



# ADSR Zine

## 008



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***Song without words****Video still, 1999-2016*

14 minutes 22 seconds looped

HD video projection,

Performance with footage of

Jaqueline Du Pré performing

Felix Mendelssohn's

*Lieder ohne Worte*

I seem to make work as a kind of contingency plan for future events.

This is not to say that I possess a special ability to see into the future. I liken the process to the feeling you get when you watch a film for a second time. At first you only remember parts of the beginning and perhaps the scene at the end. As you move through the film, small details that seemed insignificant on the first viewing become more poignant.

In 2016 I began a series of work that would act as a ballast for both future and past work. The first video in the series was a video piece entitled *Song without words* taken from the name of a Mendelssohn sonata for cello that I learnt during my high school years.

I was never really any good at playing the cello, although I did enjoy it. To learn the piece I used to watch a video of Jacqueline du Pré playing the song and follow her movements as best as I could. It became a duet of sorts - across different time and spatial thresholds.

Little did I know that this process would form a major part of my artistic practice in the years to come.

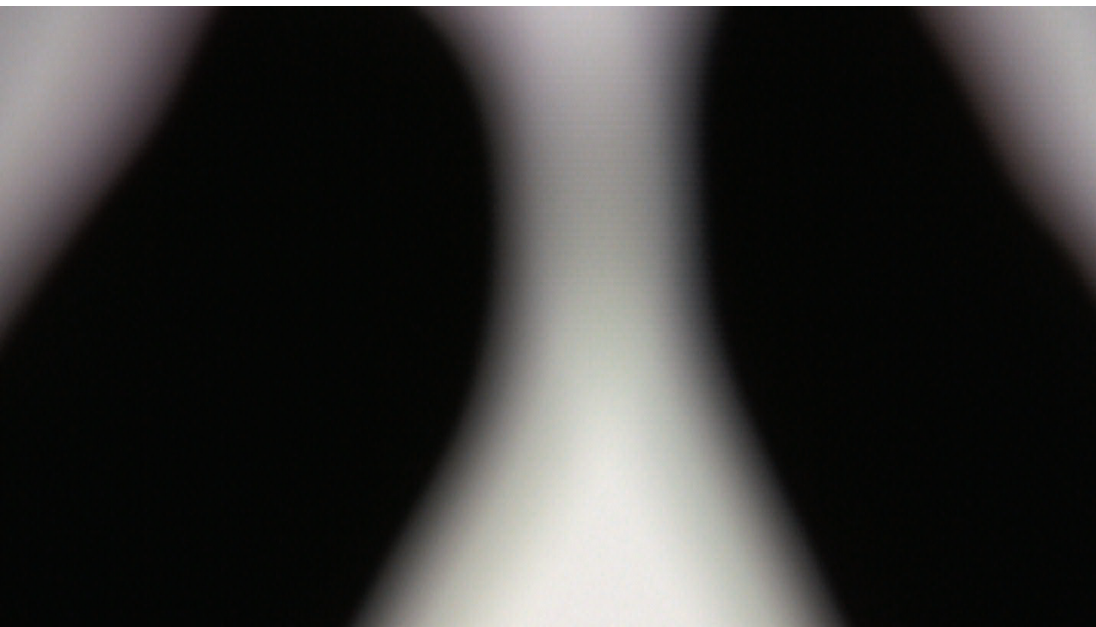
**Touchant Touché #2**

Elise/Jürgen

Video Still, 2009

9 minutes 7 seconds looped

HD video projection



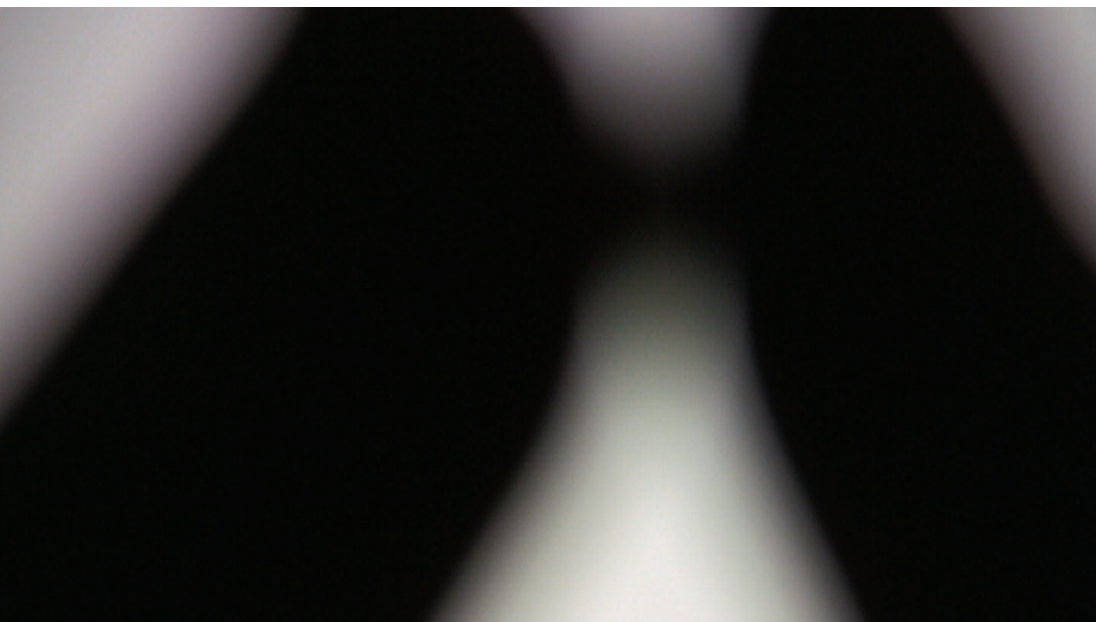
**Touchant Touché #1**

Elise/Jürgen  
Video Still, 2009  
2 minutes 2 seconds looped  
HD video projection

Throughout my undergraduate studies in art I collaborated with another student - the late Jürgen Kerkovius who sadly passed away in 2014. Our collaboration developed out of a want to undermine the idea of authorship within the institution and to explore the nature of influence within creative practice. In 2009 we co - authored our honours thesis and project which explored the nuances of collaboration at a distance through the communicative potential of the mediated other.

Somewhat like my teenage self playing along with Jacqueline du Pré, the body of work made in 2009 has taken on different significance over the years. The first being Jürgen's passing in 2014 where the notion of a 'mediated other' entered the realm of the ghost story, and here and now in 2020 - our honours thesis resurrected through Covid-19, a global pandemic that has forced the entire world to physically self isolate and to communicate at a distance.

Never before have our bodies been so reliant on the single point perspective of the camera to transmit our own body to another body. The problem of this being that in order for perspective to work its pictorial magic (as it has been doing since its invention in Renaissance painting) is that it acts as a visual mechanism for distancing the body from its surroundings. It structures and orders our understanding of space as if we are always looking at it through a window.



**Touchant Touché #1**

Elise/Jürgen  
Video Still, 2009  
2 minutes 2 seconds looped  
HD video projection





#### Touchant Touché #4

Elise/Jürgen  
Video Still, 2009  
8 minutes 32 seconds looped  
HD video projection

This perspectival distancing through the camera seems highly problematic in an environment where we are already legally obliged to socially distance ourselves from other bodies. I'd like to pretend for the next little while as we move much of our communications into networked arrangements - we let go of this idea of near and far (let's finally rid ourselves of perspective) and think about our spatial relationships with each other in new and meaningful ways.

So what contingency plans did Jürgen and I orchestrate for 2020?

Through experimenting and interacting within a networked system, we both experienced a strange phenomenon - the reaffirmation of our physical bodies in space through technological disembodiment. The body remembers itself!

In having to move under the laws of perspective to keep within the same scale, our physical bodies would have to reach far further than what they would if we were performing within the same physical space. Parts of our bodies that we never paid much attention to previously would ache - feet, toes, the tendons in your finger tips - locating themselves firmly in the present. Almost as though our bodies were re-asserting their significance in response to our virtual doubles.

Perhaps after this period of isolation and networked connection has ended, we will enter a new epoch - one in which we have learnt how to re-assert the significance of our bodies.



#### Touchant Touché #3

Elise/Jürgen  
Video Still, 2009  
5 minutes 30 seconds looped  
HD video projection

# Notes on weaning

In these isolation days, I've started plasticising my breastmilk. It is a form of domestic alchemy adapted from Youtube tutorials for kids that show how to make your own bioplastic, encouraging science-focused play at home.<sup>1</sup> Once a week, I take the milk I've squirted and squeezed out between feeds, and heat it on the stove top with a spoonful of starch, and a dash of vinegar and glycerin. Once it glugs up in the pot, I spread the slightly pungent ooze onto a sheet of aluminium foil and massage the stickiness into balls and beads. The paste coats my fingertips and palms, leaving them smelling faintly of vinegar for hours afterwards. I leave each new batch to dry for a couple of days on top of the bookshelf, out of reach of the curious fingers of the baby and the neighbours' kids. After air drying, the balls are sealed with a gloss varnish typically used for decoupage craft. My growing collection of milk sculptures remind me of wild pearls. They are bulbous and slightly grubby, the harvested secretions of a mysterious organism.

