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**Performing *Écriture Féminine*: Strategies for a  
Feminist Politics of the Postdramatic**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* using a practice-as-research methodology. Its claim is that Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* is revitalised as a source for feminist theatre studies through the emergence of postdramatic theatre. The project's practice-led research identified and extracted principles from Cixous's prose writing that are especially compelling for theatre and explored these through laboratory practice. The primary sources for doing this were Cixous's novels *Inside* (1969) and *The Book of Promethea* (1983), as well as her writing on Clarice Lispector. The exploration of these materials was a creative and transformative activity that identified equivalent strategies between the two media – prose writing and theatre – while at the same time revealing significant differences and tensions. The practice is documented in the thesis via research logs and video evidence.

The written reflection draws attention to the specific potentialities that theatre brings to *écriture féminine* and discusses how the outcomes of the practice-led research resonate with postdramatic aesthetics. While the research findings accumulated strategically across the series of three performances, and the performances built upon each other iteratively, each of the findings chapters focuses in detail on one aspect of the practice: specifically, semiotics, dramaturgy and feminine epistemology. By pinpointing and discussing nodal points at which postdramatic practices and *écriture féminine* intersect, this thesis aims to show that postdramatic theatre has the potential to be – and thus frequently is – feminine. Indeed, the overall aim of this thesis is to advance the emerging field of study of feminism in postdramatic theatre by exploring the feminine potential of postdramatic theatre and proposing that Cixous's *écriture féminine* offers a way of framing the poetics of postdramatic theatre in relation to feminist politics. The findings have potential utility for theatre-makers seeking a feminist method in the postdramatic as well as scholars of postdramatic theatre and feminism.

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# List of Accompanying Materials

**DVD 1:** *ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE*

**DVD 2:** *fire into song*

**DVD 3:** *Rings*

**CD:** Text Files

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# Introduction

In this thesis I explore the relationship between postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* using a practice-as-research methodology. My motivation to undertake this research originates from an awareness of the lack of feminist studies of postdramatic theatre. Whilst there has been a lively debate on the politics of postdramatic theatre following the publication of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatisches Theater* in 1999,<sup>1</sup> specifically feminist perspectives on postdramatic theatre are only now beginning to emerge. The scarcity of feminist thinking on the postdramatic in German can be explained by the comparatively limited amount of feminist theatre scholarship in Germany, which, as Katharina Pewny highlights, contrasts starkly with feminism in literary studies.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the seven-year delay in translating Lehmann's book into English, accounts for the fact that there are very few studies on postdramatic theatre and feminism internationally. My thesis responds to this gap by suggesting that a feminist politics of postdramatic theatre can be uncovered by taking *écriture féminine* as a starting point.

In 2006 Karen Jürs-Munby noted that the relationship between postdramatic theatre and identity politics is 'underdeveloped' in Lehmann's book and called for this field to be opened up.<sup>3</sup> Now, eight years later, a body of research is emerging. Since 2012 two studies of postdramatic theatre and feminism have appeared and an edited collection in German is in preparation.<sup>4</sup> The studies already published return to theories of femininity in order to discuss postdramatic theatre in relation to feminism. This is also my tactic in this thesis. In *Théâtre et féminine: Identité, sexualité, politique* (2012) Muriel Plana compares Julia Kristeva's notion of femininity to Lehmann's description of postdramatic theatre, concluding that postdramatic theatre is feminine.<sup>5</sup> Brianne Waychoff's practice-as-research PhD entitled 'Composing a Method: *Écriture Féminine* as Performance Practice' (2012)

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<sup>1</sup> The politics of postdramatic theatre were, for example, the focus of the conference *Postdramatic Theatre as /or Political Theatre* (University of London, 2011). It also dominated much of the debate of the conference *NA(AR) HET THEATER: after theatre?* (Amsterdam School of the Arts, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Katharina Pewny, 'Männlichkeit Im Blick Der Feministischen Performance Studies,' in *Gender Performances: Wissen Und Geschlecht in Musik. Theater. Film* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2011): p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Jürs-Munby, Hans-Thies Lehmann, and David Barnett, 'Taking Stock and Looking Forward: Postdramatic Theatre,' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16, no. 4 (2006): p. 487.

<sup>4</sup> Nina Birkner, Andrea Geier, and Urte Heldhuse, eds., *Spielräume Des Anderen: Geschlecht Und Alterität Im Postdramatischen Theater* (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Plana, *Théâtre et Féminine: Identité, Sexualité, Politique* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2012).

draws on Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray to develop a feminine devising process in the postdramatic mode.<sup>6</sup> These two studies, alongside my own project, signal a moment of return to theories of femininity in light of the rise of postdramatic theatre practices.<sup>7</sup>

My research enters into a dialogue with Plana and Waychoff's work. However, whereas Waychoff insists primarily on the usefulness of *écriture féminine* for feminist devising she does not go so far as to argue that postdramatic theatre has the potential to be and thus frequently *is* feminine. This is the claim of my thesis. Conversely, while Plana does assert that postdramatic theatre is feminine, the absence of examples drawn from practice means that her assertion remains elusive to practitioners seeking to produce feminine, postdramatic theatre. Furthermore, while Plana's focus is on Kristeva, mine rests on Cixous. My thesis aims to advance the emerging field of feminism and the postdramatic by making an argument for a structural analogy between *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre. I do this by employing a practice-as-research methodology to explore how *écriture féminine* – as conceptualised by Cixous – enters the stage and to ask whether the resulting feminine practice could be considered postdramatic. As part of my practice-led research, I created a series of three performances: *ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE* (May 2012), *fire into song* (September 2012) and *Rings: Sang, Souffle, Signe, Sein, Sens* (March 2013), each of which presents original research. The purpose of this written component of my thesis is to contextualise, elucidate and discuss those research findings.

## Terminology

In light of the ongoing debate over what is encompassed by the term 'postdramatic,' it is necessary to clarify my use of the term. In *Postdramatic Theatre* Hans-Thies Lehmann identifies a paradigm shift in contemporary Western theatre practices beginning in the 1970s. This new, postdramatic theatre succeeds the dramatic theatre model, which is historically contingent and geographically specific to Europe and North America. While Lehmann is by no means the first to use the expression postdramatic to describe contemporary theatre, his study represents the first comprehensive theorisation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Brianne Waychoff, 'Composing a Method: *Écriture Féminine* as Performance Practice'. Louisiana State University, 2012. Unpublished doctoral thesis.

<sup>7</sup> However, such a return to femininity was not yet discernible when I began my PhD research since Plana and Waychoff's studies were only published two years after I embarked on my PhD.

term.<sup>8</sup> As such, some of the ambiguity with regard to its meaning originates from Lehmann's resistance to reducing the varied landscape of postdramatic practices to a 'checklist' of postdramatic traits.<sup>9</sup> For Lehmann, postdramatic theatre is firstly defined by what it is not: it is not a 'declamation and illustration of written drama', a 'comprehensible narrative and / or mental *totality*'<sup>10</sup>, nor is it a representation of a 'fictional cosmos'<sup>11</sup>, as Gerda Poschmann analyses, based on 'the principles of narration or figuration, and the order of a "fable" (story)'.<sup>12</sup> Postdramatic theatre should, instead, be understood as a 'concrete negation producing a new wealth of possibilities, each in itself concrete and unique'.<sup>13</sup>

While I appreciate Lehmann's refusal to condense the heterogeneous landscape of postdramatic practices to a set of positivist traits, I believe that his writings do indicate some features that can be used to define postdramatic theatre. In accordance with Benno Wirz, I understand a changed way of using signs on stage to be the core of the postdramatic turn. Wirz links dramatic theatre to representational forms of signification that have been historically dominant in the West. This way of using signs minimises the 'productive, concrete, singular, contextual, real, potent, material, sensual etc.' dimension of the signifier by privileging the signified.<sup>14</sup> Postdramatic theatre, on the other hand, emphasises the sensual, affective and 'energetic' properties of the signifier and presents the many sign-systems that make up theatre equally, without hierarchy, in contrast to the logocentric tendencies of dramatic theatre.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lehmann's colleague Andrzej Wirth claims that he first used the term in the 1980s to describe the Gertrud Stein's play texts. Approximately at the same time, Richard Schechner also used it to describe happenings in *Performance Theory*. See: Richard Schecher, *Performance Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988): p. 21; and Andrzej Wirth, 'Ein Kuckuck Kann Keinen Preis Erwarten,' *Nachtkritik*, 2011, [http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1556&Itemid=61](http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1556&Itemid=61). Accessed 04 Mar 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London, New York: Routledge, 2006): p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in: Ibid: p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Word and Stage in Postdramatic Theatre,' in *Drama And/after Postmodernism*, ed. Christoph Henke and Martin Middeke (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007): p. 50. Translation by the author.

<sup>14</sup> Benno Wirz, 'Das Problem Des Postdramatischen Theaters,' *Forum Modernes Theater* 20, no. 2 (2005): p. 126. Translation by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Lehmann, 2006: pp. 37 – 38. In describing postdramatic theatre as 'energetic', Lehmann is positioning Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of 'energetic theatre' as an antecedent to postdramatic practices. [See Lyotard's description in: 'The Tooth, the Palm,' trans. Anne Knap

Some postdramatic scholars, David Barnett for example, argue that plays can be postdramatic.<sup>16</sup> However, in accordance with Lehmann and Peter Boenisch, I would contest this claim.<sup>17</sup> Lehmann inherits the term ‘drama’ from his mentor Peter Szondi, whose seminal work *Theory of Modern Drama* identifies drama as a genre of playwriting predominant in seventeenth-century France and during the classical period of Goethe and Schiller, that was thrown into crisis with the emergence of naturalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Szondi positions epic theatre forms such as those of Brecht and Piscator as ‘rescue attempts’ that maintain drama’s primary markers, which he identifies as the fictive cosmos, dialogue and the mimetic representation of a fable.<sup>18</sup> Lehmann expands Szondi’s idea of drama to a notion of dramatic theatre which, independent of whether it is grounded in a play or not, ‘clings to the presentation of a fictive and simulated text-cosmos as dominant’.<sup>19</sup> Based on Lehmann’s contention that the ‘step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it’<sup>20</sup>, and that at its core postdramatic theatre is a renewed way of using theatre signs, focussed on drawing attention to the multiple sign systems of theatre, I conclude that postdramatic theatre cannot be produced on paper.

Nevertheless I must also acknowledge that there is a contemporary playwriting tradition that, like postdramatic theatre, breaks with the formal organising structure of dramatic theatre. However, I do not think it is helpful to expand the term ‘postdramatic’ to include writing practices. Instead, I prefer Gerda Poschmann’s category of ‘no-longer dramatic play texts’.<sup>21</sup> Given that I propose that postdramatic theatre is not a writing practice, I do not consider feminist studies of ‘no-longer dramatic plays’ in this thesis, although there are a greater number of these than of feminist writings on postdramatic theatre.<sup>22</sup> Since I

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and Michel Benamou, *SubStance* 5, no. 15 (1976): pp. 105 – 110.] However, Lehmann regards ‘postdramatic’ as a preferable term since it ties contemporary practices to the history of theatre aesthetics.

<sup>16</sup> David Barnett, ‘When Is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts,’ *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 24 (2008): pp. 14 – 23.

<sup>17</sup> For Boenisch’s argument see: Peter Boenisch, ‘Towards a Theatre of Encounter and Experience: Reflexive Dramaturgies and Classical Texts,’ *Contemporary Theatre Review* 2, no. 29 (2010): pp. 162 – 172.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas* (Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp, 1965): p. 83. Translation by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gerda Poschmann, *Der Nicht Mehr Dramatische Theatertext* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Poschmann for example considers Elfriede Jelinek’s feminist plays in relation to the dramatic theatre paradigm. Ibid: pp. 194 – 211, pp. 245 – 255, pp. 274 – 287. It is notable that even in the field of postdramatic theatre, which emphasises the multiple sign systems and transient

understand postdramatic theatre as a practice that is separate from playwriting, it might appear counter-intuitive to centre this study on a writing practice such as *écriture féminine*. However, I see and explore a resonance between Cixous's fictions, which minimise or completely abandon common traits of prose such as character and narrative in favour of a poetic style that Susan Sellers and Ian Blyth define as a keen attention to language's 'potential for an excess in signification', and postdramatic practices.<sup>23</sup> Lehmann frequently notes that postdramatic theatre contains a poetic potential. Through repeated references to French poetry, and Stéphane Mallarmé in particular, he proposes that postdramatic theatre signs allow for 'the poetic sphere of *connotations* [to come] into being',<sup>24</sup> creating a kind of 'scenic poetry'.<sup>25</sup> This study then takes off from this useful and under explored intersection between postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine*.

The introduction of the term postdramatic theatre into theatre scholarship might be viewed as an attempt to replace the term postmodern theatre. Lehmann indicates that this is not the case. While he acknowledges that postdramatic theatre occurs under the conditions of postmodernity and shares some traits with what has been called postmodern theatre, he also makes clear that they are not one and the same, proposing that postdramatic theatre is 'confronted with the possibilities of theatre beyond drama, not necessarily beyond modernity'.<sup>26</sup> Lehmann's insistence that postdramatic theatre might include modernist tropes indicates an affinity with *écriture féminine*. Morag Shiach has convincingly argued that Cixous's work carries 'many of the marks of the modernist impulse'.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, distinguishing between postmodern and postdramatic theatre is significant to my thesis as there are several feminist studies of postmodern theatre including Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis* and Geraldine Harris' *Staging Femininities* that inform my own thinking. Harris' study is particularly insightful since she considers the complex interactions between postmodern positions and feminism at length.<sup>28</sup> These studies,

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nature of theatre, many scholars favour the study of play texts. At a conference entitled *Anderes Theater – Theater des Anderen* at the University of Trier, which focussed on gender and alterity in postdramatic theatre, 9 out of 16 presentations were concerned with play texts, for example.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988): p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*: p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Morag Shiach, 'Hélène Cixous and the Possibilities of Resistance', in *Feminist Utopias in a Postmodern Era*, ed. Alkeline von Lenning, Marrie Bekker, and Ine Vanwesenbeeck (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1997): p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> See: Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999): pp. 11 – 26.

however, still largely rest on stage elements that postdramatic theatre abandons – narrative and character for instance – which indicates that not all postmodern theatre is also postdramatic. While feminist scholars have vigorously investigated postmodern theatre practices, the postdramatic is only now beginning to receive the same attention through studies such as my own.

