



There is power in silence. As teenagers we quickly learn that to not answer back will infuriate a parent. As women, choosing not to speak has connotations of submissive behaviour but also paradoxically of defiance - as with the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina who march silently with the images of their missing children. There is a sense that the directly spoken word does not say enough anymore. Instead we live in a culture that relies heavily on visual imagery to sell, to seduce, to repel, to convince, to speak to us without speaking. To choose to not speak in a performance does not mean it is devoid of text.

For the first time, in my most recent piece *Feeling Poorly*<sup>1</sup> I have chosen not to speak. In fact it was a strangely unspoken rule when rehearsing with my collaborator Katrina Horne. We simply did not feel the need to talk; we needed to trust that in this six hour durational, installation piece we could communicate without speaking. Yet the piece was full of text. If one strains to hear, on the sound track you can just about make out the line "it is like secret thoughts which ooze through the body in a feverish language" and this is how the words on the body began. Primarily the body became the text, and the site of speech; during the performance various substances are layered onto my body and, at different stages, messages emerge. After a layer of Vaseline, a dusting of talc, a scraping of scissors and finally drops of iodine are scrubbed away, we are left with "she was unknown to herself" and other transient texts. In fact my body reacted so strongly to these messages that some are left in scars, due to an allergic reaction to iodine.

It was not only the body that was the source of text, but there was potential in the over-spill from the products to write to the one spectator who was allowed in the space with us. I scratched in the talc "is it still daylight outside?" as being shrouded in a 2x4 metre blanket cell/camp I had no way of knowing time or day. What was alarming was the spectator answering by speaking aloud (I thought she might write back to me). Her "yes" resounded around that tiny space as if it might break, but it was also a relief to me to feel that I still had a grip on some kind of reality - that of the able-bodied and the free, that of those who choose to speak. It was not the silence that imprisoned me, it was the coming back to the body - the stillness, the boredom and frustration with an unwell body.

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1. *Feeling Poorly* was a "Breathing Space" commission from the Arnolfini and a new work for "12 days of Risk" Chapter Art Centre in Cardiff, May 2000. The sound track was created by Daniel Belasco Rogers and the video piece was created by Louise Teale. It was shown on tour at the NOW festival, Nottingham, and Live Art Festival in Bristol, with a new collaborator, Catherine Large as Katrina Horne has recently moved to Chicago.

One of the texts that inspired me to make this piece was a quotation from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

*No one speaks to me or asks me how I feel. In an hour my mother's hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do promptly.*

It was the savagery of this act, the Vicks salve in the mouth, the being left to sweat, that both repelled and intrigued me. It was the blurring of the carer and the cared for, and the tender and the savage, as two women who sit out an unknown illness are confined, not only by space, but also by each other's company.

In *Feeling Poorly* the carer writes down her observations, and her thoughts. I do not see this text whilst performing, but I often think about what it might possibly be. Something about having an individual experience of the piece allowed people to write to us. Katrina would leave her book of notes open and people would read (in such an intimate museum of curiosity, everything was "on show") and in response to the entry "where has she gone?" one woman wrote "she has gone somewhere you cannot go". In a world

where I do not speak and am not spoken to, being allowed to read the text in the book is a real treat. It is a careful, quiet re-introduction to language, and hence the outside world beyond the timeless cell we inhabit.

And now I do not write within the piece any more. For the first time ever I performed recently in a gallery, rather than a theatre. The floors were too shiny in comparison to old black theatre floors and the urge and the immediacy to communicate through words has dissipated. Perhaps it was convalescing this summer after an operation that made me realise that you cannot fight the body, you must listen, you must give in to what it needs. However, I write more than ever, before and after the piece as preparation and as reflection, as a way to bring back my subject-hood to my lifeless objectified body. After the last show I wrote a stream of consciousness from revisiting that bodily state from memory, and a letter never to be sent or read by the carer.

*I lay still. I hold my breath. The beginning is often the head - to be cooled, calaminated, dabbed. This initial touch is a shock, I gasp, I flinch - just as I do with the stethoscope on my back. There was no need to talk about it, we knew what was required - a breath in, a breath out - until I satisfied your curiosity, your procedure.*

*The only thing to be done is to cut it open. The nightdress I mean - stop it floating down the river. Get to the flesh quickly, apply poultice and rest. Light out - sleep now. "Sleep". I feel you write it on me over and over as if it would*



*Feeling Poorly* Photo: Eve Dent

come. I sit up the second you think there is peace and this pathetic plea for attention is in turn ignored or administered to. I feel sorry for you having to deal with me. I can't help this childlike state, I cannot bear to be alone with this heavy feeling weighing down on my chest. I feel pain.

Someone thought I was a doll, you see, I have to prove I am human. I find comfort in stillness.

What is it to disobey? To refuse food is one thing. To refuse medicine is another. I know your limits, I have tested them.

The words have dried like an awful skin disease and I flake them off to bring forth newness. My bed is full of sores or evidence of what they were. I have realness in this illness. I ache, I hurt, I am dying again and again and again and again. Repetition till you and I can take it no more.

What is it she writes about? I cannot intrude

into your world. You have found your place by the cupboard - are you not tempted by your own potions? Am I not making you sick? Please hear my thoughts. Please come to me now.

I feel dejected, alien, repulsive. I stink, I sweat, I weep.

Your playfulness brings a faint smile; I want to resist mothering but I can't. I want to take myself seriously by laughing. We are here forever. No daylight, no birds, no grass, no word.

This is it then. I give in.

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*Glass Beads* was created without a play-script in the traditional sense. I was offered "seed money" from Magdalena Aotearoa to create a performance for the Magdalena International Women's Festival in 1999 and I invited Olivia Lory Kay, a film maker, to collaborate with me on the project. We decided to focus on the writings of Janet Frame, a pre-eminent New Zealand novelist who spent many years confined in mental institutions. We read her poetry and novels and I looked for recurring themes in her work, which included whiteness, war, land-

scape, family, loneliness and the socialisation of women.

Olivia and I were thinking of the project in isolation, I was in Denmark and she in New Zealand. I became fascinated by the quality of light on moonlit nights in Denmark, the snow reflecting a bluish eerie stunningly beautiful light, and my desire grew to re-create this light on stage. Meanwhile, Olivia had made an art installation of four large glass screens suspended in space with three television monitors and two film projectors. Independently, I was