The confinement period has coincided with the process of weaning my 12 month old daughter. Before the crisis, I imagined this as a period when my daughter and I would be slowly extricating ourselves from a sometimes claustrophobic state of dependency. In the past few months, as the intervals between feeds shifted from three to four hours, to three times a day and now only once at the start and end of the day, I relished the prospect

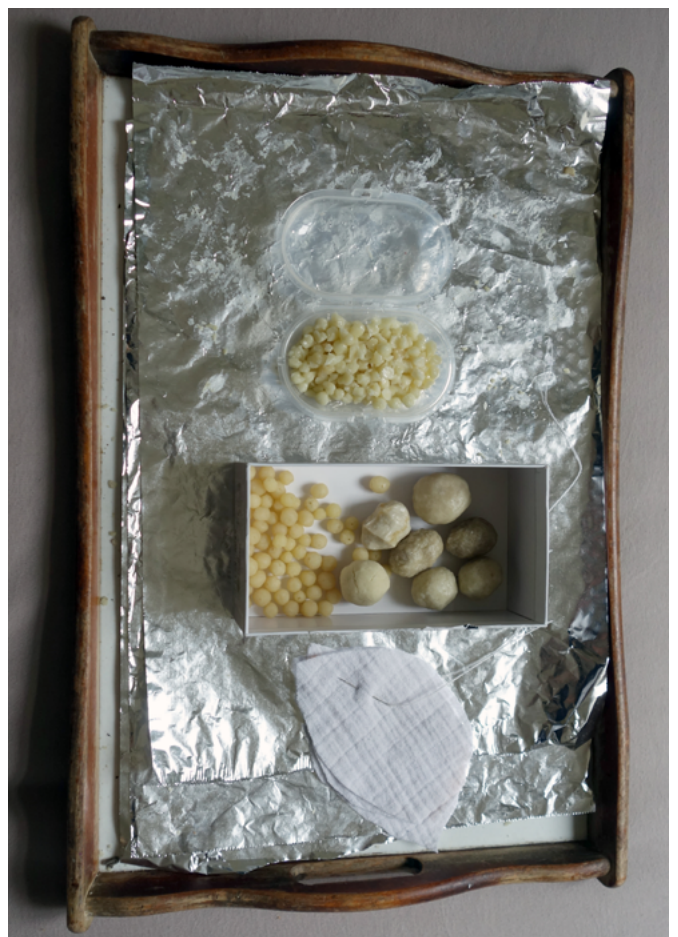


Stills from Youtube footage of wild pearl harvest  
*Pearl hunter: Real Pearls From Oyster/Wild freshwater shells harvest pearls part 2*, 25 February, 2020  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ymj9j9RmSY>



of returning to regular paid work, and being able to pass longer stretches of time away from the home. As is the case for artists and arts workers worldwide, the exhibition and festival projects in Australia and Switzerland I had committed to for this next six months have been cancelled. I'm mourning the loss of work and income, but also the loss of longed-for time with my friends and family in Australia. Days in isolation spent within close range of the flat take me back to the first few months after the birth, which now seem like a sort of training course for quarantine conditions. Thoughts of how to document this time intertwine with a need to somehow record the labour of nourishing and caring for another being with my body over the past twelve months, and during pregnancy.

Lately I've been reading texts about archaeological research focused on gender roles, rituals and the social function of art in prehistoric societies.<sup>2</sup> I've been thinking about how researchers construct narratives of how people lived in the past from obscure fragments of pottery and bone, ambiguous objects and the partial remnants of structural foundations. I'm interested in how these narratives reflect our contemporary needs and desires: perhaps a need to find evidence that there were ancient peoples who knew and practised 'better' ways of living on this planet, who were perhaps more equal, more creative and spiritually fulfilled, and that these ways of living could inform the possible presents and futures of our current era. As I sit in the kitchen pumping, brewing, squeezing and shaping my milk, I listen to the BBC world service newsreader list the global COVID-19 case rates and wonder what ritual function future archaeologists would assign to the objects I am creating. What narrative are we living now? What are we leaving behind?



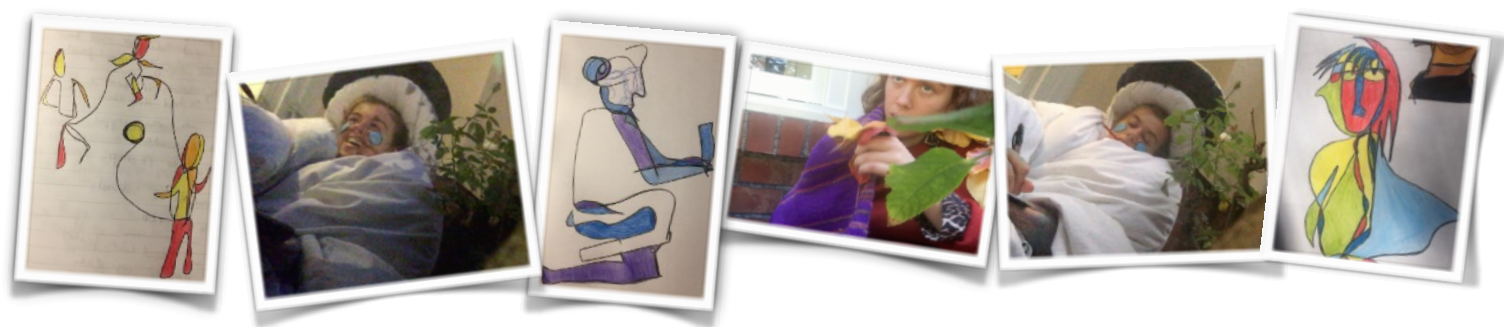
Stills from 'Weaning' work in progress, April 2020

Beth Dillon  
Bienne, Switzerland  
April 15, 2020

<sup>1</sup> *Make your own bioplastic*, 8 November, 2008  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M\\_eDLyfp8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M_eDLyfp8)

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary A. Joyce, *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008  
Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*. New York: The New Press, 1983

Right now I'm sleeping in an enclosed sunroom; a transitional space during an unprecedented time and prime for thinking about things. I undertook people watching as a tool to reflect on previous work and an excuse to experiment with my understanding of the conventions of exchange. In recent work, the aim has been to challenge and blend the perception of performer and observer. I wanted to develop a practise to engage a bodily understanding of the invitation of interaction and the convention of private and public spaces. For my own personal benefit, I like to people watch and dream of being someone who sits outside and isn't afraid to smile at strangers or make eye contact with neighbours (I'm very frightened of conflict with neighbours). It's a personal experiment on connection and I'm hoping it will lead me to consider where to go next. The windows of the sunroom bedroom and a strip of bricked porch-like space facing onto a park in which people were flocking daily served as the frame for daily observations. I people watch while I eat, or drink tea. Some ignore me while others smile and say hello. I create character dossiers and try to dramatise their interactions. I sketch people taking photos of autumn leaves and families playing soccer. I invite attention by dressing up. I wrap myself in my doona, tie pillows to my head and imagine I'm a cloud. The minute I sit down outside, a woman asks me if I'm making a tik tok. Another woman looks at me and laughs nervously, I laugh nervously too.



Then I people watch from behind glass. These windows are the perfect frame, people look into the room constantly as they pass and I imagine it's nice to have a slice of life to look at. When I walk at night, I shamelessly look into open doors and windows. The dream is to see a kitchen bathed in dim orange and dinner cooking on the stove, a pair of boxer shorts bending into the fridge. So in my window I dance and sing out loud. I lounge with my body in fun shapes. I clean by spinning each item of clothing I pick up like a flag. I sit in the window and brush my teeth for 40 minutes, letting the lathered spit foam and drip everywhere. People don't like making eye contact with me when I do these things. I have the power in this interaction as the observer breaches a sense of privacy, I'm trying to invite them into the room with me, but by performing directly to them as opposed to doing these activities for myself, I'm making it weird. I feel safer looking out from in here. I see a couple on a motorbike, the backseat passenger wrapping their arms around the driver while holding on to each end of a leek, creating a vegetable seatbelt. I watch a man kick his dog.