## Post-Millennial Feminism and Theatre

In 2006 Janelle Reinelt ‘reluctantly’ concluded that ‘we live in a time of postfeminism’, which she identified with the lack of an ‘overarching umbrella movement’ and the absence of identifiable, shared goals.<sup>29</sup> In writing this, Reinelt was echoing a sense that, beginning in the mid-1980s, feminism had begun to ‘[alienate] a younger generation of women’.<sup>30</sup> Eight years after Reinelt’s comments however, the term ‘feminism’ appears resurgent. In 2013 the *Contemporary Gendered Performance and Practice* conference at the University of Belfast, bringing together postgraduate and early career researchers, explicitly invited feminist research; while the Camden’s People Theatre in London hosted a feminist theatre and performance festival, *Calm Down, Dear*; and the Tron Theatre in Glasgow held a series of events featuring feminist playwrights entitled *Reclaim the F Word*. It seems that amidst attacks on reproductive rights, anger over the enduring high rate of sexual violence and the underrepresentation of women in most areas, including theatre, researchers and artists are finding feminism to be an important cause again. Reinelt remains correct, however, in that no coherent movement or clear goal is visible in a corpus of scholarship or group of scholars. Instead of lamenting the decline of a broad movement, I view such pluralism as an opportunity. Following Judith Butler who argues that the ‘irrepressible democratic cacophony’ of feminist voices, their tendency to cause and celebrate dissension amongst each other rather than collapse into a single voice, is precisely what invigorates feminist discourse.<sup>31</sup>

Taking Butler’s comments as a starting point, I believe it is now possible to re-assess the dividing lines and hierarchies that were established between what second-wave feminists called liberal, cultural and materialist positions in theatre. Such a reassessment appears to

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<sup>29</sup> Janelle Reinelt, 'Navigating Postfeminism', in *Feminist Futures?*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Gamble, 'Postfeminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London, New York: Routledge, 1999): p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, 'The End of Sexual Difference?', in *Undoing Gender* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004): p. 175.

be already on the way. Jill Dolan has criticised her earlier ‘dogmatic’ stance towards liberal feminist playwrights.<sup>32</sup> Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris have been calling for less ‘theoretical hygiene’ in feminist research and, like Dolan, have turned to mainstream and commercial theatre in their recent publication *A Good Night Out for the Girls*.<sup>33</sup> The edited collections, *Staging International Feminisms* and *Feminist Futures?*, reflect and emphasise the multiplicity of contemporary feminist practices and research while Aston and Harris’ book *Performance Practice and Process: Contemporary (Women) Practitioners* illuminates the variety of approaches to creative processes employed by female practitioners.<sup>34</sup> What I have found throughout these publications is that Aston is the only academic who regularly draws on Cixous’s *écriture féminine* – though she does so to analyse female playwrights.<sup>35</sup> Cixous’s work is largely no longer used in the analysis of contemporary feminist theatre. This is a notable change in how Cixous’s thinking is utilised in the theatre studies. During the height of interest in Cixous’s writing, scholars were particularly interested in the implications of *écriture féminine* for live performance. Jeanie Forte, for example, argued in 1988 that ‘Cixous’s [...] strategies are much more vividly realised in the context of women’s performance art than in writing’<sup>36</sup> and Sylvia Running-Johnson’s essay ‘Feminine Writing and its Theatrical Other’ presents suggestions for producing femininity in live performance.<sup>37</sup>

In this thesis I have found it strategically important to look backwards in order to go forwards: this means re-assessing Cixous’s *écriture féminine* which is often regarded as tied to feminist thought of the 1980s and early 1990s. Harris, for example, states that it ‘would be a mistake’ to return to *écriture féminine* seeking models that can be applied

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<sup>32</sup> Jill Dolan, ‘Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein’, *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 3 (2008): p. 438.

<sup>33</sup> Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *A Good Night Out for the Girls* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): pp. 11 – 18

<sup>34</sup> Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case, *Staging International Feminisms* (London: Palgrave, 2007); Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, *Feminist Futures?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Aston, Elaine and Geraldine Harris, *Performance Practice and Process: Contemporary (Women) Practitioners* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Aston, for example, reads Sarah Kane’s play text *Blasted* through Cixous’s ideas: *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights 1990–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): pp. 83 – 89.

<sup>36</sup> Jeanie K Forte, ‘Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,’ *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988): p. 226.

<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Running-Johnson, ‘Feminine Writing and Its Theatrical Other,’ in *Themes in Drama: Women in Drama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): pp. 177 – 183.

unaltered since they arose in ‘a place and a moment now long passed’.<sup>38</sup> However, she also makes room for the possibility that these practices still have something to offer if they are translated and adapted for the present moment. By extracting the specific potentialities of Cixous’s *écriture féminine* for contemporary theatre, my practice hopes to achieve such a transformation. Moreover, I draw on materials that were either not available to non-French speakers at the peak of interest in *écriture féminine* or that were not taken into account by theatre scholars because they pertain to prose rather than theatre. By doing this, I intend to show that elements of Cixous’s writing might still be informative for feminists today.<sup>39</sup> Since Cixous has concentrated her feminist efforts on prose writing and her approach to prose does not immediately suggest a theatre practice, the advent of practice-as-research methods make it possible to revitalise Cixous’s *écriture féminine* for contemporary theatre scholarship.

However, I am mindful of how *écriture féminine* has been problematised by previous scholars and the danger of working with the notion of femininity – which Toril Moi, for instance, believes should not factor in feminist politics at all.<sup>40</sup> The risk is of replicating some of the errors of second-wave feminism. I am particularly wary of the tendency of discourses informed by *écriture féminine* to instate sexual difference as the primary difference, discounting race, sexual orientation, class and ability, and to essentialise this difference. I argue, that it is possible to read Cixous’s writing within a deconstructive context, intended as a strategic move to undo binary hierarchies (see Chapter 2 for my discussion of this). Such a view places her *écriture féminine* in closer proximity to queer studies and poststructuralist feminism rather than to gynocentric criticism, and Cixous herself has recently expressed the opinion that her manifesto ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ was an important precursor to queer studies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Geraldine Harris, ‘Après Toutes Ces Elles / After All This Else: “New” French Feminsims’, Translated to the British Scene’, in *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance*, ed. Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): p. 233.

<sup>39</sup> Since now many of Cixous’s core writings have been translated, I rely on these where possible. However, because Cixous’s writing style often relies on puns and grammatical ambiguities to destabilise meaning, I have referred back to the original texts when necessary.

<sup>40</sup> Toril Moi, ‘From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again,’ *Signs* 29, no. 3 (2004): p. 845.

<sup>41</sup> The relationship between *écriture féminine* and queer perspectives is not simple, however. She stresses that there are just as many differences between her early work and queer studies as there are similarities. Michel Foucault’s notion of genealogy which does not propose origins or linear developments but stresses the contingency of ideas describes the relationship between *écriture féminine* and queer studies more precisely. See: Héléne Cixous, Elisabeth Schäfer and Claudia Simma, ‘Medusas “Changeance”: Ein Interview Mit Héléne Cixous,’ in *Das Lachen Der*

In contrast to Moi, I propose that femininity can play a useful role in feminist discourses, especially in the current climate, in which, as Nina Power analyses in her pamphlet *One-Dimensional Woman*, much mainstream ‘upbeat’ feminism has joined forces with consumer capitalism with the result that that conventional ‘femininity’ has been co-opted by ‘the logic of the market’.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, as Butler pointed out over a decade ago, there is an ongoing ‘trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims’.<sup>43</sup> Like Butler and Power I feel cautious of feminist positions that align themselves too closely with the institutions and laws of those already in power. From this point of view Cixous’s alternative theorisation of femininity as a subversive, resistant force that threatens capitalism as much as it does phallogentrism seems increasingly seductive. For this reason I argue that an arts practice rooted in Cixous’s notion of femininity still has a place today. Cixous reminds us that ‘we need a poetic practice inside / as a political practice’,<sup>44</sup> although such a practice does not necessarily make political statements or raise awareness of political issues. She advocates a practice that works on unravelling and re-joining the imaginary fabric that weaves together ideological positions, political institutions and individual desires (I discuss the status of Cixous’s practice in relation to her theoretical and political ideas in Chapter 2, see: pp. 46 – 50).

## Structure

My thesis is composed of three performances and a written contextualisation and critical discussion of these performances. The performances are documented on three DVDs, each of which contains a full-length film of one performance alongside selected excerpts and a CD that contains text documents and the scripts which demonstrate and highlight particular research findings. These resources are also accessible online at:

<http://www.feministpostdramatic.tumblr.com>. The written text directs the reader towards these when appropriate. The written component of the thesis is arranged in two parts, each encompassing three chapters. The first part – Part 1 – begins with an explanation of the critical and practical contexts that gave rise to this research. I then introduce Cixous’s

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*Medusa Zusammen Mit Aktuellen Beiträgen*, ed. Esther Hutfless, Gerturd Postl, and Elisabeth Schäfer, trans. Claudia Simma (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2013): p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* (Winchester: Washington, 2009): p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Weiblichkeit in Der Schrift*, trans. Eva Duffner (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1977): p. 7. Translation by the author.

theoretical and practical approaches to *écriture féminine*. In Chapter 2, I argue for the continuing relevance of her ideas and also reflect on her theatre practice. I draw on the archival research I undertook at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, indicating how this influenced the design of my first practical experiment. The final chapter of Part 1 – Chapter 3 – offers a reflection of my practice-as-research method and the decisions I made in relation to documentation. As a whole, the first part of the thesis is intended as a critical discussion and explanation of the decisions I made before beginning the practical research and aims to provide the reader with an overview of the debates that the practice grows out of, responds to and seeks to advance.

The second part of the thesis – Part 2 – presents the practical research and discusses the findings that I reached through it. Each chapter of Part 2 (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) focuses on one performance and the chapters follow the chronological order of the practice. While the research findings accumulated across the series and the performances built upon each other iteratively, each chapter focuses in detail on one aspect of the practice: specifically, semiotics, dramaturgy and feminine epistemology. Though this method of presenting the practice limits discussion of how each trope is presented across the series, it makes it possible to discuss them in greater depth and in relation to the critical contexts established in Part 1.

# **PART 1:**

**Critical and Practical Contexts**

**Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Féminine***

**Methodology**

# Chapter 1

## Critical and Practical Contexts

OPHELIA: I am Ophelia. She who the river could not hold. The woman on the gallows The woman with the slashed arteries The woman with the overdose ON THE LIPS SNOW The woman with the head in the gas-oven. Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I am alone with my breasts my thighs my lap. I rip apart the instruments of my imprisonment the Stool the Table the Bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my Home. I tear the doors off their hinges to let the wind and the cry of the World inside. I smash the Window. With my bleeding hands I tear the photographs of the men who I loved and who used me on the Bed on the Table on the Chair on the Floor. I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes into the fire. I dig the clock which was my heart out of my breast. I go into the street, clothed in my blood.<sup>1</sup>

Heiner Müller, *The Hamletmachine*

How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum*, the position of victim?<sup>2</sup>

Hélène Cixous, *Aller à la mer*

As described in my introduction, this thesis grew from a hunch that postdramatic theatre might be connected to what Hélène Cixous defines as ‘femininity’. I wondered whether Cixous’s *écriture féminine* might offer a way of framing the poetics of postdramatic theatre in relation to feminist concerns, and what an exploration of the connection between postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* might contribute to the ongoing debate on the politics of the postdramatic. Looking back over the history of feminist theatre and performance scholarship reminds me that feminists have consistently made crucial interventions into debates in the field and through their analyses have been among the drivers of politicised approaches to theatre and performance. This does not mean that a singular, definitive feminist perspective has emerged, although a tendency to privilege Brecht-inspired, materialist performance modes can be discerned by the end of the 1980s in publications such as Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* and the essays that were eventually compiled in Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis*. The lack of explicitly feminist voices in the debates on postdramatic theatre appears to me to be a gap in both

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<sup>1</sup> Heiner Müller, ‘The Hamletmachine,’ in *Theatremachine*, trans. Marc von Henning (London: Faber and Faber, 1995): p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Aller à La Mer’, trans. Barbare Kerslake, *Modern Drama* 27, no. 4 (1984): p. 546.

postdramatic theatre and feminist scholarship. For this reason, I aim to investigate whether postdramatic theatre can be located in relation to feminism through its structural similarity to *écriture féminine*. I will briefly describe my own trajectory as a theatre maker and a feminist in order to elucidate the problems I encountered trying to reconcile the postdramatic theatre and feminism, which ultimately led me to embark on this practice-as-research enquiry.

