

Foreword

I have been involved in a process of interrogating the words I use to tag or label areas of the practice and research I am busy with and invested in - both drawing attention to and identifying the areas, issues, concerns and/or words that need attending to. My attending to these terms provides a space that is both generative - allowing me to think more deeply about/around the work, opening up a space and time to work things out through writing - and simultaneously descriptive or about explaining. These are words that act as a focus to gradually make things clearer.

I would like to use this lexicon as a way to frame up this interrogation (searching for, finding, close questioning and unpacking) of terms as a methodological approach, gathering together (and presenting) some of the words that have a particular use-value for me, or us as LOW PROFILE (satisfying a need or want), and for others (realised in the process of consumption - through writing, presenting, reading, listening, talking about, exchange and re-presentation). It functions (as a lexicon) both as a container for words belonging to the same language and as a way to make visible the organising of a mental vocabulary in the speaker's mind - a way to organise and present scattered thoughts, translating them into a written format.

Lastly nothing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value.

(Marx: 1867, Vol. I, end of Section 1)

This process of developing a vocabulary for discourse around the area of research/inquiry is undertaken in the hope that attending to (spending time/effort/labour focusing on) these words endows them with a particular usefulness - what Marx terms a 'social use value' (Marx: 1867). In my case, this process is not solely contained in the space of writing - I find that the practice itself (the making/showing of live work and ephemera) is helping to develop the vocabulary, and that the vocabulary is helping to develop the practice.

At this point, it may be worth identifying/unpacking my interest in using “common” words – words that already hold a shared meaning within language – as a way to unpick and further investigate this extended practice I am involved in. These are words that are intended not to exclude. As with the work I make as part of LOW PROFILE, in my writing I am invested in (committed to, and engrossed by) making reference to, and use of, things/words that are used by ordinary people (like myself); things that do not require a specialist knowledge or suggest a special privilege, rank or status; things that do not require a specialist glossary or explanation; things that instead imply what Rancière calls an ‘equality of intelligences’ (Rancière: 2007) – a situation where author and reader or artist and audience share a space of investigation focusing on something that is in some way ‘foreign’ to both.

In this sense, I offer this lexicon, not as a glossary that defines terms, or as an attempt to master these words, but as a space for a re-negotiation of meaning and use-value of these words - for reader and author to approach these shared yet ‘foreign’ words. I hope that it can act as a space in which to unpack and re-present this process of ‘reclamation’ I am involved in - this attending to (and caring for) things that might otherwise be overlooked – and the strength of the activity of searching for/finding/using these words.

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References:

Marx, Karl (1867) *Das Kapital* - Vol. I, end of Section 1, Chapter 1
(available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>)

Rancière, Jacques (2007) ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ *Artforum International*, March 2007, pp 271 – 280

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Notes:

All dictionary-like texts included are derived from the Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation and Dictionary.com. Minor adjustments may have been made to the ordering of senses, with some senses of the words omitted.

As this is a work-in-progress, some of the terms/words have simply been identified and are still waiting to be attended to – these words appear as notes on post-its throughout the lexicon.

ADMINISTRATIVE
AESTHETIC

ATTEMPTING
TO . . .

(HUMAN ENDEVOUR)

(EPIC TASKS)

(PERSISTENCE)

ATTENDING

TO ...

(RAISING IMPORTANCE
OF / FOCUSING ON/
CARING FOR OR ABOUT

[i-fem-er-uh]

e·phem·er·a n

1. something that is transitory and without lasting significance
2. See mayfly n.

I am an artist making live work (or performances) and associated ephemera (like bookworks, installations, videos and photographs).

Why use the word “ephemera” in this description?

In common usage, “ephemera” refers to objects – *some things* – usually transitory written and printed matter that is not intended to be retained or preserved. The word is derived from the Greek and New Latin for *epi* = one and *hemera* = day, meaning things lasting no more than a day. This term could be applied to any document that is meant to be thrown away after one use – think letters, snapshot photographs or insects like the mayfly. It could also extend to encompass video/audio ephemera. Again, these are documents created without the intention of being retained or preserved, like the video of you and your friends on a night out, radio chat shows or mix tapes.

The word ephemera is also used to describe collectible items, something short lived that would have initially been cheap or disposable – cigarette cards, airsickness bags, bookmarks, catalogues, greeting cards, pamphlets, postcards, posters, bus tickets, zines or the “Most-wanted Iraqi” playing cards produced to help US soldiers to identify their enemies (with Saddam Hussein as the ace of spades). The collectability of these items means that sometimes we are presented with idiosyncratic collections of these objects – like at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (which houses a collection of everyday functional/practical/ceremonial objects) or the Bill Douglas Centre at University of Exeter (which brings together a collection of ephemera related to film and moving image).