I'm drifting away from the original intention. What I tried next was creating private performances for people with the intent to delight. Happy accidents. I think that if I root the performance in an acceptable domestic activity, I won't make it weird but will provide an image people might feel comfortable letting their eyes rest upon. Then I can get sillier and sillier. I decide to hose the front courtyard and progressively tangle myself in the hose, creating a charming dance. I hope someone on a park bench sees the dance transform and are caught by its absurdity. They don't. Everyone looks away and the dance is weird and doesn't really work. I end up squatting down to avoid people's eyes.



I realised a couple of things:

I was favouring spectacle over connection. I floated away from my simple desire to observe how people invite and accept interactions and concerned myself with how to manipulate it. The desire to make a successful offer to an audience member overwhelmed me. Really, all I observed was that some people say hello and some don't. I also realised through my discomfort and how my heart would beat while simply brushing my teeth, how little I use my body to make work. I observe and communicate with actors, I witness them feel for findings and offer invitations. I started reflecting on a previous interactive work, where our objective was to take care of the audience and be prepared to leave, abandon or forgo plans if the invitation we offered them made them uncomfortable. In this experiment, I found myself shrinking away from the eye contact passerby's offered me. I was shrinking away from the possibility of rejection. I wondered how I would feel and how fast my heart would beat if I set out to be rejected, and bathed in that feeling.

Who leads an attack where the strategy is to take to the fall? Our sense of failure within performance is the byproduct of our experimentation, our condolence to ourselves in the name of our growth and externalised, chalked up to a "weird crowd tonight". Through play we exercise to fight the shame response and focus on supporting each other by accepting every offer. What would it look like to create work where all offers are met with 'no'? Theatre of the rejected. What does it look like to create a space where performers and observers are safe to be rejected and safe to reject in return? Is rejection an act of cruelty or of understanding? Each time I tried to shamelessly present myself for interactions with strangers, I could dip my eyes down for safety, but I'd lose the opportunity to connect. Despite how confused and cloudy I found my whole experiment and how stupid that hose dance was, I know where I'm exploring next. Just a thought!

# CHIMPS FOR CHIMPS

A response to a recent performance

A family of nineteen *Pan troglodytes* are huddled in various configurations. Multi-male, multi-female, cross-generational bodies fill the display. There is action. I witness both horror and affection from these relatives – a mix of social tensions and agreements. Pairs of chimps raise their arms and lock hands in a ceremony of cleaning one another: duets of tender and delicate intimacy. I become a voyeur. I watch a baby chimp move across the family network in cheeky reverie, as its elders effortlessly manage the youngster's tactility. It climbs all over the group, touching everything with boundless play. Its curious energy expands to the homosapien gaze.

The older chimps turn their backs to us; a turning away from spectacle where an endless herd of weekenders swipe monkey faces across their mucky screens. On the side of my DNA pool, youngsters crouch on the floor mirroring their furrier cousins – they tap on the hard slime between one genetic soup and another. Here the transparent divide dissolves into an uncanny reflection where the aggressive demands of our young human hominids confuse the anthropocentric gaze. I hear grandmother Haraway's words: "*There is no Eden under glass*"; a refraction takes place and a cultural perversion reveals its head.

The 1953 French film essay *Les statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*) explores the French colonial effects on the way African art is perceived by the West. It states, "when human beings die, they enter history. When statues die, they enter art. This botanic death is what we call culture." These *Pan troglodytes* are neither the remembered dead or the stolen objects of African antiquity, and yet here they are in a place resembling a museum or a Pierre Huyghe installation where 1000 living trees are placed inside the Sydney Opera House. This is what the film calls "the place where we send objects to die." In this case, this place is where we conserve the fragments of a fragile animal kingdom – sponsored by Hungry Jacks. A Zoo. The idea of a conserved animal is paralleled to the film's "dead object" something taken from its original habitat or original significance and becomes reduced to a museum object or exhibit. A living obituary.

Will we look back at this type of exhibition/conservation and be horrified at how far we separated ourselves from our DNA pool – our humanness? The *Pan troglodytes* look back at us through us – a familiar behind the animal curtain.

Tears begin to form and I feel a deep sense of recognition. I begin to yearn to be invited into their cluster of intimacy – to be captive to their gaze. I look back through the chimp and see our captive presence – a captivated and demanding homosapien audience.

One of the younger *pan troglodytes* – the most willing to give as a glimpse of ourselves – comes forward to the stage. It jumps and points at us, exposing its sprawl of pearls as it grins against the glass. *Pan's* grin bears a deeper question – its expression pulls the homosapien into a deadlock. While we laugh and yelp – curling our facial muscles in delight, we begin to forget the usual etiquette of public utterances. Young *pan* hypnotises the lens and creates an intra-action where the glass reveals a foggy paradigm. Things begin to stir as I witness *pan* perform a bowel movement. A small piece of DNA pokes its head out and the chimp elegantly removes its excrement from its bulbous bloom.

Without disgust or rejection, it turns its waste into a play object, a cheeky mirror for us to grapple with. The chimp places its insides out onto the glass divider and beings to sculpt it like clay – only using its mouth to create shapes. Human chimps rejoice at this performance – a frenzy of noises is escalating to higher pitches. Our monkey mouths reveal a narrow range. Surprise fills the audience as young *pan* completes its work by catching a ride on the back of an older chimp, leaving the artefact behind. A gift for us as we contemplate our shitty predicaments. Here little *pan* has reversed captivity on us.

*Pan's* performative gesture triggers multiple reflections, I think of how the human artist may also subvert in order to look for a way out of social capital and traditional captivity. Where systems upon systems have governed the processes of life itself. As a way out, the human artist both historically and contemporary has made provocations through performing excremental actions – as a way of signalling “other,” *a choreographed alchemical display to disrupt the hegemonic structures* – this too, is captive. The chimp whilst part of deep complex social modes is not part of the human system of logic and capitalism. Therefore, artists staging their use of poo to escape these captive conditions fall into *Artist's Shit*. The artist Manzoni's 1961 collection of 30g tin cans allegedly contained his shit that were later sold to art collectors for thousands of dollars. The more local and contemporary ritualised poo performance of Mikala Dwyer's 2013 exhibition *Goldene Bend'er*, whereby a group of performers defecated into buckets whilst being witnessed within the glass walls of government funded institutional bodies. This poop is the botanic dead. A culture Zoo. The chimp leaves its artful gesture for all to see – revealing that the object “its DNA” is not dead or an object of conceptual entertainment. Within its shit, there is us: engulfed, bifurcated and stumped in a (de)evolutionary l(p)oop.

## “I’LL BE IN TOUCH” : TOUCH / ONLINE

Six years ago, Dutch photographer Marlous Van Der Sloot told me that we live in a

“touch-starved” society;<sup>1</sup>

that we have lost an intimate contact with one another and the relationship with our own bodies.



<https://soundcloud.com/artemis-projects/sets/touch>

Photograph by Marlous Van Der Sloot

I wonder where are we now?  
How are we feeling?  
How are we feeling?

What becomes of ‘touch’ now that we have replaced the spaces of physical interaction with the online world? Can we ‘touch’ one another virtually, through distance? What type of experiences and physical sensations does online-ing enable (or disable)?

When Marlous spoke to me about ‘touch starvation’, I am not sure if she was referring to technological implications, but I have personally been reflecting on the impact of technologies on our bodies and our relationship with nature for quite a while. Online connection for me always signified disconnection - from each other, from ourselves, from spaces we inhabit. Spending time with technology meant time out of the body, which is time out of the feeling; a numbing down that ultimately enslaves you to whichever system of control decides to take hold of you.

But now...

it is the only available way to connect, to ‘stay in touch’.

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<sup>1</sup> You can hear Marlous speak to me about this, here: <https://soundcloud.com/artemis-projects/sets/touch>





Picture: Filmelodic

### **Are we creating a new agora?**

Is this new form of connection and exchange only a temporary solution, or are we witnessing the birth of a new civilization and a permanent shift in the way we do things, make things, share things, experience things? Once Covid is history, will we go back to connecting in physical spaces, as readily? → Think what happened to cinema once technology developed so we can watch films from the comfort of our homes. ← If it becomes possible to listen to a concert, view an exhibition, or do a dance class from our rooms, will we bother going to live gigs or live classes again?

**What kind of experiences are we limiting ourselves to,  
and what becomes of us if we connect only  
via the virtual spaces of gathering?**

If I remember it right, Covid started with the hope that this might be our chance to slow down and internalise for a while; a chance to reflect on where we are and where we wish to head; a chance to recuperate. But there hasn't been much slowing down and, if anything, things seem to have sped up. If before Covid I was overwhelmed by the amount of offering on Facebook and by the pressure to be a part of it, now I feel hyper-overwhelmed. I was a fool to think that FOMO will go to rest during Covid.