In the above-quoted essay, *Aller à la mer* (1984), Cixous proposes that traditional dramatic theatre has been enslaved to patriarchal imagination in which ‘it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin’.<sup>3</sup> On a narrative level it is true that the path of Western dramatic theatre is littered with female corpses: Antigone, Ophelia, Emilia Galotti, Amalia and Hedda Gabler all fall victim to the power play between men. Their role is reduced to that of barter: they are mere objects of exchange between men. Following Cixous, the consequence of this for the female spectator is that she is left with two options: she must either identify with the victim and participate in her own erasure or identify across gender boundaries and partake in the sadistic pleasure of objectification and denigration. Teresa de Lauretis has similarly conceptualised the female spectator as being positioned in a state of double identification ‘with the figure of narrative movement, the mythical subject, and with the figure of narrative closure, the narrative image’;<sup>4</sup> the latter being identified with feminine, passive desire and the former with masculine, active desire. De Lauretis suggests that the female spectator is always split in two in this model, oscillating between a spectatorial position coded as feminine or masculine. To position feminine desire as the driver of narrative is impossible in this regime, and this leads Cixous to proclaim that theatre cannot produce ‘a living woman’, only a dead one.<sup>5</sup>

I share Cixous’s observation, though unlike Cixous I came to realise it not as a spectator of theatre but as a maker. In 2009 I co-directed a production of Friedrich Schiller’s *The Robbers*, entitled *Robbers // Brothers // Lovers*.<sup>6</sup> The title given to the piece indicated our reading of the play text as structured through a series of couplings revolving around the

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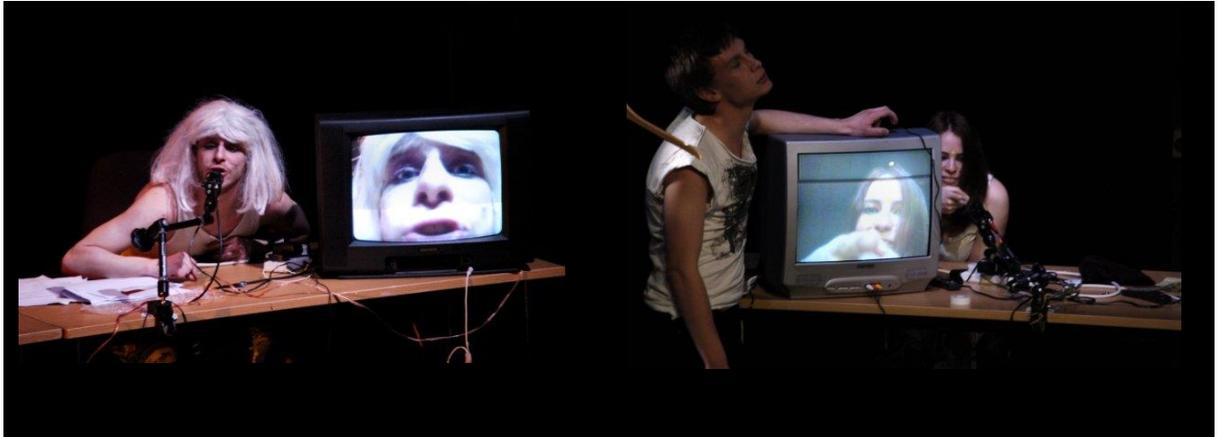
<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 546.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984): p. 144.

<sup>5</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 546.

<sup>6</sup> *Robbers // Brothers // Lovers*, dir. Cara Berger and George Mackenney, G12 Theatre, Glasgow, Feb 2009.

protagonist Karl Moor.<sup>7</sup> Our performance drew on a register of techniques that are typically identified as postmodern: Karl and Amalia were doubled on stage through two videos that ran throughout, while two performers played a range of minor characters with the help of six cameras and two TV sets as the pictures below illustrate.



Although postmodern in its aesthetics, only some aspects of the piece – the layering and texturing of sound, the attention to multiple sign systems by using soundscapes, the associative, fragmented dramaturgy – were also postdramatic since the performance hinged on narrating a fable and presenting the actions of characters. Throughout the production process the character Amalia troubled me; with few exceptions she is reactive. While the male characters are torn apart by conflicting desires and appear all the more rounded for it, her trajectory is a one-way street leading to her death: her role is to be the desired object and a dramaturgical tool, not a desiring, acting subject. I felt the weight of responsibility as a female director with a burgeoning feminist consciousness, working with a strong and multi-faceted female performer, creating a performance mode in which the performer was not victimised in the same way Amalia is in the play.

The answer I found at the time was to create a distinct distance between the performer and the character she was playing and to historicise Amalia as a persistent image of woman as

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<sup>7</sup> Karl is tricked out of his inheritance by his brother Franz and is driven underground. He forms a gang of robbers together with his friend-cum-rival Spiegelberg while his lover Amalia stays behind. Franz falsely claims that Karl has died, causing his father to apparently collapse dead, and proceeds to forcefully pursue Amalia. Amalia, however, remains dedicated to Karl and succeeds in uncovering the truth: both Karl and his father are still alive. Following a series of encounters Karl decides to return home to find Amalia. Upon his arrival Amalia does not recognise him; he, however, is shocked by her pure image of him, which he cannot reconcile with the murdering and pillaging lifestyle he has succumbed to. In the final scenes of the play Spiegelberg is murdered by the robber gang after a failed coup for leadership, Franz commits suicide out of guilt for his deeds and the father of the brothers dies of a heart attack after hearing of Karl's doings. Karl's penultimate act is to kill Amalia who states that she either wants him to disavow his loyalty to the robbers or die. Finally, Karl repents and gives himself over to a bounty hunter, willing to accept any punishment that the law has in store for him.

an object of desire and the victim of the play's action that reaches into the present moment.<sup>8</sup> Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis* played a formative role in my staging decisions. Diamond suggests a 'possible re-radicalisation of [Brecht's] theory through feminism',<sup>9</sup> working through techniques such as historicisation, the alienation-effect and the *gestus* from a postmodern feminist position. The most powerful assertion Diamond makes is that Brechtian forms can be used to distort and disrupt the correlation of seeing and knowing: so the alienation effect can be employed to challenge 'the conventional resemblance between the performer's body and the object, or character, to which it refers'.<sup>10</sup> In relation to feminism this means that gender can be made visible as a cultural encoding of the body rather than a natural state. The actor Stefanie Ritch performed Amalia as a series of gendered images by putting on and taking off costumes that were hung in the space, following a sign-posted path. The pictures below show a few of the different roles she assumed.



Stefanie slipped into the role of the teen with a rock star crush dancing in pyjamas, the seductress in a red dress, and the innocent victim clothed in white, amongst others. The desired effect of this was to foreground gender as a sign system and a set of behaviours

<sup>8</sup> The trope of female death still permeates contemporary playwriting. The play texts of Dea Loher, who is associated with neo-dramatic theatre, for example, feature several female murders – in *Blaubart: Hoffnung der Frauen* (1997) and *Das letzte Feuer* (2008) – and suicides – in *Unschuld* (2003), *Licht* (2004) and *Das Leben auf der Praca Roosevelt* (2004). The use of women's deaths as the catalyst for or climax of action, however, is possibly more pronounced in TV drama and film, which supports Karen Jürs-Munby's claim that dramatic structures are now more 'sedimented in film and television' than they are in theatre. (See: Lehmann, 2006: p. 13)

<sup>9</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997): p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrating, as Diamond puts it, that ‘the gender lexicon’ is made up of ‘illusionistic trappings that are *nevertheless* inseparable from, embedded in, the body’s habitus’.<sup>11</sup>

Since the core of Brechtian theory is to show the world as changeable and full of potential for difference, rather than immovable and pre-determined, we foregrounded the narrative structure that produces Amalia’s fate as inevitable. Between each costume change, the actress was free to roam and observe the action around her. As she arrived at each change, she might have acted differently. Each action was to ‘contain the trace of the action it represses’.<sup>12</sup> This was most fully realised in the scene of Amalia’s death during which Stefanie spoke the lines of all the characters in the scene, satirising their voices and mannerisms. Finally, she did not act out Amalia’s death but spoke the directing instructions describing Karl’s actions and left the stage through the backstage door. Her leaving the stage, we hoped, contained the trace of her not leaving, the possibility of her disagreement.

However, this final act of leaving the stage has haunted me ever since. Had I, despite my best intentions, participated in erasing the female character and the actor playing her from the stage? What was meant to be an empowering gesture uncannily resembled defeat. I began to wonder how I might produce theatre that does not ultimately erase women and participate in ‘the sadism directed against women’.<sup>13</sup> Cixous is hopeful for the possibility of producing a femininity in theatre that does not position women as objects of a masculine gaze and exchange, ultimately leading to their death. To achieve this, she declares, ‘staginess’, narrative events and distancing must be left behind.<sup>14</sup> The stage should rely on ‘body-presence’ instead of narration that produces a single, oppressive vision of woman.<sup>15</sup> The form of feminine theatre that Cixous advocates would surpass the safe distance between the gaze and the stage, instead coming up close, producing energetic intensity. Cixous’s description of a new theatre strongly resembles Hans-Thies Lehmann’s account of postdramatic theatre as affective and energetic rather than representational. This has led me to ask: does postdramatic theatre produce the feminine as Cixous defines it? Indeed, is there a structural resemblance between it and *écriture féminine*, and can, as a result, the postdramatic be said to contain a feminist politics? Before detailing my

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid: p. 47. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 546.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: p. 547.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

exploration of these complex questions I discuss the grounds upon which feminists have historically criticised the theatre apparatus and the solutions that have been advocated. I argue that the models of feminist theatre criticism put forward to date cannot be used to interrogate postdramatic practices since they rely on narration and figuration, properties minimised or entirely relinquished in postdramatic theatre practices. Instead, I suggest revisiting Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* in order to probe the relationship between postdramatic theatre and feminist politics.

## Feminist Criticism of the Theatre Apparatus

The late 1980s were a pivotal point in the history of the study of feminism and theatre, characterised by a critical mass of theorising and debate. During this period scholars identified and taxonomised different staging strategies that loosely corresponded to the then prevailing idea that feminism can be divided into three main strands: liberal / bourgeois, cultural / radical and materialist feminism.<sup>16</sup> While Geraldine Harris argued that these distinctions are not so clearly upheld in practice and that whether a specific performance is classed as materialist or cultural is largely a matter of interpretation, the positions formulated towards theatre and its representational methods remain influential at least in so far as no other taxonomy of feminist thought has won wide recognition.<sup>17</sup> The late 1980s also coincided with the English translation of one of Cixous's core books on *écriture féminine*, *The Newly Born Woman*, and the re-publication of her manifesto 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's influential anthology *New French Feminisms*.<sup>18</sup> Whilst Cixous's *écriture féminine* was discussed by feminist theatre scholars during this time, it has since largely fallen out of the debate in the US, though UK-based feminists such as Geraldine Harris and Elaine Aston still refer to her work sporadically.<sup>19</sup> While my thesis revisits some of the debates of the 1980s, I approach them from a historicising perspective, paying particular attention to how the contemporary, postdramatic landscape might prompt us to re-examine them.

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<sup>16</sup> Both Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* [*Feminism and Theatre: Reissued Edition* (London: Palgrave, 2008).] and Elaine Aston's *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* [*Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995).] are structured around these distinctions, for example.

<sup>17</sup> Harris, 1999: pp. 83 - 122.

<sup>18</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> For example, see: Aston, 2003: pp. 83 – 89; Harris: 2011.

Much feminist theatre scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, developed from a critique of realist theatre and its implications for feminism, was inspired by deconstructionist thought. Realism had been used by liberal and bourgeois feminists whose feminism, as Jill Dolan concisely summarises, worked ‘within existent social and political organisations’, hoping that these might be transformed in the long run.<sup>20</sup> Premised on the notion that the stage acts as a mirror of social life, such realist feminist theatre presented women’s lives and experiences as equally important and as universally meaningful as men’s. Dolan, although profoundly sceptical of realism, concedes that liberal activism led to ‘the wider visibility of women playwrights, directors, producers, and designers, and the creation of richer roles for women performers’.<sup>21</sup> However, by the mid-1980s most influential feminist theatre criticism rejected liberal feminism and realism, using psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory to critique the representational apparatus of realist theatre as well as the assumption that the stage functions as a mirror that accurately reflects the world.

While liberal feminists assumed that realism in the hands of women could be used to give more truthful accounts of their lives, deconstructivism enabled scholars to dig deeper into the conditions in which realist theatre is premised and show how its mode of representation is already structured by patriarchal relations. Catherine Belsey’s work on realism in literary studies was an important influence on feminist theorisation at this time. Referring to Althusser’s writing on ideology, Belsey argued that ideology not only penetrates material relations but also imaginary relations, which prop up ideological positions by disguising myths and beliefs as common-sense knowledge. Belsey was particularly keen to point out that ‘the destination of ideology is the subject’.<sup>22</sup> Since the effects of ideology are seen in subjects’ actions, knowledge of the ways subjects are constructed can be of great importance to feminist scholars and artists. Joining Marxist and psychoanalytic positions, Belsey used Jacques Lacan’s ideas on subject-formation alongside Althusser to critique what she identified as ‘classical realism’, which she proposed supports dominant positions by naturalising ideology. Belsey showed that Lacan’s poststructuralist theory of subjectivity could be made useful for feminism since it originates from a perspective that assumes that subjectivity is not a fixed and stable condition but a perpetually re-negotiated process. Because of this subjectivity can be transformed and recreated.

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<sup>20</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991): p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Belsey, ‘Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text’, in *Feminist Criticism & Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature & Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfeldt (London: Routledge, 1985): p. 58.

Belsey's writing on realism was taken on board and developed by several feminist theatre scholars. Jill Dolan and Sue-Ellen Case's articles of the mid-1980s also stand out in this regard. Dolan, focussing on the stage as mirror analogy, proposed that the mirror is 'really an empty frame' and that 'the images reflected in it [are] consciously constructed according to political necessity, with a particular, perceiving subject in mind who looks in the mirror for *his* identity'.<sup>23</sup> Dolan promoted a critical reorientation from the 'mirror's image, to the mirror's surface and frame'.<sup>24</sup> Theatre was no longer to be understood in terms its reflection *of* women, but the way that theatre reflected *on* women. Case added a lesbian perspective, arguing that realism for women is 'deadly' since its narrative closure 'chokes the woman to death and strangles the play of symbols'.<sup>25</sup> This, according to Case, is because of realism's 'continual zooming-in on the family unit and its heterosexist ideology'.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, Case decried realism for its tendency to deny the existence of lesbians while at the same time chastising heterosexual women.

By the late 1980s feminist theatre scholars had divided non-realist feminist theatre into two differing approaches: cultural and materialist feminist theatre practices. Both positions shared much of the critical groundwork with regard to the dangers of the realist theatre apparatus but backed different alternatives to it, which were rooted in distinct ideological positions. Radical and cultural feminists typically criticised realist theatre for portraying an erroneous picture of women in both form and content, proposing that non-realist theatre forms might generate more accurate portrayals of women: Dolan, for example, points out that although such theatre often did not look realistic, it aimed to promote a feminist mimesis that would 'mirror female content through female forms'.<sup>27</sup> Cultural feminist theatre approaches largely faded from academic discourse by the 1990s, as did Cixous's *écriture féminine* which was, in my opinion incorrectly, identified with cultural feminism in much of the English-speaking world (see Chapter 2). Dolan, one of the most vocal critics of cultural feminism, contributed to this argument by pointing out its tendency to essentialise 'woman' and elide differences between women with regard to class, sexual orientation and race. Cultural feminist theatre was exposed as involuntarily reinforcing the patriarchal structures it sought to challenge by reifying an insurmountable binary between

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<sup>23</sup> Jill Dolan, 'Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles,' *Women & Performance* 2, no. 2 (1985): p. 7. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*: p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,' *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (1988): p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*: p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Dolan, 1991: p. 96.

men and women. I largely agree with Dolan's position on cultural feminism, with the exception of her positioning of Cixous as one of its proponents.<sup>28</sup> As such, my work on *écriture féminine* should not be understood as a return to cultural feminist theories but as an effort to reappraise Cixous's work from a deconstructive standpoint.