There is also an art historical sense that we are referring to when we talk about ephemera. There are identifiable traditions of artists using ephemera as a material (in the case of artists making “assemblage” like Robert Rauschenberg or Kurt Schwitters who are using things like bus tickets or discarded objects) and artists working with ephemera as a format (artists producing books, pamphlets, stickers, badges, and other altered objects).

For us (LP), this word ephemera seems to ‘fit’ as a way to describe the things that we make as LOW PROFILE that run parallel to our live work, partly because of the associations this word has with collectable items - something short-lived, ‘brief’, temporary or transitory - but also because of the connotation of ephemera as ‘stuff’, matter or things (as opposed to live situations or events). The term is also useful as it reflects our (LP) conceptual concerns with things that operate in a space between the provisional and the authoritative - referring to the performative qualities of the place/space of the reception of the work (creating live situations, or a mode of reception that is fleeting or provisional or hard to grasp/contain) and a possible space of resistance. The descriptor “ephemera” becomes attractive as it also suggests something that falls a little short of an official or authoritative document or recording - something that serves as a makeshift or provisional trace, made from what you have to hand, that has a limited usefulness and is designed not to last for more than one day.

Describing (or re-phrasing) these things/artworks as “ephemera” reflects our desire to create artworks that are never quite ‘final’ - artworks that in some way resist becoming (simply) artefacts, with an emphasis on these things as responsive to/indicative of an unwieldy provisional (sociable) state rather than the controllable rarefied (distant) objects of art.

* * *

EXCESS

(TOO MUCH)
(NO CLEAR CENTRE, NO
CLEAR EDGES)

[non-vur-choo-oh-soh]

non·vir·tu·o·so n

non-

a prefix meaning “not,” freely used as an English formative, usually with a simple negative force as implying mere negation or absence of something (rather than the opposite or reverse of it, as often expressed by un-): nonadherence; noninterference; nonpayment; nonprofessional.

vir·tu·o·so n

1. exceptional performer: a musician who shows exceptional ability, technique, or artistry
2. talented person: somebody who shows exceptional technique or ability in something
3. connoisseur: somebody who is knowledgeable and cultivated in appreciating the fine arts

(from Italian *virtuoso*, late Latin *virtuosus*, Latin *virtus* = skill, manliness, excellence)

Q: How do you become a virtuoso?

A: Practice, practice, practice.

The position of non-virtuoso is an attempt to negate the notion of artist as genius – this mythical figure whose individual talent and skill is mysterious/impenetrable, marking and re-enforcing a vast separation between them and their audience. The aim of this virtuoso/expert is to dazzle, to master, to control or exert power over, to conquer, to ‘own’ and to overcome.

In the live situations we (LP) set up, we are interested in tactics that emphasize the commonalities we share with those who come to view what we present, rather than tactics that subjugate with a didactic approach. This is not to suggest that there is no distance or difference between those who share the space/time of the performance (the work is all about those differences) but instead about assuming and re-enforcing an 'equality of intelligences' (Rancière: 2007). We are not presenting ourselves as amateurs, as unprofessional or unskilful but instead suggesting an alternative or different measure of 'skill'.

Our interest in making/showing work is not about flourish (grand gestures, embellishment, showy-ness), competition (the goal of outperforming others or of winning something) or achieving a mastery of the performance space. We (LP) are not 'at home' on the stage, or with performing – the 'on stage' is other to us. This position allows us to develop (and acknowledge/encourage the development of) "ways of operating" (de Certeau:1984:xix) – "tactics" (in de Certeau's terms, what you use when you are not 'at home') for surviving the situation, "clever tricks" and knowing how to get away with things (de Certeau:1984).

The place of the tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalise on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances.

(de Certeau:1984:xix)

Rather than adopting a sleight of hand (or playing at being experts), we are interested in drawing attention to our non-interest in creating something that is 'a work of art' (masterpiece/ masterwork) - savouring our work's unwieldiness (if "wielding" holds a connotation of the use of force, power or authority). In an arena (art and performance) traditionally concerned/obsessed with greatness, solo-genius, virtuosity, display of skill/talent/connoisseurship, our (LP) approach may seem a little out of tune or paradoxical.