I understand and share the need to stay connected, engaged, productive, and I am impressed by the strategies we came up with to deal with Covid-era and to keep going. But to keep going and 'doing the same' might be the problem. Our incredible capacity to adapt is both our virtue and vice. Like animals and mimicry, the sense of threat or destabilization

causes us to generate “creative responses,”<sup>2</sup> but I am wondering if this capacity, the very desire to immediately respond, has something to do with what Donna Haraway calls “enslavement to progress,”<sup>3</sup> “a dark bewitched commitment”<sup>4</sup> which in it holds an inability to pause, a failure to stop and a particular way of considering success?<sup>5</sup> Are we wired up to adapt quickly? What kind of responses are we generating that way?

Not stopping, we simply rush into repairing the good old familiar world. Like skilled marketers, we only repackage it, making the very same product appear fresh and new; desirable again. We are not giving ourselves time to fall into the abys of mystery from which the vision of the new, changed world might emerge. We are busying ourselves with rebranding the old one. Good ideas always take time; bad ones come quickly, they rush in.

I too, despite my craving for pause and advocacy of rest, find myself

making things,  
sharing things,  
joining things,

following endlessly... And I wonder: Why do I do this? Where does this need come from? Is it innate or have I been cultured into it? Have I been made to believe that my sense of self-worth is found in *doing*? Or *is* my self-worth, indeed, in doing? If I have been cultured into it, whose vision am I fulfilling? And why is this someone making sure I don’t stop?

### **What is it that stops me from stopping?**

I have enjoyed many things I came across online, in the last few weeks. I loved doing a dance class with my friend in Serbia! [Although I hated staring at the screen while doing it.] I enjoyed participating in a lab and a performance in Croatia. It was awesome to take part in a forum discussion in Denmark. And, although I generally feel saddened by the idea of virtual galleries, I have loved the Instagram project @t.w.e.n.t.y.o.n.e\_ and the online-specific work by Joe Wilson and Chanelle Collier (@joeandchanelle) who shifted my perspective on what can be done and how it can be done well, with elegance. I loved all that! But I am anxious thinking of the permanency of online-ing and I wonder if we need to be careful and resist decent (or is it accent?) into the online world? Are we falling prey to the big fat prophecy of

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<sup>2</sup> “*Becomings are encounters that engage the subject at the limits of corporeal and conceptual logics already formed and so bring on the destabilisation of conscious awareness that forces the subject into a genuinely creative response.*” Tamsin Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, p. 82

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene*. See: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> For more on these thoughts hear podcast with artist Darko Dragicevic: <https://soundcloud.com/artemis-projects/podcast-darko-dragicevic> (in particular from about 25’00’)

robotization, machination, **detachment**? Who will be profiting from this? Whose pockets will we be filling? And what systems will we be supporting?

I understand the need to do it now that the Covid is on (although would it hurt us to stop?) but I wonder: will we, once Covid is history, permanently replace physical interaction with the digital one?

What will happen to **'touch'**?



Analogue collage: Ira Ferris (2017)

- Do you find it possible to be touched via the screen, or in ways that don't involve physical proximity?
- What is your current experience of ~~(physical)~~ connectedness?
- How does it *feel* to perform, view, listen online and what type of intimacy are you experiencing?
- Are all your senses involved?
- Can the online space be thought of as site-specific?

When something moves us, we speak about **'being touched by'** it. In the English language we already have a concept of **'touch'** via distance (i.e. **"I'll be in touch"**) which is interestingly not used in my native tongue (Croatian) where we say 'čujemo se' ('we will hear each other'), thus evoking the sense of hearing but not of tactility. We don't speak of the distant connections (via phone, email, etc) in terms of **touch**; **touch** is reserved for proximity. But will this change? Will we learn how to feel the

physicality of online connections? Will we learn to be present in our bodies, with all our senses, as we connect with each other online?

Or,

Are we speaking of a different kind of psycho-somatic effect when we speak of 'touch' via distance? Are we begging to think of touch differently; keeping the word but not the sensation?



One of the most memorable and most 'touching' things we got to experience during Covid and via Facebook was that wonderful Italian flash-mob where the whole neighbourhood (or the whole city) came out on their balconies to play music/create sounds together. I heard comments after; how amazing it was to be able to experience this thanks to the online interconnectedness, as if the mob was an exposition of the possibilities of online-ing. What made the flash-mob so touching, in my view, wasn't the fact that we got to see it online but that these people came out (away from their computers) and played together in a physical space (not via zoom); hearing each other's noises directly, feeling the vibrations of each other's sounds. It was the physicality of that connectedness that moved us, as these people demonstrated the need

to be in touch,  
to be touched.



It was nostalgia for that kind of connection that **touched** us; the body remembered what that feeling is/was like. The Italian flash-mob was not a presentation of online possibilities but a reminder of the need for physical connectedness.



Source: Getty images

**Touch** matters because it is the basic and most natural interaction with the world; the first sense we develop back in the mother's womb, which is why architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa calls it "the mother of all senses."<sup>6</sup> **Touch** is a sense of safety, nourishment, familiarity, comfort. It is a sense of care and being cared for.

So, what happens to the '**touch-starved**' society;  
if the sensation of **touch** is our primal need?

One of the positive aspects of Covid is that nature has been given time to recuperate. But, if this is not paralleled by our own recuperation and if glued to the screens we become more and more un-natural, what kind of interaction with nature do we expect to see follow? If, as a consequence of the discovery of online possibilities, we will be sitting by our screens day in and day out, how will we know what is going on out there and why would we care? Science will pass on the information, but this will matter little if not paired with somatic

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<sup>6</sup> See Juhani Pallasmaa's essay "The Eyes of the Skin"

experiences. We need to feel in order to care; and feeling comes via the “tissues of our flesh,”<sup>7</sup> via the physical relationship with the world that is made of matter, just like we are.

**I fear for the “response-ability”<sup>8</sup> of the bodies that sit by the screens,  
missing the soft subtleties of the world around them.**

But I also hold hope that now that **touch** has been prohibited; we might re-value it and learn how to **touch** better; so our **touch** is never a violent grab: appropriative, possessive, abusive, colonising.... but a soft caress where we know that what we **touch**, **touches** us in return.<sup>9</sup>



Instagram image by @thomasthorbylister

[Ira Ferris, 20 April 2020]

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<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway writes about the urgency of feeling in understanding climate change; she says : “Understanding *that* [i.e. climate change] in the tissues of our flesh seems to me really urgent.” (*Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney*, p256)

<sup>8</sup> Body is a site of knowledge and it is through physical experiences and interactions that we cultivate “response-ability”, to quote Donna Haraway who writes of responsibility as “cultivation of the capacity to respond.” (*Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney*, p256-57)

<sup>9</sup> This thought has been inspired by the conversation with artist Lux Eterna who brought to my attention the problem with touch, as we know it, and the necessity and possibility of learning how to touch better.

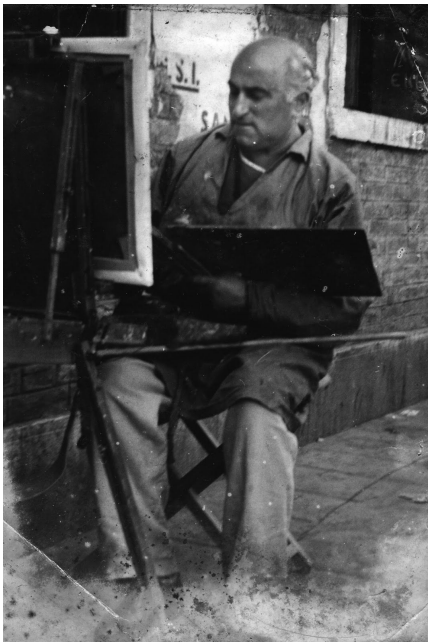
## Notes from a Reformed Opera Singer

by Jessica O'Donoghue

I was trying to slow my breathing as I walked through the corridors of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. I had worked out that breath control was as good for steadying my nerves as it was for supporting my top register. And there was always something a little anxiety inducing about walking the halls of one of the most famous opera houses in the world, seeing the legendary divas and conductors staring down at me from the pictures on the walls above.

I was in my late 20's and I was heading to a coaching with one of the company's head repetiteurs. I had my set of arias prepared; scores clutched firmly in my slightly sweaty hands. I was nervous. Nervous about making a good impression on the experts I was working with. But also nervous that this might mark the end of a ten year-long investment in an industry that I had slowly started to resent.

I was always going to be a singer, this I had known from as long as I can remember. I had a colourful childhood growing up in a family full of eclectic musicians and artists. My [great grandparents](#) were painters, my [grandparents](#) were principal artists in the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, and my father (the late [Rory O'Donoghue](#)) was a composer, musician, actor, comedian and Cleo centrefold. Dad wrote jingles for loads of TV and radio ads back in the day and he often used his four children to sing any jingles that required young voices, so from the age of three I was in the recording studio and loving it. I had found my calling early and I felt at home and in my element.