By the end of the 1980s there appeared to be a consensus amongst a number of feminist scholars, including Diamond, Dolan and Reinelt, that materialist stage practices, modelled on the theatre of Brecht, were most suited to 'dismantling the representational apparatus' that was damaging to women.<sup>29</sup> However, I suggest that when viewed through the prism of postdramatic theatre, the advocacy of Brechtian materialist performance modes by feminist scholars begins to appear as a less radical break with tradition than some of its proponents assumed. Lehmann defines dramatic theatre as the representation of a 'fictive cosmos',<sup>30</sup> in which the triumvirate of action, character and dialogue reign. All of these serve the defining feature of dramatic theatre: the fable or story. No matter how interrupted or distorted, the presence of a fable marks a performance as dramatic, Lehmann insists. Contrary to the common perception of Brecht by Anglophone theatre scholars as anti-illusionistic and, hence, anti-realist, he viewed his theatre as a form of realism. Brecht conceptualised realism not as a form but as an effect, contra the idea that realism in theatre means reproducing the surface appearance of reality. He explained:

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / [...] emphasising the question of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.<sup>31</sup>

While Brechtian realism bears little formal resemblance to Belsey's classical realism, it is still profoundly entangled with the dramatic tradition. Since, as Lehmann points out, 'the fable [remains] the *sine qua non*' of Brechtian theatre, it might be understood 'as a *renewal* and *completion* of classical dramaturgy' not 'as a revolutionary counter-design' when approached from a perspective informed by postdramatic theatre practices.<sup>32</sup> If Lehmann's proposition is accepted, it becomes evident that materialist feminist theatre, rooted in Brechtian techniques, is a type of dramatic theatre. Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis*, for

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<sup>28</sup> Dolan, 1991: pp. 86 – 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht' in Theodor W Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 2007): p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 33.

instance, while arguing for a critical mode of dramatic representation by using the alienation effect, the *gestus* and historicisation, is preoccupied with fable and characters. In the materialist feminist theatre model, realism and its conservative gender doctrine are demystified and historicised, their ideological inflection is unveiled and shown to be changeable but the basic building blocks of dramatic theatre, though put together differently, still hold sway over the stage.

## The Limits of Materialist Feminism

Seeking to problematise the continuing reliance of feminist theatre on dramatic forms, I draw on both Lehmann's and Cixous's ideas. In her essay 'Aller à la mer', Cixous argues that 'theatre [...] repeats and intensifies the horror of the murder scene which is at the origin of all cultural productions'.<sup>33</sup> Here, she is referring to Lacanian psychoanalysis which posits the castration complex and the Name-of-the-Father as the precondition for participating in culture, in effect coding all symbolic production masculine. Lacan re-reads the primordial murder scene that Freud describes in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud proposes that in early human history a ritual murder of a castrating father – he is castrating since he forbids sexual access to the mother – by a horde of sons created a situation wherein 'the dead father became stronger than the living one had been' and thus instated the incest taboo without the need for the immediate threat of penalisation.<sup>34</sup> Freud transposes the Oedipus complex from the individual to the societal, concluding that 'the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex'.<sup>35</sup> However, the murder Cixous decries is not the murder of the father but that of a woman.

This proposition brings Lacan's reading of Freud into play: Lacan views the Oedipal scenario as formative for the subject's initiation into the Symbolic Order. Rather than concentrating on the real father, he focuses on the symbolic father or the Name-of-the-Father who 'acts as the support of the symbolic function'.<sup>36</sup> The symbolic father intervenes in the mother-child dyad, severing the subject's imaginary tie to the mother and forcing it into the field of social and symbolic relations. For the subject this is a profound loss and in consequence it experiences itself as lacking. In order to manage this sense of lack the subject identifies with the symbolic father and the law, denouncing the position of the

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<sup>33</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 546.

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 2001): p. 166.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*: p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990): p. 71.

mother who comes to be seen as lacking access to the Symbolic. In effect, woman is identified with lack, a position which, according to Laura Mulvey's influential study on psychoanalysis and cinema, she cannot 'transcend'.<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, woman can only ever appear as 'bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning'.<sup>38</sup> The child must reject the mother and the feminine, metaphorically murder her, in order to become a subject and participate in society. This, says Cixous, is the precondition for representational theatre, which is premised on the actions of discrete subjects who have renounced the mother in order to participate in the patriarchal Symbolic. She concludes that theatre conspires in the erasure of women 'with even more violence' than other types of art.<sup>39</sup> Dramatic theatre, including Brechtian forms, that is centrally concerned with narrating a fable and presenting characters is problematised by Cixous's account. This includes the apparently subversive tactics of Brechtian theatre, bound as this theatre is to the traditions of dramatic theatre, which operate under the condition of Lacan's Name-of-the-Father that represses the feminine.

Brechtian-materialist performance does not so much leave behind the mirror, as Dolan wishes; it applies a tactical crack that allows us to see that there is nothing behind the mirror. Nevertheless, there are a number of arguments for Brechtian-materialist performance's continuing relevance. As both Dolan and Diamond point out, theatre presents a particular challenge to feminist theatre makers and scholars since 'the actor's body cannot forget its gender'.<sup>40</sup> The sight of a body immediately invites us to place it into a gender binary, to view it as either male or female and to overlay it with various cultural scripts and codes. Brechtian-materialist realism does at least afford feminist artists the opportunity to disentangle these scripts and show how they are produced. To this extent feminist theatre, as Diamond argues, 'has a stake in truth' and benefits from 'assuming a subject position, however provisional, and making truth claims, however flexible'.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, I share many of Geraldine Harris' qualms over the central position that Brecht is afforded by feminist theatre scholars. Reflecting on feminist theories of the 1980s, Harris warned in 1999 of the dangers of the 'reification of Brecht as the "master"'

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<sup>37</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 546.

<sup>40</sup> Diamond, 1997: p. vii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

discourse for political theatre'.<sup>42</sup> The problem that Harris identified is the tendency to establish a set of aesthetic markers that were used to define the field of political theatre and thus limit thinking about theatre and politics in advance. This had severe consequences for theatre studies in Britain, according to Harris, as it 'foreclose[d] the domain of intelligibility for social and political dissent within theatre practice' for 'at least a decade'.<sup>43</sup> I believe that Harris' remarks, although now more than a decade old, might go some way toward explaining why feminist theatre scholars have neglected postdramatic theatre practices. Whereas Dolan, for example, has recanted her earlier dismissal of feminist theatre other than Brechtian-materialist styles because she believes 'not enough feminist performance work is visible or taken seriously for scholars to make the fine distinctions that once seemed necessary',<sup>44</sup> influential feminist theatre scholars, such as Janelle Reinelt and Birgit Haas remained sceptical towards the political value of the 'elliptical, affective' style of postdramatic theatre.<sup>45</sup>

In this thesis I too argue that a feminist theatre beyond the mirror and the dramatic form is possible. This means shifting the debate from the sphere of the representation of character and fable to concerns of postdramatic poetics: the type of signs being produced, the compositional framework and the material elements of the stage. This corresponds with Lehmann's assertion that the politics of postdramatic theatre are not to be found in themes and content but in its 'mode of representation'.<sup>46</sup>

## Postdramatic Theatre and Politics

A thesis that seeks to open up the field of postdramatic theatre for feminist scrutiny cannot elide debates on the relationship between postdramatic theatre and politics more generally. The question of the politics of postdramatic theatre has been the focus of scholarship since the publication of Lehmann's study in German in 1999 and in English in 2006. As postdramatic theatre 'leaves behind the political style' of Brechtian theatre favoured by feminist scholars in the 1980s and beyond,<sup>47</sup> the politics of postdramatic theatre only

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<sup>42</sup> Harris, 1999: p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Dolan, 2008: p. 435.

<sup>45</sup> Janelle Reinelt, 'Generational Shifts,' *Theatre Research International* 35, no. 3 (2010): p. 290.; Birgit Haas, *Plädoyer Für Ein Dramatisches Drama* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 178.

<sup>47</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 33.

appear ‘indirectly, from an oblique angle, *modo obliquo*’.<sup>48</sup> This does not mean – and this is a central argument to this thesis – that postdramatic theatre operates outside of political discourses or lacks political efficacy.

I propose that the politics of postdramatic theatre are better understood through Jacques Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic efficacy of art than through the ‘pedagogical model’ that much feminist criticism hinges upon.<sup>49</sup> He differentiates between three types of political efficacy ascribed to art: the ‘pedagogical model’,<sup>50</sup> which supposes that the receiver will modify their behaviour based on lessons drawn from the work of art; the model of ‘ethical efficacy’ in which the artwork seeks to create an experience of a new community; and the aesthetic regime that creates a dissonance ‘between sense and sense’,<sup>51</sup> breaking with ‘the “natural” order’ which determines specific ways that ‘being, seeing and hearing’ are distributed in line with political power.<sup>52</sup> The pedagogical model is premised on the idea that understanding something about the world will cause changes in our behaviour. Framing the politics of postdramatic theatre in terms of its aesthetic efficacy, in contrast, means making room for the as of yet unthinkable, unseen and unheard to emerge and granting this process the potential for transforming the composition of the political. While Lehmann formulates some useful starting points for thinking about the politics of postdramatic theatre, his use of the term ‘the political’ remains elusive and begs several questions: what politics are these?; and, to whose end do they function? By focussing the debate on a more concrete political subject, feminism, I aim to bring some clarity to the discussion, injecting it with a sense of political urgency and focus that a term as general and abstract as ‘the political’ cannot so easily achieve.

Lehmann’s book moves in two directions with regard to locating the politics of postdramatic theatre: towards a specific type of spectatorship on the one hand, and a politics of aesthetic form on the other. While this study focuses on the latter, I would also like to discuss briefly the former. For Lehmann postdramatic theatre facilitates real encounters between the stage and its audience, exploiting the fact that theatre is a shared

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<sup>48</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Das Politische Schreiben* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2002): p. 16. Translation by the author.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Paradoxes of Political Art,’ in *Dissensus: On Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010): p. 136.

<sup>50</sup> Rancière, 2010: p 136

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, New York: Verso Books, 2009): p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> Rancière, 2010: p 139

situation in time and space. Consequently, its politics should be sought in the situative relationship between the spectator and the stage.<sup>53</sup> Dagmar Jaeger sees the political purpose of postdramatic theatre as restoring broken relations in a mediatised society. Linking the tendency of postdramatic practices to facilitate real encounters rather than narrate fictitious stories to the proliferation of mass media images, she asserts that postdramatic theatre fulfils a ritualistic purpose. It seeks to heal the spectator from the isolation and anonymity of contemporary life by creating authentic experiences.<sup>54</sup> Lehmann formulates a similar opinion, proposing that postdramatic theatre answers the flood of hyperreal media images – which are evacuated of desire and which erode the relationship between the sender and the receiver since their sole function is to transmit information – with a politics of perception rooted in an ethics of ‘response-ability’.<sup>55</sup>

Nikolaus Müller-Schöll likewise conceptualises postdramatic theatre’s tendency to emphasise shared time and space in relation to politics. He references Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of ‘being with’, used to denote a state of social togetherness that avoids both the idea of being ‘for’ or ‘because of’ each other.<sup>56</sup> Instead, being-with highlights that we are ‘singular-plural’; being, as Nancy understand it, is fundamentally relational.<sup>57</sup> Postdramatic theatre, Müller-Schöll proposes, allows us to experience being in just such a way by calling attention to the act of spectating. Ontroerend Goed’s performance, *Audience*, in which the spectators are confronted with a live-filmed mirror image of themselves, for example, exploits theatre as a practice that occurs in a shared time and space. Postdramatic strategies such as this mutually implicate the actors and spectators: the spectators become a ‘partner (*Mit-Spieler*)’ in the performance, Müller-Schöll suggests, and both are led to explore or interrogate what it means to be singular-plural through it.<sup>58</sup> As in Brecht’s epic theatre – and this explains Lehmann’s insistence that postdramatic theatre is a post-Brechtian theatre – postdramatic theatre is charged with the duty of activating its spectators and educating them to become more ethically and politically aware. This is not achieved through the

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<sup>53</sup> Lehmann, 2002: p. 15. Translation by the author.

<sup>54</sup> Dagmar Jaeger, *Theater Im Medienzeitalter: Das Postdramatische Theater Von Elfriede Jelinek Und Heiner Müller* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2007): pp. 110 - 111.

<sup>55</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 185.

<sup>56</sup> Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, 'Theatre of Potentiality. Communicability and the Political in Contemporary Performance Practice', *Theatre Research International* 29, no. 1 (March 2004): p. 54.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy develops this idea in: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Brien (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Müller-Schöll: p. 47.

presentation of a political fable as in Brecht's theatre but by exploring the ethics of the face-to-face encounter in the auditorium.

However, Rancière's recent theorisation of the spectator troubles the role ascribed to her by Lehmann, Jaeger and Müller-Schöll. The notion that postdramatic theatre might activate spectators and prompt them to enact a new community fits with what Rancière has called the model of the ethical immediacy of political art in which 'the stake [...] is not to improve behaviour through representation, but to have all living bodies directly embody the sense of the common'.<sup>59</sup> Rancière takes issue with the notion of ethical immediacy since it relies upon a direct relationship between emotive enactment and the decision to change one's behaviour in daily life. He further decouples the notion that theatre is experienced communally and thus politically charged in specific ways, claiming that: 'in the theatre [...] as in a museum, school or street, there are only individuals plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them'.<sup>60</sup> Instead of assuming a 'calculable transmission' between the artwork and the receiver through representational means or ethical involvement,<sup>61</sup> he suggests a different way of thinking about the political efficacy of art: its 'aesthetic efficacy'.<sup>62</sup> I would like to suggest that this model is a more productive way of considering the politics of postdramatic theatre.