In relation to our (LP) practice, it may be useful to talk about operating with competence rather than 'skill'. Competence suggests a person's

internalized knowledge of the rules of a language that enables them to speak and understand it, or the ability to do something well or to a required standard. This would imply a proficiency, a perceptiveness or savvy - know-how (rather than the falsehood of know-it-all). The competent non-virtuoso would then operate in a way that is credible, effective, capable and applicable to the context – rather than reliant on a current (accepted or shared) understanding of what the descriptors ‘good’, ‘the best’ or ‘exceptional’ mean in the technical terms of a certain field.

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References:

de Certeau, Michel (1984) trans Steven Rendall, *The Practice Of Everyday Life*, London: University of California Press

Rancière, Jacques (2007) ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ *Artforum International*, March 2007, pp 271 – 280

[seer-eez]

se·ries n

1. a number of similar or related things coming one after another
2. a set of regularly broadcast programs, each of which is complete in itself
3. a number of books, pamphlets, or periodicals brought out by one company or organization on the same or related topics or in the same format
4. in some sports, for example, cricket and baseball, a set of games between the same teams
5. a number of related items, for example, stamps or coins of different values, brought out at one time
6. a group of related chemical compounds that are similar in structure or properties. (Also called family)
7. the indicated sum of a finite or infinite sequence of terms, each term being added to those that precede it.

In our work as LOW PROFILE, we have more recently been engaged in ‘working in series’ – developing artworks (live performances and ephemera) that investigate a linked set of concerns through a number of different outcomes. These outcomes are made public one after another and each piece is ‘complete’ in itself, although they are tagged, named or labelled with a consistent prefix (e.g. DRY RUN).

This decision (to ‘work in series’) came about as a response to the dissatisfaction we felt in producing (or feeling like we were expected to produce) artworks that were in some way ‘final’ – occurring at the ‘end’ of a period of research; suggestive of being the last and most important, highest quality outcome (the ultimate); presented as absolute, definitive, conclusive and allowing no further discussion. This notion of finished work, of finality, or even the assertion that an act, belief or statement

could be taken as final stands in stark contradiction with the concerns of our work and research. In the face of this challenge, we chose the format of the series to strategically position the public showings of our work.

This idea of a series offers a number of useful connotations for us.

Series as a way of dealing with a need for ‘completeness’ while retaining a sense of un-finalness (or provisionality)

In our work (as LP), we are interested in ideas of ‘wholeness’ and ‘completeness’ in relation to ideas of ‘excess’ (too much) (no clear edges, no clear centre) (untidiness) - things that are relentless, unending and imperfect. For this reason, the formats in which we make our work public are often provisional (temporary or conditional, pending confirmation or validation) unpolished, or seemingly makeshift. As these decisions about format are intentional and considered (and the un-finalness of what we are presenting reflects the conceptual concerns we are dealing with), it is important to us that the situation is not mis-read or dismissed as ‘work-in-progress’ (a work that is yet to be finished or not quite ready to be presented). The work we present is not unrefined, not unsophisticated – each part of our investigation should be presented as an ‘occasion of showing’, each of which should be notable.

For these reasons, working in series offers a degree of tidiness – allowing us to present (and give time/space to) each element of the work and suggesting that the series is something on-going rather than something that is incomplete. In this way, the work becomes programmable (starts to fit within institutional programmes like exhibitions/festivals/residencies etc.). The frame provided by the series means that the audience know that the element (i.e. performance, bookwork, video, merchandise) that they encounter is *something* that is part of something larger. It is important that each thing (artwork) is still viable on its own, but it does not pretend to have all the answers, to be all encompassing, conclusive or ‘near perfect’.

The series is also of indeterminate length – we may never be done with this thing. The parts of the series are numbered chronologically in the order that they are shown/made public but this is not to suggest that part 2 is better (or more accomplished) than part 1. Rather than supersede each

other, each new component sits alongside the others, building a greater understanding of the area of research/enquiry, with an interconnectivity that means each part plays off (or re-activates) the others – rejecting the idea that there would be an ultimate (the most nearly perfect) or final artwork/piece.

Naming work as part of a series also suggests a ‘regularity’ in how often new works will be shown or the expectation that there will be another thing (artwork) that follows – something that reflects the process/patterns of how we (LP) work.