Jessica's great grandfather David L. Ghilchik painting



Jessica's grandfather Terry O'Donoghue performing with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company



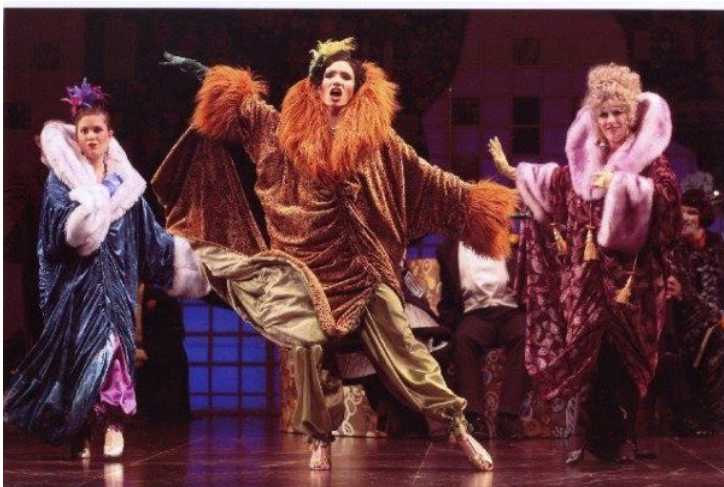


Jessica's father Rory O'Donoghue as Thin Arthur in Aunty Jack



Jessica's grandmother Sybil Gilchik as Pitti-Sing in The Mikado with D'Oyly Carte Opera Company

By the time it came to leave high school I was lucky to have already gained extensive performance experience in a wide range of genres. There was no doubt in my mind that I would continue to pursue music and singing as my career and I wanted to develop my craft to the extreme. Opera and the demanding vocal technique required sparked my interest as I was always up for a challenge, and operatic technique for me was the ultimate. Impressive voices ringing out over full orchestras, filling huge theatres and concert halls with no amplification, what could be more extreme than that? But it was never just about singing for me. I always felt a duty and responsibility as an artist and performer to move my audience in some way be it challenging them, inspiring them, bringing them joy and happiness, or moving them to tears. I loved being on stage and I loved telling stories, taking my audience on a journey of some kind. I felt opera had all the right ingredients; music, drama, design and costume. But not only that, it was on a grand scale, so surely through opera I could achieve my artistic goals in the most effective way.



Jessica performing in *Die Fledermaus* with Opera Queensland





Jessica performing in *Die Zauberflöte* with Opera Queensland

I embarked on the stock standard operatic training of Bachelor of Music, Diploma of Opera, followed by Young Artist Programs and into the beginnings of my operatic career. But as I went through these motions I became more and more at odds with the art form. Things weren't as grand as they first seemed and my initial dreams and expectations were shattered. Instead of being part of a thriving scene that was wowing audiences around the globe with this thrilling art form, I found myself stuck in an industry that was hell bent on clinging to the past. It was like the industry was in a coma, barely breathing, with company managements by its side refusing to flick the switch, clinging on to snippets of past glory, memories and experiences that were long gone. It wasn't dead yet, but there was barely a pulse.

I left the coaching rooms at Covent Garden that day feeling the same way I felt when I left the industry. Flat. Underwhelmed. And a little bit sad. My growing fears for the industry were confirmed. Opera was ironically dying a slow, drawn out death. It was time to return home and assume my title as a 'reformed opera singer'.

At home in Sydney and at home in my musical roots where my artistic passions had first begun, I started to re-connect with my old networks in theatre, cabaret, pop, contemporary (new music), Renaissance and early music, art music and the festivals scene. An eclectic bunch I know, but I was always a lover of multi-genre creativity and enjoyed collaborating with artists who were inspiring and doing new and exciting projects regardless of the style.



Jessica O'Donoghue performing at Oxford Arts Factory for the launch of her debut EP *Emerge*



Jessica O'Donoghue performing at Sydney Opera House with pop band CODA in *Music for the Eyes*



Jessica performing in *Nineteen to the Dozen* at Sydney Opera House with The Song Company

It was during this time that my career took an unexpected u-turn of sorts. I was approached by a young Jack Symonds who had founded a little company called Sydney Chamber Opera with Louis Garrick back in 2010 and which was now run by Jack and the company's Principal Artistic Associate Huw Belling. Jack asked me to perform in their upcoming production of a newly commissioned opera by Michael Smetanin, *Mayakovsky*. Naturally I was a little hesitant, not another bloody opera. It had taken all my strength to leave that industry behind and after a decade of blood, sweat and tears (not to mention shit loads of money) I didn't want to waste another moment on what I felt to be a dead end for me (literally). But after meeting Jack and hearing about his emerging and innovative company, I was instantly on board.

That first show with Sydney Chamber Opera was really more inspiring than it should have been. The company was young, tiny and everything was done on a shoestring. I had had way more 'impressive' performances to name on my CV, but for me, this became one of my personal operatic career highlights and the start of

many to follow because for the first time in opera I had found people who valued the same things that I did. People who championed creativity, who saw each work, be it a new commission or an existing opera, as a blank sheet to make a fresh and unique mark on. Never bogged down by expectations or traditions, always questioning and reinventing, making artistic decisions employing a hugely collaborative process that involved the entire creative team. Working with composers who were still alive was thrilling. No more did I hear phrases like “you can’t make that sound in opera”, or “that ornament is stylistically incorrect” or “that’s not what the composer would have wanted”. I felt creatively and artistically liberated, challenged, inspired and fulfilled and it made me realise something. Opera wasn’t dying, it was being murdered.

Of course it’s infinitely easier for a young, small and nimble opera company like Sydney Chamber Opera to push boundaries, to take risks and explore uncharted territories. However, it’s now time for the industry at large to start to take note and begin making brave steps forward before it drives this potentially thrilling genre into a not so early grave. After ten years working in traditional opera and almost ten years again working in new opera, I have five areas where I think the industry could have a red hot go at rethinking, which would have a hugely positive effect on an otherwise grim outlook for opera.

1. Opera needs to be redefined as an artform with the ability to inspire and tell new stories. Not an historical artefact that needs to be preserved.

Opera should be a living, breathing, multi-disciplinary genre that tells stories through fully staged performances. By combining music, drama and design in the forms of stage, lighting and costume, opera should in fact be one of the most exciting of all art forms as its multi-disciplinary nature enhances its ability to delve beyond the initial surface of words and action alone. Continuous music adds extra depth and meaning to what is being explored on stage, giving opera the capacity to connect to an audience on levels that can’t be seen or even understood, but that are certainly felt.

However, opera has become a series of old works that the major companies re-hash time and time again to a rapidly dwindling audience. Even my Grandmother who had subscribed to the opera for over 50 years finally gave up on the industry. She cancelled her Opera Australia subscription claiming to have seen every opera that was programmed “HUNDREDS of times darling!” and admitted that she just couldn’t sit through “*another bloody La Boheme*”.

2. The operatic industry needs to urgently invest in the commissioning of new works. Works which tell interesting and relevant stories that modern audiences can relate to and actually want to hear.

To squander opera’s potential for immensely effective storytelling on endless repeats of outdated works is artistically irresponsible and an unnecessary burden on the already fragile state of government funding for the arts in this country. Major opera companies make lame attempts to ‘refresh’ these tired shows by shoving them into a slightly more modern setting, or by superimposing a clunky or ‘crazy’ design over the top, or they sometimes even intersperse this overdone operatic repertoire with the odd

re-hashed American musical. But these methods, while sometimes at the outset may look pretty spectacular (as opera tends to do on the first couple of exposures), actually only serve to highlight how irrelevant the majority of operatic repertoire is and how self-conscious the industry is of its inability to engage an audience in a substantial and lasting way.

Much of the operatic repertoire has become so outdated that it is now a liability. For a start, the way women are historically represented and treated in opera is offensive and damaging to our modern and progressive society. Massively stereo-typed, women are either made out to be feeble, weak, damsels in distress, or in the case of characters like Carmen who are strong and independent women, they end up being the victims of seriously violent acts or even murder used to punish them for such rebellious behaviours. As part of this group who make up over 50% of our population, I don't think I'm out of line in saying that women (and no doubt many men) no longer care to see this kind of thing on our stages, no matter how much they are romanticised or smoothed over with enchanting music and song. And I can certainly say that as an artist I am no longer prepared to embody these types of characters or enact these mindless scenarios on stage.

Surely as an industry we can tell better stories. Addressing gender inequality and misrepresentation in opera is only one small first step in acknowledging the disturbing lack of diversity in the industry. If we are to widen opera's reach, we must widen the source of storytelling that we choose to draw from. That means capturing voices from all sectors of our society; women's voices, nonbinary voices, voices from our First Nations communities, and many, many more. Stories from our people, about our people and for our people.