The model of aesthetic efficacy is similar to the second path Lehmann takes in expounding the political function of postdramatic theatre. Following Rancière, the aesthetic efficacy of art is to participate in the redistribution of the sensible. He proposes that art is politically efficacious when it intervenes in the system that defines who or what is visible or invisible, audible or inaudible, sensible or hidden and which effectively defines who can have a share in what is 'common of the community'.<sup>63</sup> The French term *partage* that Rancière uses is typically translated as 'distribution' but can also mean 'partitioning', 'dividing' or 'sharing'; it evokes a string of different modes of relation in which shared togetherness and dividing exclusion lie closely together. Lehmann similarly proposes that postdramatic theatre interrupts the common. Through Kristeva, he develops an understanding of the political as the 'common measure, the rule that constitutes commonality'.<sup>64</sup> The political,

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<sup>59</sup> Rancière, 2010: p. 137.

<sup>60</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Rancière, 2010: p. 143.

<sup>62</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 63.

<sup>63</sup> Rancière, 2010: p. 139.

<sup>64</sup> Lehmann, 2002: p. 17. Translation by the author.

according to Lehmann's reading of Kristeva, 'cannot help but posit an order, a rule, a power that is applicable to all'.<sup>65</sup> Lehmann suggests that the politics of the postdramatic lie in the interruption of the rule through 'the momentary *suspension* of normative, legal and political modes of behaviour'.<sup>66</sup> However, a politics that merely interrupts the law is deeply unsatisfying from a feminist perspective, since it is in danger of replicating the problem of the carnival that Terry Eagleton has detected. Since carnival is a 'licensed affair', it ends up supporting the law it momentarily undoes by staging a 'popular blow-off', making carnival a 'permissible rupture of hegemony' rather than a useful tool for imagining political alternatives.<sup>67</sup> Postdramatic theatre is a similarly licensed affair. By only momentarily rupturing the law it is in danger of affirming the rule it seeks to challenge (I discuss this problem in more detail and in relation to my practice in Chapter 4). In drawing on Rancière, I wish to argue that postdramatic theatre goes further than interrupting the law, that it in fact proposes an altogether different distribution of the sensible.

Lehmann introduces the intriguing notion that the import of postdramatic theatre lies in a 'cultivation of affects, the training of emotionality that is not under the tutelage of rational preconsiderations'.<sup>68</sup> This proposition parallels with Rancière's notion of the aesthetic efficacy of art. He attests that art, when it is functioning politically, 'triggers new passions', reframing the relation between bodies and how they can be put to use.<sup>69</sup> While to Lehmann such emotional tutelage is realised and concluded in the spectator's becoming aware of her implication in the spectacle, to Rancière the 'multiplication of folds and gaps in the fabric of the common' can radically alter the horizon of perception and thought, giving way to new 'possibilities of collective enunciation'.<sup>70</sup> Rather than homogenising a community of spectators in a shared understanding of the world, it creates fissures and breaks, causing 'a shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world that defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance'.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid: p. 175. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>67</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981): p. 148.

<sup>68</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 186.

<sup>69</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 72.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Framed through Rancière's notion of the aesthetic regime of political art, postdramatic theatre, I suggest, can be conceived as doing more than merely interrupting the law and the symbolic order. Instead, it can be thought of as working on making visible and audible what was partitioned off into invisibility in the dramatic imagination, redistributing the sensible towards yet to be realised possibilities of thought, perception and emotion, I discuss this process in relation to my practice in Chapter 5.

## Postdramatic Theatre, the Sensible and Feminism

What kind of a shift in the fabric of the perceptible might postdramatic practices then effect? And how does the shift relate to feminist concerns? What is appealing about Rancière's ideas for the study of postdramatic theatre is that they allow for a conception of political art beyond thesis, representation and message since he locates a political moment within the aesthetic experience. Rancière's theories also create a set of problems for feminist practitioners. Because he is interested in the position of the spectator rather than the creator, how his ideas relate to *practising* art remains oblique at best. He unequivocally holds that the aesthetic efficacy of a work of art is not a matter of intention and cannot be wilfully produced or anticipated. As such, Rancière's theorem does not provide suggestions as to how a practitioner is to proceed in the aesthetic regime.

Cixous's *écriture féminine* offers at least a partial solution to making feminist theatre in the postdramatic mode since it seeks to be politically efficacious through the aesthetic experience it creates, rather than through its message or didactic impetus. Both Lehmann's notion that postdramatic theatre functions as an interruption of the common and Rancière's assertion that the aesthetic experience can be politically efficacious resonate with her practice of *écriture féminine*. She describes the goals of her writing in the following fashion:

The whole point of my activism is to have increased oppositional gestures to the law, and to have attempted to encourage gestures of freedom with respect to all kinds of expressions of the law, all forms of despotism at the level of relations of political power, to be an integral part in the history of women who have been under the law's power, beginning simply by thinking it.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Hélène Cixous, *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, Ed. Susan Sellers, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): p. 140.

Cixous has worked on creating oppositional gestures to the law in a markedly experimental style of prose writing that she calls feminine. This ‘insurgent writing’,<sup>73</sup> like postdramatic theatre, is not political in its presentation of an ethically-inflected fable, but provides aesthetic experiences that are intended to create folds and shifts in the sensible fabric of the world, rendering visible, audible and tangible the feminine position that is sacrificed in the mirror stage. Without wishing to neglect Rancière’s warning that the redistribution of the sensible is an unpredictable process whose outcome can never be fully controlled or even anticipated, I believe that Cixous offers a powerful model of a theorised practice that can be appropriated and adapted by feminist practitioners in the postdramatic. It can be used to craft oppositional gestures even when the effects of these remain unpredictable. In fact, unpredictability is fundamental to Cixous’s writing practice. She writes:

The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, this is what we are looking for when we write. We go toward the best known unknown thing, where knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will know what is unknown. Where we hope we will not be afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the unthinkable.<sup>74</sup>

For Cixous the purpose of her writing is to bring forth what is yet to be seen and heard, embracing the unpredictable effects of this process and effecting new folds in the relationship between the known and the unknown.

Muriel Plana, who derives her notion of femininity from Kristeva rather than Cixous, has already established an intimate link between femininity and postdramatic theatre. Based on her reading of Kristeva, Plana erects a series of binary oppositions that describe the difference between the feminine and the masculine – rational/irrational, conscious/unconscious, cerebral/corporal, masculine/feminine – and argues that because postdramatic theatre employs energetic signs and material intensity, it privileges the latter half of the binaries and can produce the feminine for this reason. Lehmann also points out a relationship between Kristeva’s notion of femininity and postdramatic theatre. According to him, postdramatic theatre inscribes what Kristeva has called the semiotic *chora*. For Kristeva, the *chora* is a pre-discursive space in which the ‘rhythmic’, ‘kinetic’ and ‘intonational’ drives are grouped together.<sup>75</sup> The *chora* relates to the semiotic element of

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<sup>73</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa,’ *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): p. 880.

<sup>74</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): p. 29.

the sign, which, in contrast to its denotative function, exceeds the symbolic content of the sign. Meaning is only ever established in the interaction between the symbolic and the semiotic, but for coherent meaning to be produced the semiotic has to be effectively repressed. Kristeva explicitly links the *chora* to the maternal body thus gendering it female. In describing postdramatic theatre as a ‘chora-graphy’, Lehmann intimates that postdramatic practices rebalance the relationship between the symbolic and the semiotic in favour of the latter, implying a strong relationship to femininity.<sup>76</sup> He does not, however, consider the implications of this for feminism.

In this study I aim to go beyond Plana and Lehmann’s suggestions, thinking through the relationship between postdramatic theatre and femininity more thoroughly, and to suggest ways in which femininity might be generated in practice. This thesis starts with theatre as a material practice. Laura Cull’s recent proposition to rethink the relationship between performance and philosophy resonates with my method. Cull warns of the dangers of merely applying philosophy to theatre in which ‘a fixed idea is superimposed upon a pliant example, a predetermined theory over a passive practice’.<sup>77</sup> Instead, she urges us to use practice to create new ideas which ‘the thinker has not already developed on the basis of some other encounter’.<sup>78</sup> Rather than applying fixed concepts to theatre practice which risk rendering it a passive example of concepts developed elsewhere, I use a practice-as-research method to enable me to think *through* theatre in order to determine how the feminine manifests on stage, and whether the result of this is postdramatic.

The starting point I chose for this was not, however, Kristeva’s concept of femininity which Plana and Lehmann draw on, but Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. Cixous’s work shares a common theme with Kristeva’s: they both seek to detect and describe femininity by identifying, as Elaine Showalter succinctly summarises, ‘the inscription of the female body [...] in language and text’.<sup>79</sup> The two are frequently grouped together under the label French Feminism, a term used to denote a poststructural feminist approach that originated in France.<sup>80</sup> I suggest that Cixous’s work can be put to use more fruitfully than Kristeva’s

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<sup>76</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Laura Cull, ‘Performance as Philosophy: Responding to the Problem of "Application",’ *Theatre Research International* 37.1 (January 26, 2012): p. 21.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*: 23.

<sup>79</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,’ *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): p. 185.

<sup>80</sup> French Feminism is usually thought to further include the psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose study *Speculum of the Other Woman* traces the exclusion of women and femininity from Western discourse (see: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the other Woman*, Trans.

in *this* project since Kristeva's work does not suggest an artistic practice. Kristeva analyses how femininity is already part of signification, while Cixous suggests ways in which the feminine might be produced in and through practice. Cixous is, in the first place, a *practitioner of écriture féminine* having developed a 'feminine' writing practice alongside and in dialogue with her scholarly and philosophical writings. This philosophically inflected writing can generate ways to manifest femininity in theatre as I demonstrate in my own practice. The result of this is not an application of a theory to artistic practices but a theorised, feminist practice that strives towards making the feminine sensible.

## Chapter 2

### Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Féminine*

Women cannot allow themselves to deal with political problems while at the same time blotting out the unconscious. If they do, they become, at best, feminists capable of attacking patriarchy on an ideological level, but not on a symbolic level.

Antoinette Fouque<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I discuss Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Since Cixous's feminist practice responds to and advances a complex theoretical terrain, I begin by delineating Cixous's strategic interventions into theoretical discourse. In doing this I argue that Cixous's feminism – and her notion of femininity – is grounded in deconstruction, rather than biological essentialism. As such I hope to make a case for the continuing relevance of her work in a contemporary context. However, I also propose that some of Cixous's ideas are no longer acceptable or useful to feminist thought and I flag this up where appropriate. Following my discussion of the theoretical framework Cixous draws upon, I consider how her writing practice relates to and develops her theoretical ideas. Finally, I reflect on her theatre practice in relation to feminism and postdramatic theatre. In this last section I also give an account of how I derived initial ideas for my practice from her theatre. The overall purpose of this chapter is to introduce Cixous's thinking to the reader, make an argument for its continuing relevance and highlight the connections between my work in the rehearsal studio and Cixous's work.

Morag Shiach has argued that Cixous employs a twofold strategy in her attempts to transform sexual and cultural structures. Firstly, that she carries out a deconstructive reading of how sexual difference has been historically conceptualised, challenging the hierarchisation of the masculine over the feminine and the presentation of this as inevitable and natural. Secondly, that Cixous explores 'the subversive, and the political, possibilities of a writing practice that sets itself up in opposition to such cultural categorisation'.<sup>2</sup> This is what Cixous calls *écriture féminine*. While I find the notion that Cixous's method can be understood in terms of a twofold structure appealing, my practical research suggests that

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<sup>1</sup> Antoinette Fouque, 'The MLF Is You, Is Me', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken, 1981): p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991): pp. 9 – 10.

the two strategies cannot be so neatly kept apart. In my practice I found that the deconstructive and, occasionally, destructive aspects of *écriture féminine* are in tension with its creative and innovative impulses. I discuss this tension and its implications for my research throughout Part 2 of this thesis. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, I will adopt Shiach's suggestion and discuss Cixous's deconstructive and creative practice as separate strategies. I begin with the theoretical analysis Cixous delivers and then introduce her methods for creating the theorised feminist praxis; a praxis I explored in my practice-led research.

In Cixous's early theoretical writings between 1975 and 1979, beginning with the publication of 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975 / 1976), and ending with the less well-known essay 'Poésie e(s)t Politique' (1979), she makes clear that her work is underpinned by the psychoanalytical discourse of Freud and Lacan. From these two authors, both of whom she invokes and questions, she derives her notion of sexual difference. While I am wary of the emphasis that scholars such as Toril Moi,<sup>3</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones,<sup>4</sup> and, in theatre studies, Jill Dolan have placed on Cixous's early texts,<sup>5</sup> which are in many respects fraught with the key problems that have come to stand for her entire *oeuvre* – including the tendency towards essentialist rhetoric – I believe that these early texts remain foundational to her later writings. Because of this it is important to consider these texts and the theoretical terrain they mark out before moving on to Cixous's practical experiments.

Cixous's infamous manifesto, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', is saturated with thoughtful challenges and witty ripostes to proclamations and theoretical claims made by Freud and Lacan about women and femininity. The title of Cixous's essay refers to Freud's short piece 'Medusa's Head' in which he interprets the figure of the Medusa as exemplifying the masculine fear of castration. In Freud's reading Medusa's head symbolises the gaping hole of the female sex organ that imparts the terror of castration on the male beholder, who fears that his body may be mutilated in the same way. Following Freud, the vision of the Medusa makes the beholder 'stiff with terror, turns him to stone'.<sup>6</sup> Cixous argues that Freud's reading of the Medusa is emblematic of the way femininity is discussed in

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<sup>3</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'*écriture féminine*,' *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (1981): pp. 247 – 263.

