from the first person, both used text.

Essentially, the project *sittin' with cabot square* is one of those root projects that keeps on engendering new growth. The newsprint publication, a “flawed” transcription of the spoken word *sittin' with cabot square* – developed as a means to introduce the project to the Interdisciplinary Writers' Unit group at Playwrights' Workshop Montréal in 2014 – accompanied the exhibition at Centre Clark last summer. Initially I had intended to delve deeper into the stories from Cabot Square, but during the Workshop I became conflicted about sharing the stories with a larger audience. I felt uncomfortable “outing” the people from the park. However, in 2014 Cabot Square

was gutted to be reopened with much fanfare in 2015 – much fanfare and a greatly altered landscape which clearly shouted, “homeless not welcome here”. I experienced a kind of rage regarding what I saw as blatant theft from the initial users of the park. From this rage spoken word project *the sitter* was developed.

L. N. 2 juin

You said “I felt uncomfortable outing the people from the park.” What do you mean by “outing”? If I understand correctly, what differentiates the oral, the sound-based, from the text would be, for you, this opening, this revealing that sound provokes versus a greater mediation resulting from the use of text. Does sound have an obscene dimension in this context?

k. e. s. 6 juin

Hi Lisanne,

I am going to answer the easiest question first. To “out” someone basically refers to the act of revealing confidential information about someone to the public. People who live their lives in the public realm, but who are not considered public figures, are extremely vulnerable to having their lives displayed, which in turn creates further vulnerability. Think about images you have seen in the media of homeless persons sleeping on a sidewalk and then imagine the consequences to the homeless person who now has been imaged as homeless and imaged in a specific place that can be located.

Does sound have an obscene dimension in this context? What an interesting question! Certainly sound, or speech, comes out of an orifice in the body. And certainly speech as linked to the body is fallible; we have slips of the tongue, stuttering, breathlessness.

And yet, all of my spoken word audio recordings are derived from text. Either a memorized text, as in the *sitter*, or a reading of text, as in *sittin’ with cabot square*.

One of the great differences between text and speech is how the information is received in the reader versus the listener. However, I don’t think one is more inherently obscene than the other. Open for revision though.

L. N. 8 juin

Dear Karen, we see here how translation can be tricky... obviously I used the word obscene in its figurative sense and not as a direct reference to sexuality or to the body... as an offense to decency. And I find this lovely quote by Sartre: “On this bloody earth all joy is obscene and happy people are alone.”

This exposure that activates the text was also present in the project *porteur de rêves/dreamlistener*.⁴ You transcribed your dreams onto large cardboard panels that you installed in the city. So, yet again, a public unveiling of something intimate, private.

This is perhaps the time to address the passage that occurred, within your work, I don’t know when... from legible writing to the form characteristic of your recent work, an aestheticization of the text, of letters, that makes reading difficult. It is this type of work that you pursued in the public artwork made at our invitation in collaboration with Nadia Myre⁵ in 2014; it is also the type of work that was presented at the Baie Saint-Paul symposium last year. Therefore, this

difficulty that you impose on the ability to read, is it linked to a desire to reveal the work of communication and the resistance inherent in such?

k. e. s. 8 juin

Yes. It was through Nadia generously opening up her practice to include me that I was introduced to you!

The process of arriving at what could be called my current text/image work came about through an invitation by Le Lobe to participate in their fundraiser *feuilles mobiles* (2011). This fundraiser involved creating a work on lined paper, and it was here that I used the lines of the paper to make a grid to paint in one letter per square to form a phrase. From this point I started to look back over *dream listener* work and transcribed some of these dreams into the grid structure. Perhaps because my work progresses through the doing of it, and perhaps because I could read the text/image (being the creator) it wasn't until I was showing some image/text paintings to a curator at the International Studio & Curatorial Program that I became aware not everyone could read the texts. Somehow this knowledge of illegibility was liberating. Knowing people had a difficult time reading the words opened up a sense of freedom to become even more abstruse.

Initially my texts were motivated by transcribing something I wanted us (humans) to remember. Art (potentially) has a longer lifespan than newspapers. Art occupies a certain visibility. Art invites contemplation. Because this work looks like Art I trusted sooner or later someone would decipher the image/text. I also hoped through taking the time to decipher the words, the words would be revealed to the reader with more force. Through the discovery of the text a meaning is revealed and then the text closes itself again until the next reader in turn discovers the code. In one way the text is not given to be seen. I want the reader to feel the work is for them in the singular, but only if they too will hold the words for a while. so the words sink deeper inside. (quite the romantic notion i got here...)

1. Presented in 2000 at Centre des arts actuels Skol, Montréal, Québec.
2. The term "spoken word" refers to the use of words, of orality, as viewed by Victoria Stanton, among others. See Victoria Stanton and Vincent Tinguely, *Impure, Reinventing the Word: The Theory, Practice and Oral History of Spoken Word in Montreal*, Conundrum Press, 2011.
3. This project was realized in the context of the residence-laboratory *bloc 5: les flâneuses*, organized by the centre Praxis Art Actuel, located in Sainte-Thérèse. bit.ly/2uhRtgm
4. *porteur de rêves/dream listener*, 2007, DARE-DARE – Centre de diffusion d'art multidisciplinaire, Montréal. This project took place through multiple manifestations: urban actions, audio track, book, DVD, postcards...
5. *Frozen blue*, ephemeral public art work realized, at our invitation, in March-April 2014 by Nadia Myre and Karen Elaine Spencer on the walls of La Bordée theatre and referring to the play *Frozen*, which was currently running there. bit.ly/2tIH9kt

Traduction: Karen Pick