Jessica performing in *Her Dark Marauder* by Georgia Scott with Sydney Chamber Opera



3. Not only do we need to move away from the old stories and narratives in opera, we also need to progress from the traditional musical styles into a whole new sound world. New music, new harmonies, new forms of orchestration and new vocal techniques, sounds and colours.

The traditional operatic vocal technique is still important in terms of being able to perform the traditional repertoire and achieve a resonant sound such that the singer can be heard in large operatic theatres and above full orchestras. But the excessive pressure the industry places on making this specific type of operatic sound, and at such a flawless level, more often than not forces the singer into a place of artistic restriction, stifled by traditions and tastes that were created centuries ago in an impossible quest to recite a work the way that a composer who died years ago would have wanted, or to sing an aria the way countless famous opera singers have sung it before them. In traditional operatic singing there is little tolerance for straight or 'white' tones, breathiness, slides, shakiness, crunchiness or cracks as they are so often seen as mistakes, imperfections or holes in one's technique. But in fact, they are expressive tools that can be used as a way to vocalise real human emotion, and it's often in those ugly, gritty and 'human' moments that the voice is at its most expressive and moving.

Audiences don't come to the theatre to hear vocal perfection, they come to be moved and transported. And while I must admit that it was in learning the traditional operatic technique and going through the rigorous vocal training required of an opera singer that gave me such an in depth understanding of my body and a great command over my instrument, it was then only through relinquishing the intense hold that the operatic technique had on me that I could feel completely liberated as an artist, free to make any sound I felt the work needed in any given moment. A whole new world of artistic expression was available to me, a fresh palette of new and wonderful colours to choose from.

This is also true for the orchestration, harmony, use of rhythm and even the introduction of electronics in opera. The possibilities these days are endless in terms of sound choices, and I have no doubt that composers like Mozart, Wagner and Puccini would all employ similar techniques and colours had they been exposed to them in their day. New music and new music techniques, while at first can be confronting and even overwhelming, offers up a whole new language, an amazing array of expressive tools to use when creating and presenting this new wave of stories, expressions, feelings and emotions.

4. Opera needs to focus on integrating its many disciplines effectively to tell stories in a powerful and meaningful way. No one discipline should rule, and that includes singing.

While apparently a multi-disciplinary genre, it's no secret that singing is the number one discipline in a traditional operatic performance, often at the expense of all the other performance elements, in particular the dramatic aspects. In fact, the 'acting' side of things comes in at such a distant second to the singing that I remember being in productions where whole scenes that were worked out, staged and rehearsed for weeks with the director

were completely scrapped at the first stage orchestral rehearsal because the conductor demanded the soprano “forget who she is singing to on stage, walk down front and centre and deliver the aria straight out to the audience”. I’ve seen performances when the heroine does her impressive ‘death scene’ falling dramatically to the ground, only to then miraculously and instantly rise up to receive her applause and take a little private curtain call mid performance. The state of believable story telling in opera is now at the point where professional actors and dancers are brought on stage to stand in front of the stiff opera singers in an attempt to display some kind of embodied performance, which of course only serves to make the opera singers look even more disengaged in the action.

New audiences are no longer accepting this ‘stand and sing’ approach opera so often employs in its performances. If the industry is finding that the nasty and annoying ‘acting’ keeps getting in the way of producing the ‘perfect’ vocal rendition of an aria, they should shift to a concert performance or studio recording. But if they are going to continue to go to the effort of donning elaborate costumes and standing amongst hugely impressive sets, then they must go the whole mile, throw themselves in and give a fully integrated theatrical performance in which the singing, movement and drama all affect each other in each and every moment.



Jessica performing in *Biographica* by Mary Finsterer with Sydney Chamber Opera

5. Finally, the training offered to young and emerging opera singers is not giving them the skills required to move opera into this new platform. If any of the above points are to be implemented, we need to invest in the training of a new breed of artists to sustain this new breed of opera.

Opera has always been an elite art form, and this new form is even more challenging. Forget the triple threat, new opera requires a quadruple threat. An artist that can produce not only an impressive operatic sound, but one that has such a command over her instrument that she can perform all the new extended techniques being employed by modern composers. No longer is the odd generic hand gesture learnt in the ‘acting for singers’ class at university sufficient for telling these new stories being written. The new opera singer needs to be able to fully embody realistic characters with depth and purpose, telling complex and engaging stories in an authentic and

believable way. And gone are the days where a stand and sing approach to a performance is acceptable. No, these new operas require full movement capabilities, singing while crawling, rolling, climbing, and at times presenting fully choreographed dance routines. Artists are required to totally physicalise a character and there needs to be the training to learn how to do this beyond the stock standard ‘movement for opera singers’ classes which consist of learning how to fall to the ground safely once your character has drunk the deadly poison, or how to do a low-key version of the Viennese Waltz. Then the fourth threat that the artists need to be equipped with is a serious musicianship. New opera requires not only learning incredibly difficult musical repertoire that incorporates ever increasing challenges in rhythms, harmonies and vocal techniques, they have to memorise this music at such a level that they can perform them whilst giving a fully embodied dramatic performance as described above.

It’s not just the singers that require new methods of training. More opportunities for composers, designers and directors to learn the art of new opera is essential, with a focus on incorporating specific opportunities to diverse and underrepresented sectors within our community. We must create an influx of interesting and relevant contributors and collaborators to the genre moving forward. And then once we’ve invested in this training, we need to ensure that creative jobs and roles in Australian operas then go to these Australian artists. The system is massively broken in this area and while I won’t go into more detail on this point here, it must be said that taking Australian tax payers’ money and then outsourcing a vast number of jobs to overseas imports simply has to stop if there is to be any kind of future for opera and its artists in this country.



Jessica performing as Tarquinius in *The Rape of Lucretia* with Sydney Chamber Opera



Jessica performing in *Victory Over the Sun* re-written by Huw Belling with Sydney Chamber Opera



Jessica performing in *The Invisible Bird* by Bree van Reyk with Sydney Chamber Opera

Now obviously I'm not suggesting that we do away with traditional opera entirely. It's an art form that is centuries-old and an important and huge part of western musical history, much like Shakespeare is to theatre. We have many world class operatic artists in this country, however they are trapped in an industry that has become lazy, complacent and broken. It's time to put a stop to the lame excuses from major company directors for why this increasingly irrelevant art form must remain untouched and instead start to funnel more of the resources into a new future, a new opera, one that is exciting and fulfilling for our creatives and relevant for our audience. This future exists, it is achievable, it is bright and it is alive.

Companies like Sydney Chamber Opera are an excellent example of what this future opera can and should look like as they continue to pave the way to a new version of this thrilling art form. They seek to explore challenging themes, commission numerous new works from Australian composers (making conscious and real steps to achieve gender equality), they employ local talent and create integrated and impressive productions for modern audiences, always musically, artistically and dramatically of the utmost credibility. It's edge of your seat opera where audiences flock to see what will be presented next knowing it is always a new, exciting and engaging experience.



While I've found Sydney Chamber Opera's general approach to opera refreshing right from the outset, it was in their most recent production of *Breaking Glass* where I've found a whole new level of artistic satisfaction. A collaboration with the Composing Women program led by Liza Lim, *Breaking Glass* is a quadruple bill of short one act operas written by female composers Bree van Reyk, Georgia Scott, Josephine Macken and Peggy Polias. I was involved in the development of these works in 2018 and then again in the final staging process which wrapped up early, just managing to capture the work on film ahead of the Covid-19 lockdowns (you can watch it [here](#)). In addition to the usual positives working with this company as mentioned above, the thing I was most moved by in this recent production was finally being able to be a part of the promoting of women's voices and stories. The joy of enacting characters that were created by women, presenting experiences and journeys from a women's perspective, and being guided by two incredible female directors, Danielle Maas and Clemence Williams was a profoundly fulfilling experience. I felt excited and relieved that these critical and urgently important stories were being told, that finally there was an opportunity for women to make a meaningful contribution to the art form and at last I could relate to the works we were presenting and feel proud of the issues we were raising.



Jessica performing in *The Invisible Bird* by Bree van Reyk with Sydney Chamber Opera



Jessica performing in *Commute* by Peggy Polias with Sydney Chamber Opera

When I heard about the recent ‘call to action’ instigated by Sally Blackwood, Liza Lim, Peggy Polias and Bree van Reyk which resulted in the ‘Gender Equity and Diversity in Opera Summit’, I felt incredibly relieved. Finally, I wasn’t alone in feeling disconnected and completely at odds with this intimidating and male dominated industry. I always thought opera wasn’t for me simply because it failed to feed my yearning for new and innovative sources of creativity. But I now realise a huge part of it was that opera has never been a welcoming or fulfilling place for me as a female artist.