<sup>5</sup> Dolan, 1991: p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head,' trans. James Strachey, *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 22 (1941): p. 69.

psychoanalytical discourse in which '[men] have theorised their desire as reality', leaving women 'riveted [...] between two horrifying myths: the Medusa and the abyss'.<sup>7</sup> The former inevitably leads towards decapitation like the mythical figure, thus rendering femininity silent, while the latter confines it to a 'dark continent' that cannot be known.<sup>8</sup> Cixous's retort to the assertion that the feminine remains uncharted territory is that 'the dark continent is neither dark nor unexplorable' and she subsequently sets out to shed light on it.<sup>9</sup>

Susan Sellers' description of the theoretical basis of Cixous's work foregrounds Cixous's take on the castration complex, which I also regard as central to her conceptualisation of femininity. In Freud's account masculinity is founded upon the fear of possible castration. Since the female body is castrated – that is, it lacks a penis – femininity is associated with lack. While Freud attends to the importance of the penis in the psychic development of children, Lacan transposes this to the field of linguistics and focuses on the centrality of the phallus in the Symbolic Order. The phallus, the marker of sexual difference, becomes the signifier of signification itself, the so-called master signifier that holds together the field of signification.<sup>10</sup> The lack of the phallus, femininity, is subsequently equated with lacking the ability to signify. Hence Lacan claims that Woman does not exist:

Woman can only be written with a bar through it. There's no such thing as Woman. Woman with a capital *W* indicating a universal. There's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence [...] – she is not whole.<sup>11</sup>

Lacan's Symbolic order, which encloses all human signifying practices, depends on the exclusion of Woman. While Cixous does not refute psychoanalysis in its entirety, neither does she accept Freud and Lacan's ideas uncritically. While they may have delivered a useful account of masculinity, Cixous criticises their conceptualisation of femininity that

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<sup>7</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 885.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: p. 877.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 884.

<sup>10</sup> Here I am following Derrida's identification of the master signifier as phallus. For a comprehensive discussion of this see Gayatri Spivak's introduction to *Of Grammatology* (p. xvi): Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1997). And for Lacan's discussion of the phallus: Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus,' in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006): pp. 575 – 84.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999): pp. 72 – 73. Emphasis in the original.

reduces woman to ‘an anatomical “defect” ’ and assumes that there is only a single libido and way of desiring.<sup>12</sup>

Against the background of psychoanalytic ideas on femininity, Cixous’s theoretical and practical project contests the claim that, in her words, ‘women have nothing to say about their pleasure’.<sup>13</sup> She sets out to investigate woman and the feminine, to discern the relationship between these terms and to locate their meaning beyond the negativity of not-man. In doing this, she invests femininity with a specific, deconstructive force that, I argue, makes it of enduring interest and relevance to feminists today. I do not view Cixous’s work as a global enterprise, however. The roots of her work in psychoanalytic thought and her engagement with biblical and mythological motives place her writing firmly in a modern, Western context. As such, I believe that her work applies to Western culture only. Moreover, I find Cixous’s notion that sexual difference is the primary difference problematic.<sup>14</sup> This contention seems inconsistent even in her own system of thought since it establishes a hierarchy of difference. Judith Butler has criticised this tendency of *écriture féminine*, asserting that:

the field of power structured in part by the imperialising gesture of dialectical appropriation exceeds and encompasses the axis of sexual difference, offering a mapping of intersecting differentials which cannot be summarily hierarchised either within the terms of phallogocentrism or any other candidate for the ‘primary condition of oppression’.<sup>15</sup>

From a contemporary standpoint, Cixous’s theoretical project ought to be viewed as a way of intervening in a form of oppression, the field of sexual difference, while acknowledging that this is only one type of oppression amongst many and that these different forms of oppression are structurally interrelated.

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<sup>12</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Reading with Clarice Lispector*, trans. Verena Conley and Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990): p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> In ‘Castration or Decapitation’ she claims that ‘every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of the symbolic system [...] everything that’s organised as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us – it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man / woman opposition’. See: Hélène Cixous, ‘Castration or Decapitation?’, trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): p.44.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990): p. 19.

## Deconstructive Femininity

While for Freud sexual difference is premised on specular knowledge, ‘catching *sight* of something’, and is thus located in the exterior, anatomical appearance, Cixous proposes that sexual difference is located on the inside, in the Imaginary and its relation to desire.<sup>16</sup> Bodies are mapped by two different libidinal compositions. Firstly, the masculine Imaginary body is engendered as a ‘centralised body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts’, it is hierarchically ordered and ‘gravitates around the penis’.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Cixous envisions the feminine Imaginary body in contrast as a:

body without end, without appendage, without principle ‘parts’. If she is a whole, she is a whole, it’s a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simply partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros.<sup>18</sup>

The feminine body is less ordered than the masculine, any body part can be the source of delight. Feminine pleasure is unfixed and manifold. Libidinal desires and their relation to love and the other can be described in economic terms, Cixous proposes. The two libidinal economies manifest particularly in intersubjective relations. The masculine libidinal economy reduces the other to a use-value, something that is acted upon, appropriated and exploited, while in the feminine economy, the self derives pleasure from keeping ‘the other alive and different’, renouncing the impulse to know, to master and to seize upon and to take possession of.<sup>19</sup>

In 1987, after having been widely accused of essentialising femininity by feminist scholars in the US especially, Cixous clarifies that the notion of two completely separate libidinal economies is a useful abstraction that she employs for her purposes ‘out of convenience’ rather than a reflection of reality and stresses that they do not correspond to the male and female anatomy.<sup>20</sup> She writes that while she differentiates between a feminine and a masculine economy in theory, they ‘do not distinguish themselves in such a decisive way

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<sup>16</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 82. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 889.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Extreme Fidelity,’ in *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers, trans. Susan Sellers and Ann Liddle (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988): p. 14.

in reality: in the living they are traits which obliterate themselves, which blend together',<sup>21</sup> and that 'in every individual there is a whole complex play of femininity, of masculinity.'<sup>22</sup>

However, it is impossible to read Cixous's early descriptions of femininity in the contemporary moment without stumbling over the problematic slippages between femininity, woman and women, as well as between penises, masculinity and men, which risk affirming binary thought and gender essentialism. She opens 'The Laugh of the Medusa', for example, with a call for woman 'to write herself' and to produce *écriture féminine*, explaining that 'when I say "woman", I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history'.<sup>23</sup> Here, she appears to be collapsing individual women into a universal and singular category woman while implying that it is women's prerogative to produce *écriture féminine*. However, she contradicts herself a few pages later claiming that both men and women can and do produce *écriture féminine*. This inconsistency that riddles 'The Laugh of the Medusa' stems from the twofold intentions of Cixous's manifesto. On the one hand, she is urging women to write, to express themselves on a public platform and to relate their experiences. At the same time she is advocating for men and women to adopt *écriture féminine* as a strategic, oppositional move. Throughout this article, and other publications of this time, the two aims become entangled, leading to an imprecise identification of women with psychosexual femininity.

The conflation of women and femininity recurs particularly in her use of metaphors drawn from the female body. She describes, for instance, the activity of writing feminine texts as writing with 'white ink',<sup>24</sup> that is writing with mother's milk, and envisions it as an 'outpouring', likening it to 'menstrual flow'.<sup>25</sup> Proclamations such as these have garnered much criticism from other feminists. Toril Moi's position on Cixous's writing is exemplary in this respect. Moi argues that the slippages from feminine to woman in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', combined with Cixous's maternal metaphors that allude to a pre-Oedipal state of presence and wholeness, undercut the deconstructive tendencies of Cixous's writing.<sup>26</sup> I propose, however, in accordance with a number of scholars, that the bodily and maternal

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Cixous, 1976: pp. 875 - 876.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: p. 881.

<sup>25</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Moi, 2002: pp. 119 – 121.

metaphors Cixous uses to describe *écriture féminine* can also be read non-essentially. On the one hand, they constitute an attempt to invent symbols and images that run counter to the dominance of the phallic signifier. Cixous uses them to replace temporarily the phallus in order to disrupt the symbolic system that posits it as the only available option. Abigail Bray has proposed that such imagery captures the *jouissance* of the body that Lacan locates 'beyond the phallus'.<sup>27</sup> This, says Bray, constitutes a 'revolutionary moment' that ruptures the Symbolic.<sup>28</sup> Since the Imaginary is also the place in which the relation between the signifier and the signified becomes slippery and the meaning of signs slides towards the unknown, the attachment of femininity and masculinity to particular bodies is thrown into crisis. By creating moments of rupture in the Symbolic, *écriture féminine* espouses, in Shiach's words, a 'politics of disorder', shaking up current structures and attempting to put the parts back together anew.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, as Katherine Binhammer has proposed, the relationship between the feminine and the female body in Cixous's writing needs to be interrogated with regard to the difference between metaphor and metonymy. Binhammer suggests that Cixous's use of imagery of the female body might be read as both at the same time. On the metaphoric plane, Cixous employs anatomic metaphors that relate to specific biological experiences of (some) women. Cixous explains: 'I don't believe that men and women are identical. Our differences have to do with our experience of pleasure, with our bodily experiences, which are not the same. Our different experiences leave different marks, different memories'.<sup>30</sup> While it is true that (some) women have different physiological experiences than men, and that these should not be negated or be regarded as taboo, asserting a single way of reacting to these in order to construe them as foundational for a feminist practice is both excluding and regulatory: what if giving birth is not experienced as liberating and creative as Cixous describes it but as traumatic and distressing? What if a woman never experiences giving birth or menses? At the metaphorical level then, Cixous's work does run the risk of collapsing difference into a single, proscriptive signifier and promoting a form of biologism and because of this her use of bodily imagery remains problematic.

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in: Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Morag Shiach, 'Their Symbolic Exists, It Holds Power - We the Sowers of Disorder Know it Only Too Well,' in *Between Feminism & Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London, New York: Routledge, 1989): p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in: Katherine Binhammer, 'Metaphor or Metonymy? The Question of Essentialism in Cixous,' *Tessera* 10 (1991): p. 74.

However, Binhammer also makes a compelling argument for regarding Cixous's female imagery as metonymic as well as metaphorical. Binhammer proposes that reading *écriture féminine* metonymically – that is, based on contiguity – ‘allows for the introduction of material considerations while avoiding essentialist definitions of women’.<sup>31</sup> Drawing on a similar proposition by Donna Stanton, Binhammer suggests that when femininity and femaleness are viewed as contiguous, neither completely independent of each other nor identical, they can both be seen as defined by a specific historical and cultural context. I do not think that the metaphoric aspect of Cixous's work is as useful for feminism as reading her work metonymically. The metonymic reading of *écriture féminine* places it in a more historically and materially anchored perspective that can be utilised by feminist artists and critics to interrogate how myths, libidinal conditioning and lived bodily experience are intertwined and reinforced in art and culture. To posit a metonymic relationship between the biological body, the imaginary mapping of it and how it is expressed exposes crucial gaps between the three, means that their relationships can be negotiated and transformed. In as far as Cixous works on this triangular relationship, her ideas are still relevant for contemporary feminism.

Since the relation between the feminine and women remains a productive, but also a contested issue with regards to Cixous's ideas, I use Shiach's definitions of the feminine, woman and women in Cixous's writing throughout this thesis. The feminine in Shiach's understanding is a type of deconstructive thinking and writing bound to pleasure that disrupts binary relations and is independent of biological sex. Woman, on the other hand, is a ‘cultural construct’ that is fabricated and reiterated through art and myth.<sup>32</sup> The third category, women, describes historically specific people who are neither identical to woman nor the feminine but whose ‘identity is continually negotiated in terms of these categories’.<sup>33</sup>

Cixous aims ultimately to

rid us of words like ‘feminine’, ‘masculine’, ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, even ‘man’ and ‘woman’ which designate that which cannot be classified

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid: p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Shiach, 1989: p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

inside of a signifier except by force and violence which goes beyond it in any case.<sup>34</sup>

Her strategy for erasing these words is not to circumvent them, nor treat them entirely separately, but to reinterpret them playfully. Her work on the figure of the Medusa is only one example of her attempt to recode legendary, mythological or otherwise culturally significant figures who have come to stand for woman and exemplify feminine qualities. She counters Freud's anxiety-ridden interpretation of Medusa by opening up the possibility that she might be seen differently: if we only 'look at the Medusa straight on' rather than turning our backs on her like Perseus, we will see that she is 'beautiful and she's laughing'.<sup>35</sup> Cixous then does not so much propose that *écriture féminine* should become a counter-culture entirely disconnected from the patriarchal Symbolic, rather that it consists of tactical adaptations, ruptures and renegotiations of meaning undertaken in order to alter it.

Cixous suggests that the political goal of *écriture féminine* is to transform the binary order that works to the disadvantage of women. She proposes replacing the culture of opposition, in which one term is sacrificed for the other, with a culture of difference in the Derridean sense. Derrida claims that deconstructive readings are 'not simply analyses of discourse' but 'active interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts'.<sup>36</sup> The aim of these interventions is, he states, to analyse 'the conditions of totalitarianism in all its forms', totalitarianism expressed and supported by binary orders.<sup>37</sup> Further, he views deconstruction as a method 'to free oneself of totalitarianism' by uncovering and valuing the endless play of difference which unsettles any attempt to totalise being.<sup>38</sup> In such a culture of difference hierarchies could be exploded, and differences would be configured as multiple and fluid. Cixous echoes Derrida: 'No longer would the common logic of difference be organised with the opposition that remains dominant. Difference would be a bunch of new differences'.<sup>39</sup> While Derrida's writing, arguably, runs the danger of getting stuck in oppositional gestures

<sup>34</sup> See: Verena Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984): p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 885.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'But, Beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon),' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (1987): p. 168.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War,' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (1988): p. 648.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 83.

rather than suggesting alternative ways of organising thought, meaning and culture, *écriture féminine*, in contrast, seeks to enact such a culture of differences.

## Hélène Cixous Practising *Écriture Féminine*

In her creative writing practice Cixous creates texts that are marked by femininity.