Series as a method of ‘ordering’, ‘tagging’, ‘labelling’ or ‘naming’

Within the context of a conversational collaborative approach (where work is developed through conversation and exchange between two or more parties), ‘naming’, ‘labelling’ or ‘tagging’ scattered elements, details, observations, scraps, fragments, intuitive feelings and so on becomes particularly important, if not essential. Identifying particular qualities and naming these allows for the development of a shared language and can serve to unpick and test the ideas/concerns being explored. This naming or labelling helps to draw some kind of edge around the ideas, with the ‘names’ and the ‘named’ under continuous scrutiny (and subject to re-grouping / re-ordering) as part of the process of working out what ‘it’ is or isn’t. For us (LP), we have always found it useful to give a/the set of concerns we are working with a name so that we have a focus, something to talk about/around, a framing for a particular discussion and a way to identify which elements of our investigations could belong alongside (or near) each other in an artwork/piece.

Similarly, naming a series and ‘tagging’ artworks as belonging to that grouping (or series) extends this process, making it visible to/for others (audience). The name given to the series (e.g. DRY RUN) needs to be specific enough to be suggestive of a distinct set of concerns, but wide enough to allow for each element (e.g. parts 1, 2, 3 etc.) to re-define or unpick/unpack a different instance or nuance of the issues at hand. In this way, the things that are tagged (the individual components of the series) give meaning to the tag (the name of the series) as well as vice versa.

This process of distinguishing sundry elements that rest under an umbrella term (rather than aiming for one clear-cut, conclusive, absolute or unconditional outcome) allows room for doubt, questions and contradiction, requiring a state of constant re-negotiation of ideas and shifts-in-attention from both artist and audience. The distinctions drawn between each part in the series also allows for special kind of individual attention to be paid to each piece/part – so that it can be given the space/time that it ‘needs’ (whether that is, for example, a 17 hour durational live performance, an 8 minute to-camera video or a 233 word instruction piece), rather than being constrained by an existing format of presentation (the 1 hour long end-on theatre show, the 99 minute feature film, the 3 minute pop-song).

Series as a way to impose order, making disparate elements appear more like each other

‘Working in series’ also offers a sense of continuity, consistency, stability and connection that is especially useful when working across seemingly disparate formats, allowing for the association of works by content, rather than by form/medium. This allows us (LP) to draw from (and retain particular qualities of) a number of reference points – like procedures and instructions, action adventure TV programmes, systems of empirical measurement, survival books, charts and graphs, movie plot lines, TV marathons, consultation exercises, airhostess safety routines, triage systems, diagrams and so on – without having to render, translate or ‘fit’ each one into the same format.

In this way, the series becomes a method of connection – associating, linking or fastening this loose collection, while retaining a sense of incongruity (that these things in some way belong together but remain strange or out of place in a particular setting or context).

* * *

UNPHOTOGENIC

[UHN-FOH-TUH-JEN-ik]

- NOT VISUALLY / AESTHETICLY SLICK,
CONCISE OR COHERANT
- NON-SPECTACULAR
- HARD TO IDENTIFY EDGES,
HARD TO IDENTIFY CENTRE
- WORKING TO THE SCOPE OF THE TASK
(LINGUISTIC / CONCEPTUAL), RATHER THAN TO
THE SCOPE OF THE LENS (VISUAL / BODY
CENTRED)

UNTIDY

[UHN-TAHM-DEE]

- NOT NEAT
- IN SOME WAY UNORDERED / DISORDERLY, Muddled, CLUTTERED OR A BIT CHAOTIC
- NO EDGES
- TOO MUCH STUFF
↳ EXCESS
- UNMANAGEABLE (A BIT OUT OF CONTROL)

UNWIELDY

[UHN-WEEL-DEE]

- DIFFICULT TO GET IT TO DO WHAT YOU WANT IT TO DO
- UNPORTABLE (DOESN'T QUITE FIT) (TOO BIG/TOO LONG)
- AWKWARD (TO CAREN) (A BIT OUT-OF-PLACE)
- 'HARD WORK' (YOU MIGHT BE GLAD IF SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT FOR YOU)
- CLUMSY, CUMBERSOME OR UNSTAINLY
↳ THE POSSIBILITY OF MISTAKES AND THINGS GOING WRONG IS NEVER FAR AWAY.

UNWIELDY

(CONTINUED...)

- NON-INTEREST IN 'MASTERING' OR 'CONQUERING' THE PERFORMANCE SITUATION
↳ IN FACT, AIMING TO RETAIN THIS STATUS/AESTHETIC OF THE NON-VIRTUOSO (NOT THE SAME AS AN AMATEUR)