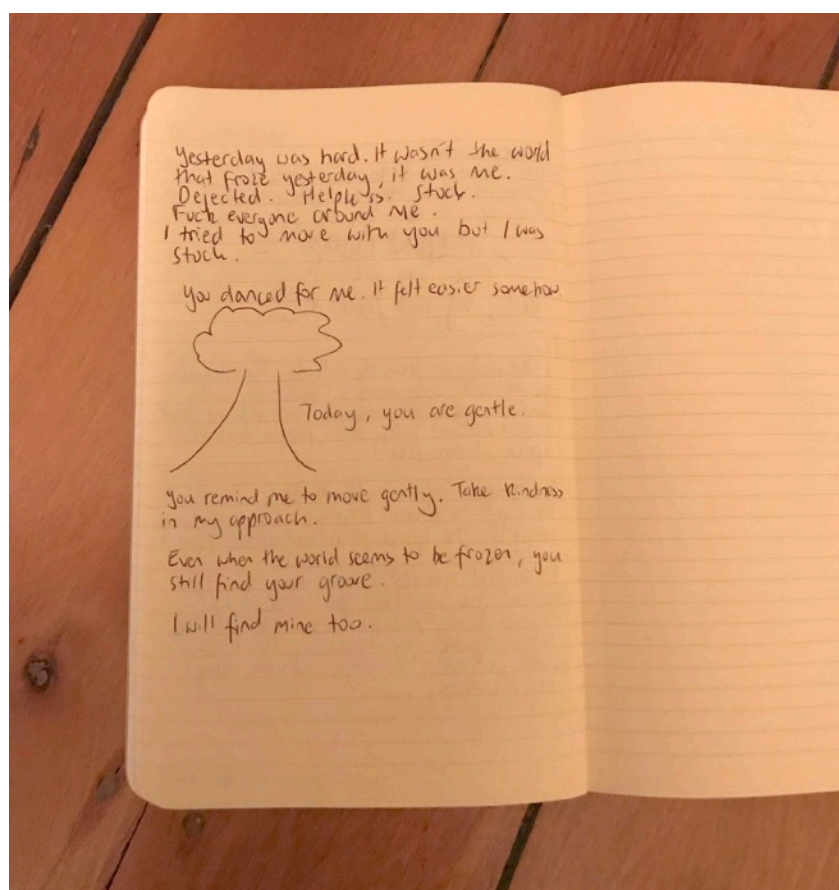
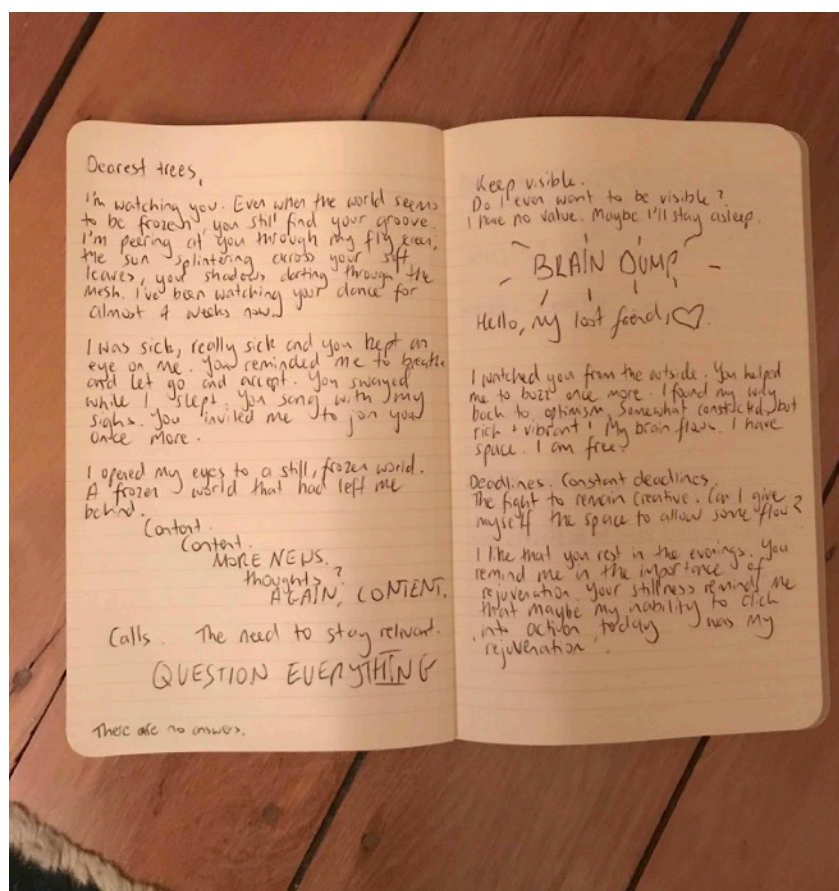
My experience of being a part of *Breaking Glass* made me think two things. Firstly, how is it that I’ve spent the best part of 20 years in the opera industry and only in the last year have I had this revolutionary experience of completely connecting to and identifying with the art that I was producing. Efforts to achieve gender equity and real diversity in opera are way overdue and the major opera companies need to get on board and get on board quickly. Secondly, if a company like Sydney Chamber Opera can achieve ground-breaking works like this with virtually no government funding and a company that consists essentially of two full time staff members, what could be achieved if the whole industry backed this kind of innovative approach to the future of opera.

When *Breaking Glass* recently premiered online, the responses from viewers included comments like “Always love experiencing new opera work in Australia”, “I am in awe of what you have created - thank you for the hope that you all bring for our future. Sydney Chamber Opera ensures the health and vitality of this artform”, “Thank you for making things that did not exist before”, “Whilst I was watching this, I felt a real surge of optimism about the future of opera. Something I haven’t felt about opera generally in a really really long time” and “This is such a brilliant performance. You are doing exactly what I hoped Opera Australia would do, but apparently won’t. I’m looking forward to your next season”. The overwhelmingly positive reviews stated that “this is a work of visceral intensity.” - [Sydney Morning Herald](#), “this is a major achievement and another feather in the cap of Australia’s most inspirational modern opera company.” - [Limelight](#) and “While gender inequality is an issue across most art forms, the inequality in operatic programming is especially stark. Projects such as this are essential to bringing new perspectives and diverse artistic voices to audiences within an otherwise conservative art form.” - [The Conversation](#).

For the record, I no longer call myself a ‘reformed opera singer’ as I realise in fact that I am still an opera singer. Only now I’m singing ‘reformed opera’. I hope that in the not too distant future, many more opera singers in this country will be able to say the same.

# As the trees continue the dance

TAMARA KOHLER







Dearest trees,

I'm watching you. Even when the world seems to be frozen, you still find your groove. I'm peering at you through my fly screen; the sun splintering across your soft leaves, your shadows darting through the mesh. I've been watching your dance for almost four weeks now.

I was sick, really sick and you kept an eye on me. You reminded me to breathe and let go and accept. You swayed while I slept. You sang with my sighs. You invited me to join you once more.

I opened my eyes to a still, frozen world. A frozen world that had left me behind. Content. Content. More news. Thoughts? Again, content. Calls. The need to stay relevant. Question everything. There are no answers. Keep visible. Am I visible? Do I even want to be visible? I have no value. Maybe I'll stay asleep.

BRAIN DUMP

Hello my lost friends.