However, the relationship between her theory of femininity and textual production is not straightforward and Cixous problematises the relationship between theory and practice. In ‘Sorties’ (1975 / 1976), an essay written in the same period as ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, she explains that:

At the present time, *defining* a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be *theorised*, enclosed, coded, which does not mean that it does not exist.<sup>40</sup>

This statement has led many feminist thinkers to wrestle with the notion of *écriture féminine*. Rosi Braidotti, for example, shows some unease towards Cixous’s opposition to theorising *écriture féminine*. She fears that the lack of recognisable categories might render Cixous’s work inaccessible and endanger its afterlife.<sup>41</sup> Sellers and Blyth suggest a more nuanced reading of Cixous’s declaration, proposing that Cixous ‘wishes to highlight [...] the difference of *écriture féminine* from other, more traditional forms of theory’.<sup>42</sup> Cixous explains that, as soon as the question of ontology is raised – such as when we ask ‘what is it?’<sup>43</sup> – a desire to master the object under scrutiny becomes active and this leads ‘right back... to the father’.<sup>44</sup> Since *écriture féminine* seeks to undo fixed identities and create manifold, new differences, defining its borders rigorously and producing a ready-for-use blue print would contradict its aims. Following this Sellers and Blyth locate the identity of *écriture féminine* in practice rather than in theory, keeping the possibility open that *écriture féminine* might appear differently across different contexts and times. This account of *écriture féminine* poses a challenge to the idea that the time for *écriture féminine* is passed. The adaptability of *écriture féminine* is the reason why, although Cixous’s theoretical essays go some way in defining the structures to which she is responding and pronouncing

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<sup>40</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*, trans. Elozabeth Guild (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991): p. 242.

<sup>42</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

the deconstructive effects that she believes *écriture féminine* has, her creative writing practice remains the prime site for refining and developing *écriture féminine*.

Whereas Cixous suggests that there are a number of different writers who produce *écriture féminine*, my practice research focuses primarily on a selection of her novels and theoretical writings. I chose to concentrate on Cixous's own writing because the texts she produces and the traits that she claims make them feminine, resonate most strongly with postdramatic theatre practices as they employ non-representational signification and poetic openness, while politicising compositional and formal features. Most studies of Cixous's writing identify distinct phases in her creative practice, which exemplify how she develops her *écriture féminine*. Sellers, for instance, proposes that the novels written by Cixous before 1978 only partially fulfil Cixous's own description of *écriture féminine*, while those written between 1978 and 1983 adhere most closely to it.<sup>45</sup> Sellers makes this judgment based on the fact that the earlier writings are more concerned with the formation of the feminine subject and the intrasubjective Imaginary landscape while the later novels open up the sphere of the intersubjective and are more focussed on the relationship between the self and an other. I am not entirely persuaded by Sellers' hypothesis that this shift necessarily makes the later novels more convincing examples of *écriture féminine*, since Cixous insists upon the political importance of giving shape to the feminine Imaginary and circulating it through writing.<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, the early novels already imply an other, namely the reader, and fulfil her demand to explore the feminine subconscious that is pivotal to *écriture féminine*.

I do, however, agree that there is a marked difference between her writing before and after the late 1970s, which coincides with her discovery of the novelist Clarice Lispector in 1978. While Cixous's writing before this encounter is often overwhelmingly experimental and dense, marked by an abundance of word play, intentionally produced grammatical ambivalences, collagistic fragments and intertextual allusions, the later novels continue to employ all these formal strategies but do so more sparsely and deliberately with the effect that the reader is less overpowered by the text. Sellers and Blyth identify that Cixous, inspired by Lispector, develops an 'economy of approaching' in which she uses the

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<sup>45</sup> Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1996): p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Mairéad Hanrahan further notes, and I agree with her, that measuring Cixous's fiction against an ideal form of *écriture féminine*, extracted from her theoretical writings, appears to 'rehabilitate the very subordination of the "practice" to the "theory" of (feminine) writing'. [Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Hélène Cixous (review)', *French Studies* 60, no. 4 (2006): p. 549].

techniques developed in her early texts to strive towards the signified without mastering it and submitting it to the trap of ontology.<sup>47</sup> While her early novels are characterised by working on the signifier, her writing after the encounter with Lispector demonstrates a turn towards the signified.

In my practice-led research I chose to engage with both periods of Cixous's writing since I believe that her early work on the signifier cannot be divorced from her later work on the signified; both projects are part of the spectrum of her *écriture féminine*. I chose Cixous's first novel *Inside* (1969 / 1986) to explore the former and the novel *Book of Promethea* (1983 / 1991) to think about the impact of this strategy on composition. In my third practice-as-research performance I explored what Cixous's turn to the signified might prompt in theatre practice. Because of the significance of Lispector's writing in how Cixous develops her *écriture féminine*, my third practice-as-research performance was informed by her writings on or inspired by Lispector, collected in *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (1990) and *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (1991). I do not consider her contemporary novels such as *Hyperdream* (2006 / 2009), *Philippines* (2009 / 2011) or *Eve Escapes* (2009 / 2012) because I view her writing between the 1970s and the early 1990s as most explicitly concerned with *écriture féminine*. I have found the greatest resonances between Cixous's *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre in her politicisation of form, which corresponds to Lehmann's proposition that the politics of the postdramatic should be located at this level rather than in its content. In my later chapters on my practice research I interrogate more fully how Cixous practices *écriture féminine* in specific novels. However, at this point, I would like to point out three particular aspects of *écriture féminine* that she describes, which form the point of departure for my practice.

A formal mark of the feminine text to which Cixous returns to repeatedly is the significance of the material dimension of the signifier, which she explores with regard to its aural and tactile dimensions. *Écriture féminine* is 'close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language' and 'there's tactility, there's touch'.<sup>48</sup> She intertwines the two, writing that the 'touch passes through the ear'.<sup>49</sup> In this formulation writing the feminine body no longer means insisting on metaphors drawn from female anatomy but involves the concrete bodily processes of language: specifically, speech. The bodily uttering of sounds is evoked in her prose writing through alliterations, puns and homophonies. The sound of the

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<sup>47</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 54.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

signifier as it is generated in the vocal cords and passes through the mouth points towards bodily *jouissance* that lies beyond meaning and signification. Cixous introduces the tactile dimension of the signifier into writing through experiments with the visual representation and arrangement of words on the page. She variously uses spacing, capitalisation, colour, and empty spaces, drawing attention to the materiality of the written word whose imprint touches the retina. Her playful work on the signifier means that her writing comes closer to the poetic than the novelistic. As Sellers and Blyth point out, in poetry ‘one is always attuned to or aware of the potential in words and phrases to mean more than they might at first appear to mean’.<sup>50</sup> This creates a chaos of meaning in Cixous’s work that Diane Crowder describes as ‘surplus, madness, irrational overflowing’ which recalls Lehmann’s description of postdramatic theatre as bringing ‘chaos and novelty into the ordered, ordering perception’.<sup>51</sup> This suggests a strong affinity between the way signifiers are employed in *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre, which I discuss more fully in Chapter 4.

In ‘Castration and Decapitation’ Cixous formulates some concrete suggestions as to how a feminine text may be composed: it is ‘without ending: there’s no closure’.<sup>52</sup> She reiterates these traits adding greater detail in a seminar three years later in which she delineates the difference between masculine and feminine texts more clearly. Masculine texts abide by the Symbolic law: they are ‘architectural’, as ‘One enters it, one already has a map of the building or is given one; it is written in relation to a kind of fear (...), a fear of getting lost, the fear of non-return’.<sup>53</sup> The masculine text drives towards closure and resolution. The feminine text, in contrast, entails numerous beginnings and departures: it ‘paves new ways’<sup>54</sup>, it denies the centrality of endings and finished products. While as a material object any book must have a last page, the feminine text is composed in such a way that there is no linear through-line and hence no end. Cixous refines her comments about how a piece of *écriture féminine* is composed in relation to Lispector’s novel *The Stream of Life* in which she traces motifs through the text which interweave and intertwine but are not finally resolved or tied together. This leads her to propose that the text is composed as an ‘organic order’ that ‘follows the movements of the body’ rather than being structured by

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<sup>50</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Cixous, 1977: pp. 79 – 80. Translation by the author.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid* : p. 79.

‘classical narration’.<sup>55</sup> The non-hierarchised, mutating feminine Imaginary body is inscribed in the compositional elements of the text in this way; I consider its similarity to postdramatic dramaturgy in Chapter 5.

The final element of Cixous’s *écriture féminine* I explore is how she approaches the signified after her encounter with Lispector. Lispector inspires her to reconsider the relationship between the text and the thing. This, she cautions, does not mean returning to ‘representing a reality that can be coded’, but creating texts that evoke the phenomenological dimension of things.<sup>56</sup> Cixous proposes, that in *écriture féminine* the relationship between the word and the thing it signifies is different from that found in the masculine text. In the latter, ‘words [...] fall upon things and fix their quaverings and make them discordant and deafen them’.<sup>57</sup> In *écriture féminine*, by contrast, ‘the voice passes gently behind things’, feminine writers ‘remain near by things [...] to reflect and protect’.<sup>58</sup> Sellers describes this as avoiding ‘severing the words from experience’,<sup>59</sup> while Shiach proposes that this indicates that Cixous is interested in forms of knowledge beyond ontological categorisation and the ‘obliteration of the Other’.<sup>60</sup> The knowledge she seeks is closer to Heidegger’s notion of being in which subjectivity is not viewed as discrete but ‘constituted by participating in the world of objects and experiences’.<sup>61</sup> I agree with Shiach’s assertion that, through her reading of Lispector, Cixous develops a notion of feminine knowledge, and I propose that this element of *écriture féminine* might also be found in postdramatic practices which foreground the material, sensuous dimension of things. I consider whether postdramatic theatre is premised on what Cixous claims to be feminine knowledge in Chapter 6.

## Hélène Cixous’s *Écriture Féminine* in Theatre

Next to her remarkable productivity as a novelist, Cixous has also published 14 texts for the theatre. I considered Cixous’s playwriting in the early stages of my research, before beginning to work on the practical element. Building on the findings of other scholars,

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<sup>55</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 99.

<sup>57</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Vivre l’Orange / To Live the Orange,’ in *L’heure de Clarice Lispector* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1989): p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Sellers, 1996: p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

such as Julia Dobson and Geraldine Harris, I believe that her theatre practice from the 1980s onwards is of limited interest to *écriture féminine* and feminist politics. While I found Cixous's prose a richer source of inspiration for my theatre practice, I nonetheless engaged with her early theatre practice in order to develop initial ideas for realising *écriture féminine* in theatre. Below, I detail my understanding of her practice in relation to feminism and postdramatic theatre as well as my rationale behind exploring Cixous's prose in my practical research.

Cixous's early play text, *Portrait of Dora* (1976 / 1983), and the opera libretto *The Name of Oedipus* (1978 / 1995), in particular mark an expansion of her feminist politics into theatre. Both are highly intertextual adaptations – of Freud's case study of his hysteric patient Dora and of the Oedipus myth respectively – and centre on the female characters of the material in question. As such, it is unsurprising that both texts have drawn attention of feminist theatre scholars such as Jill Dolan, Elin Diamond and Geraldine Harris.<sup>62</sup>

Contemporaneous with the production of *Portrait of Dora*, Cixous published a theoretical essay on theatre, 'Aller à la mer'. In this, she criticises the phallogentric organisation of classical theatre and advocates a new, feminine theatre premised on 'body-presence' that can 'get across the living, breathing, speaking body'.<sup>63</sup> As such 'Aller à la mer' functions analogous to 'The Laugh of the Medusa', while paying attention to the particularities of the theatre situation. Her emphasis on the 'living [...] body' indicates that Cixous views the live encounter between the audience and the stage as fundamental to a theatrical *écriture féminine*. I explored some of the suggestions Cixous formulates in 'Aller à la mer' in my first practice-as-research performance (see: pp. 88 - 96).

However, while Cixous's suggestions for a feminine theatre practice in 'Aller à la mer' might arouse the imagination of feminist theatre makers and scholars, her promise that *Portrait of Dora* would be the 'first step [...] in a long journey' was not fulfilled.<sup>64</sup> I am persuaded by Julia Dobson's analysis, which indicates that Cixous ceases to experiment with methods for producing *écriture féminine* in theatre after only a few productions. Dobson argues that whereas Cixous's early theatre, beginning with the production of *Portrait of Dora*, is motivated by her desire to 'reveal and represent the repression of the

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<sup>62</sup> See: Dolan, 1991: pp. 101 - 103; Diamond, 1997: pp. 38 -39.; Geraldine Harris, 'Confusions of Identity in Theory and Practice,' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 2, no. 1 (1994): pp. 11 – 23.

<sup>63</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 547.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

female subject' and can be regarded as feminist for this reason,<sup>65</sup> she gives up on trying to develop a form of *écriture féminine* for the theatre by 1982.<sup>66</sup> Dobson proposes that Cixous aborts this project in favour of working on historical narratives and exploring the notion of a common humanity in place of sexual difference.<sup>67</sup> Cixous confirms Dobson's claim, writing in 1987 that:

the theatre is not the scene of sexual *jouissance*. [...] In the theatre it is the heart that sings, the chest opens, you can see the heart tearing itself apart. The human heart has no sex.<sup>68</sup>

This statement suggests that Cixous loses interest in producing *écriture féminine* in theatre. It also indicates that she abandons the maxim, formulated in 'Aller à la mer', to no longer go to the theatre except as a 'political gesture with a view to changing [...] its means of production and expression' in relation to sexual difference.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, 'Aller à la mer' remains the only theoretical text in which Cixous considers the relationship between theatre, *écriture féminine* and feminism.

At the same time as Cixous abandons sexual difference in her writing for the theatre, her style of playwriting changes. Whilst, as I describe below, *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus* both made use of staging strategies that disrupt dramatic structures, her later play texts are positively dramatic in style. Her most recent collaboration with the Le Théâtre du Soleil, with whom she has worked for over twenty years, *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir* (*The Shipwreck of Mad Hope*), exemplifies this. Premiered in 2010 the production is billed as *mi-écrit* (part-written) by Cixous. It is mainly set across two temporal and fictional frames. Firstly, a troupe of socialist activists, whose storyline was devised by the cast, filming an allegorical silent movie between 28 June 1914 and 31 July 1914 – that is, between the day of the assassination of the Archduke of Austria, which was a catalyst for the outbreak of World War I, and the day of Jean Jaurès's assassination, three days after the start of the War. The second frame is the film they are making, written by Cixous, about a motley group of shipwrecked castaways, including convicts, utopian socialists and

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<sup>65</sup> Julia Dobson, 'The Staging of the Self- The Theatre and Hélène Cixous,' *New Readings* 2 (1996): p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> Julia Dobson, *Hélène Cixous and the Theatre: The Scene of Writing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002): p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*: p. 62.