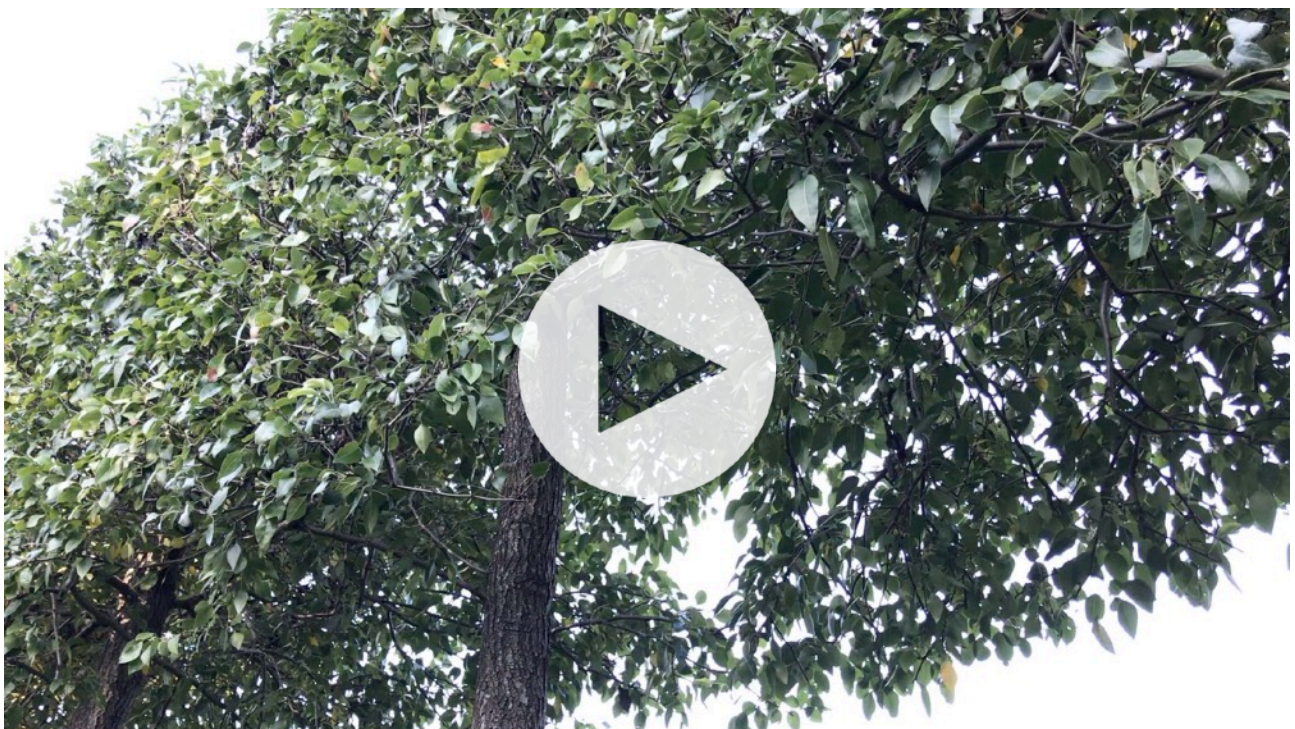


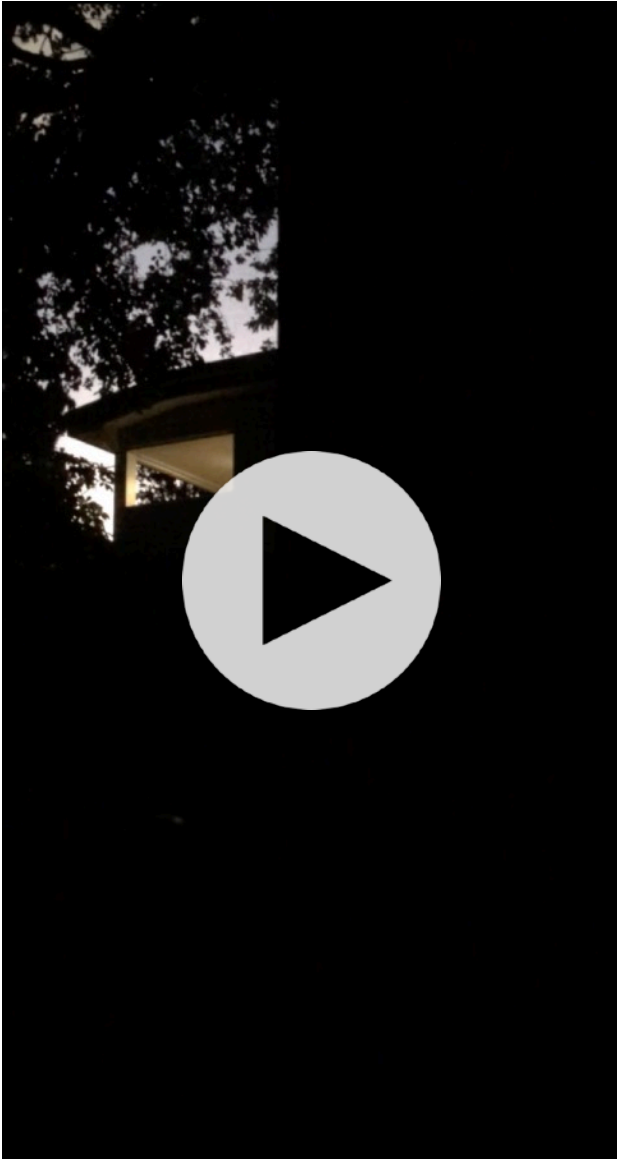


I watched you from the outside. You helped me to buzz once more. I found my way back to optimism. Somewhat constricted, but rich and vibrant. My brain flows. I have space. I am free.

DEADLINES, CONSTANT DEADLINES.

The fight to remain creative. Can I give myself the space to allow some flow?

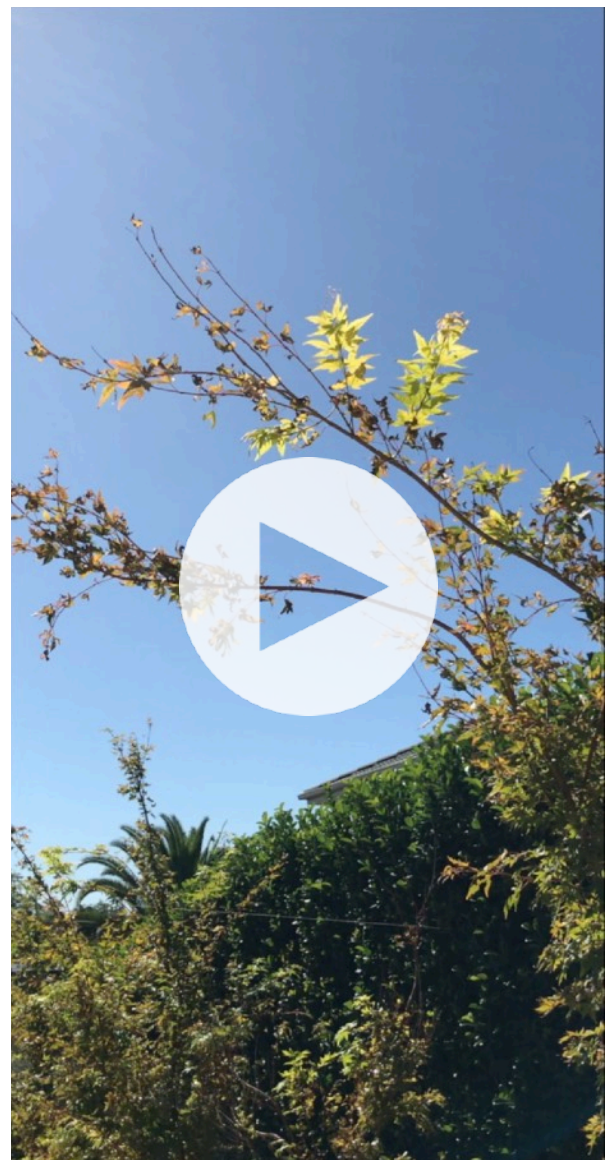




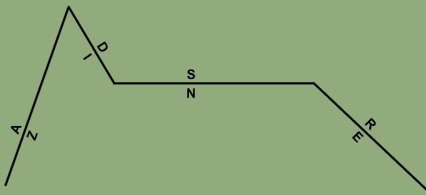
I like that you rest in the evenings. You remind me in the importance of rejuvenation. Your stillness reminds me that maybe today my inability to click into action was my 'rejuvenation'.

Yesterday was hard. It wasn't the world that froze yesterday, it was me. Dejected. Helpless. Stuck. Fuck everyone around me. I tried to move with you but I was stuck. You danced for me. It felt easier somehow.

Today, you are gentle. You remind me to move gently. Take kindness in my approach. Even when the world seems to be frozen, you still find your groove. I will find mine too.







## ADSR Zine

[attack, decay, sustain, release]

ADSR Zine is an online platform established in November 2018 by Elia Bosshard, James Hazel and Sonya Holowell. It is a bi-monthly publication that features writing from contributors who are, or who work with contemporary practising artists. We value the process of reflection, translation, interpretation, critical response and active engagement with Australian art and performance.

We believe that the artist is not only an expert in their field, but offers an important voice beyond the scope of their primary discipline. Artists are welcomed to move beyond this scope to embrace naivety, presenting the sweep, the details, or a combination of both.

As a magazine with a strong interdisciplinary focus, the online format allows for the delivery of written, sonic and visual resources to present, support and facilitate discourse between practising artists.

### WHAT WE DO

ADSR Zine offers a 3-part conceptual scaffold that is designed to evoke experimental and non-formalist approaches to responsive writing and media within a contemporary arts and performance context.

### OUR POINT OF DEPARTURE

ADSR Zine is a platform for discourse that encourages experimental approaches to discussing visual, performative and sound art. Functioning from an 'art begets art' premise, we offer contributors significant creative license.

We are influenced by the wave of 70's and 80's experimental music and art publications (NMA, Sounds Australia) which were platforms for creative and innovative solutions to writing and conceptualising experimental work.

### TEAM

Editors = James Hazel, Sonya Holowell, Elia Bosshard

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