<sup>68</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Writings on the Theatre,' trans. Catherine Anne Frank, *Qui Parle* 3, no. 1 (1989): p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 547.

aristocrats, who attempt to set up a communist settlement in Patagonia. The four-hour long piece details the struggles of the filmmakers to collaborate whilst receiving news of world events during the filming and presents the film scenes being created. The two frames relate as a *mise en abyme*, wherein the increasingly dictatorial style of the film director and the power struggles in Patagonia mirror and inform each other as both reflect on the passions, obstacles and pit-falls of collective organisation.

The emphasis in this production is, then, clearly on the narration of a fable through the depiction of characters and action, placing it firmly in a dramatic tradition. There are, however, elements that may appear postdramatic, for example the atmospheric and evocative music of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre that at times surpasses the fable, opening up a textural and associative space, and the layered dramaturgy that is not organised around a single ‘logocentric view’ but resembles the ‘new visions of multiple logos’ that Lehmann sees as typical of postdramatic practices.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, taking David Barnett’s recent differentiation between postdramatic and post-Brechtian theatre into consideration, I would argue that *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir* is better described as the latter, that is as post-Brechtian, meaning that it might still be regarded as a continuation of the dramatic tradition rather than a radical break with it. Barnett argues that the legacy of Brechtian theatre should not be measured by the use of ‘an aggregation of devices’ – historicisation, the *Gestus* and the *Verfremdungseffekt*, for example – but in the presence of a ‘dialectic performance philosophy’.<sup>71</sup> In the case of *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir*, there is a series of parallel dialectics: between the socialist ideals of the two groups and the reality of collective organisation – leading in the case of the castaways to a bloody showdown from which only two characters emerge; between the utopian hope that motivates the film and the reality of the filmmakers situated at the brink of the atrocities of the twentieth century; and, between the spectre of pre World War I socialist thought and the spectator’s contemporary European landscape that has disowned it.

What differentiates Brechtian and post-Brechtian practices in Barnett’s eyes is that, while the former is premised on the idea that the dialectic process brings forth a harmonious

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<sup>70</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, ‘From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy’, *Performance Research* 2, no. 1 (1997): p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> David Barnett, ‘Performing Dialectics in the Age of Uncertainty, or: Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic’, in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, eds. Jerome Carroll, Steve Giles and Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): p. 48.

synthesis and societal progress, the latter, influenced by ‘postmodern uncertainty’,<sup>72</sup> stages a negative dialectics that ‘accrues contradiction upon contradiction’ without neat synthesis.<sup>73</sup> This is also the case in *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir*. The dialectic struggle between utopian visions of a new societal organisation represented by the metafictional actors and the inability of the castaway visionaries, whose consciousness remains anchored in reactionary power structures, remains unsolved. Instead, the play gathers momentum through staging myriad clashes between good intentions, practical limitations and differing desires that cannot be brought into accord. Since the play presents a dialectic understanding of material conditions, which as Barnett points out ‘implicitly [allows] for the possibility [...] of societal change to take place’,<sup>74</sup> it is better understood as post-Brechtian and thus connected to a dramatic theatre tradition, rather than postdramatic which is ‘philosophically discrete’.<sup>75</sup> In this analysis, because Cixous concentrates her efforts in theatre on staging historical processes through dramatic forms, ignoring types of theatre that break with the dramatic tradition, she found it impossible to work on feminine *jouissance* and *écriture féminine* in theatre and instead pursued the same investigation through prose rather than drama.

Dobson and Harris both critique Cixous’s later theatre from a feminist angle, proposing that in turning to history she forgets feminism with the effect that her theatre ‘[fails] to address [her] earlier condemnation of power structures in force in theatrical representation’.<sup>76</sup> Given this, in preparing to embark on my practical research, I only considered Cixous’s early play texts in which she explores the relationship between femininity and theatre. In order to develop staging methods to try out in practice, I spent two weeks in the archives of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BNF) reviewing how Cixous’s play texts had been performed during the brief period in which she worked on *écriture féminine* in theatre. Next to Cixous’s two early plays, *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus*, I also researched an adaptation by Viviane Théophilidès of her novel *La*, entitled *L’Arrivante*, available in the archive’s holdings.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid: p. 66.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid: p. 52.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid: p. 66.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Dobson, 1996: p. 25

<sup>77</sup> *L’Arrivante*, Festival d’Avignon, dir. Viviane Théophilidès, Théâtre Ouvert, Avignon, July 1977.

In the BNF, I engaged with a range of documents related to the staging of Cixous's texts, such as photographs, props lists, set descriptions, reviews and annotated scripts, all of which gave me clues as to how they were performed. While much of the critical writing on Cixous's theatre centres on the published play scripts, and thereby stresses her role in the creation of the pieces over and above the other artists involved, the material in the archives indicated that her experiments with *écriture féminine* in theatre emerged from strongly collaborative processes with theatre directors Simone Benmussa (*Portrait of Dora*) and Claude Régy (*The Name of Oedipus*), as well as the Marguerite Duras – in her role as filmmaker (*Portrait of Dora*) – and composer André Boucourechliev (*The Name of Oedipus*). *L'Arrivante* similarly appears to have started out as a collaboration between Cixous and Théophilidès, albeit that Cixous later left the project and removed her name from the collaboration before its premiere.<sup>78</sup>

I used the Cixous archive at the BNF to understand what staging methods Cixous and her collaborators had used in the past to render *écriture féminine* in theatre. The printed editions of *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus* indicate that both centred on narrating a fable, representing characters and relying on mimesis of action to narrate this fable. As such, they might be regarded as dramatic texts, and their performances as dramatic stagings. The staging methods used in the performances, however, disrupted theatrical and dramatic conventions. Two staging strategies that were shared across the performances particularly stood out. Firstly, all the pieces made use of multi-casting: a dancer and an actor performed Dora; Oedipus and Jocaste were each performed by an opera singer and an actor; and an ensemble of seven actors performed the first person narrator of *La*. Secondly, *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus* both used multiple media on stage. *Portrait of Dora* featured dance on film, projections and live performance; and *The Name of Oedipus* used singing, projections and live performance. *L'Arrivante*'s use of text and movement may have had a similarly multimedial effect but since accounts of the performance are scarce this is difficult to establish for certain.

The performances variously disrupted the unity of character (through multi-casting), linear time and coherent space (multiple media used to create multiple simultaneous spaces and time zones). I suggest that they can be seen as examples of what Gerda Poschmann calls 'critical uses of the dramatic form', in which dramatic structures are at the same time

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<sup>78</sup> 'Faux Departes Par *L'Arrivante*', *L'Humanité*, 19 Sep 1977.

employed and ‘thematized, questioned or disturbed through a deconstructive act’.<sup>79</sup> The dissolution of stable character, and coherent time and space in the performances of Cixous’s plays, might be regarded as such deconstructive acts. The effect of these methods, Poschmann proposes, is that dramatic structures are problematised from ‘within’.<sup>80</sup> Dobson contends that Cixous thus exposes the ‘nature of repression of the female subject in conventional theatre’ that she critiques in ‘*Aller à la mer*’.<sup>81</sup> As a consequence, I decided to use both multicasting and multiple media (movement, acting and film) in my first practice-as-research performance.

However, I found that using these strategies alone would not be enough to devise a form of *écriture féminine* in theatre since, as Dobson points out, *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus* do not offer an alternative vision to the phallogentrism of theatre. Shiach similarly writes that ‘[*Portrait of Dora*] does not produce [...] any new ordering of subjective or social relations’.<sup>82</sup> At the end of the respective plays *Dora* and *Jocaste*, the female protagonists, might ‘choose to leave the scene of their repression’ but in doing so, they are in effect relegated to silence.<sup>83</sup> Whereas Cixous finds methods for producing an alternative way of writing that is grounded in a feminine Imaginary in her novels, her theatre primarily stays within the confines of deconstructive criticism. I propose that the reason that Cixous is not able to move beyond criticism is that she remains indebted to a dramatic notion of theatre. Consequently, I found Théophilidès’ adaptation of *La* particularly compelling. Since it was based on Cixous’s prose writing, and sought to develop equivalent strategies to her prose, the performance appears to have gone beyond dramatic forms of representation. Théophilidès’ notes, for instance, that ‘the text by Hélène Cixous offers a poetic rapport with the world’ and the prologue to her script makes clear that she endeavoured to do the same for theatre.

Théophilidès envisages the performance in metaphorical terms: as an ‘opening to the subconscious’; ‘a journey through the body’; and as a way of ‘[wandering] in two waters’.<sup>84</sup> What this led her to do in practice can only be partially reconstructed, since there is very little documentation of the performance beyond her scripts and annotations.

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<sup>79</sup> Poschmann, 1997: p. 88.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Dobson, 2002: p. 44.

<sup>82</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 115.

<sup>83</sup> Dobson, 2002: p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> Bibliothèque National de France, NAF28080 (II.2). Translation by the author.

Shiach's brief account of the performance is the most vivid description I have been able to find:

[It] involved the use of seven different actresses, whose words, gestures, and choreographed movements strove to represent the dynamic process of feminine subjectivity. Allusions to the mythic and the archaic were suggested by moments such as the opening of the play, where six of the actresses stood, one behind the other, in profile, suggesting the representational strategies of Egyptian art.<sup>85</sup>

*L'Arrivante's* emphasis on associative images, metaphors and bodily presence appear to go beyond the critical approach of *Portrait of Dora* and *The Name of Oedipus*, and also align it with postdramatic theatre practices. Based on this discovery, I decided to begin my practical research process by working with Cixous's prose writing as Théophilidès did, rather than her playwriting, which was hampered by her use of dramatic structures.

Cixous's adherence to dramatic models of theatre is in stark contrast to her propensity to embrace experimental forms in her prose writing. Indeed, she states in 1990 that her writing for the theatre differs from her prose writing 'in every way'.<sup>86</sup> In 'A Realm of Characters' she explains this difference in relation to how meaning is disseminated in her prose and her theatre. She observes that in her fictions, she lets meaning 'gather slowly', while in her theatre 'there must be an immediate explosion of meaning'.<sup>87</sup> Sellers and Blyth note that in her theatre Cixous 'limits the poetic excess' that she views as foundational for *écriture féminine* in prose.<sup>88</sup> Sellers further points out a pronounced difference between Cixous's prose writing and her dramatic writing: in writing *écriture féminine*, Cixous strives to minimise order and control, whereas her theatre in contrast is heavily ordered. Sellers deduces from this that Cixous finds that a playwright has an 'obligation to furnish a text that is producible and comprehensible' and that theatre needs 'the controlling presence of an author'.<sup>89</sup> However, a characterisation of theatre as ordered, as controlled by a single author and as being immediately meaningful, rather than

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<sup>85</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 115.

<sup>86</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Two Countries of Writing: Theatre and Poetical Fiction,' in *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture: Rewriting Women in the Symbolic*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990): p. 191.

<sup>87</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'A Realm of Characters,' in *Delighting the Heart: A Notebook by Women Writers*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1989): p. 127.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Sellers, 1996: p. 87.

poetically plural, ignores contemporary developments in theatre practices and postdramatic theatre in particular.<sup>90</sup>

I propose that Cixous finds she cannot produce *écriture féminine* in theatre because, firstly, she does not engage with non-dramatic theatre forms and secondly, as a playwright she is unable to account for the live situation. As such my practical research starts from Cixous's early experiments, continuing to pursue *écriture féminine* in theatre where Cixous did not. Like Geraldine Harris, I believe that in order to do this Cixous's suggestions with regard to *écriture féminine* in prose need to be 'substantially transformed and translated'.<sup>91</sup> This means taking them out of the context of writing and literature since, as Harris points out, 'the entire history of theatre studies as a discipline has been a struggle to establish that theatre is more than a sum of its writing' and determining equivalent formal strategies tailored to the specific properties of theatre.<sup>92</sup> The second part of my thesis documents how I approached this, the formal methods I developed in the process and how my practical findings resonate with postdramatic theatre.

Overall, I believe that the potentialities of *écriture féminine* for feminist theatre are not yet exhausted, especially since Cixous herself abandoned the project. Practising in the context of the twenty-first century, I hope my research might reinvigorate and advance her ideas for the contemporary, postdramatic moment.

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<sup>90</sup> Jennifer Birkett points out and criticises Cixous's tendency to '[envisage] [the audience] as the passive recipient of [her] potent authorial voice'. Birkett terms this approach 'authoritarian' and emphasises its incongruity with Cixous's idea that *écriture féminine* is non-exclusive and resists mastering the other. Jennifer Birkett, 'The Limits of Language: The Theatre of Hélène Cixous,' in *Voices in the Air: French Dramatists and the Resources of Language*, ed. Colin Smethurst and Kenneth Varty (Somerset: Castle Cary Press, 1992): p. 176.

<sup>91</sup> Harris, 1994: p. 12.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 3

### Research Methodology

In this chapter I reflect on my research methodologies and the discussions on practice-as-research, adaptation and documentation that have informed these. As such, the chapter provides a critical discussion of my method, rather than an explication of the research trajectory, which I undertake in the second half of my thesis. A central proposition I make in this chapter is that practice-as-research methods might be particularly useful for feminist research since they breach the theory / practice divide that has historically caused rifts in feminist discourse. I consider how I adapted Cixous's *écriture féminine* into theatre practice, explaining my understanding of adaptation as a transformational process, rather than an attempt to replicate a source text. Following this, I reflect on my research process in relation to key concerns in practice-as-research: the disorderliness of the creative process, the validity of the results and the relationship between the practice and written reflection. Finally, I explain the rationale for the decisions I made in regard to documentation.

My practical research process produced three performances: *ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE* (May, 2012), *fire into song* (September, 2012) and *Rings: Signe, Souffle, Sang, Sein, Sens* (March 2013). In each performance I adapted one or several of Cixous's texts: specifically, *Inside*, *The Book of Promethea*, and her writings on Clarice Lispector. My three pieces were devised with a changing ensemble of performers and, on occasion, voice, sonic and word artists. Each piece emphasised one practical trope – signification, dramaturgy and the signified – while carrying through the results of the performances preceding it so that the final performance demonstrated the outcomes of the entire process. During the creative process I mostly worked one-on-one with the performers, creating solo pieces, which were only combined into a single performance in the last few weeks of rehearsals. I developed this method as a response to Cixous's theories around signification, which press for a poly-perspectival representation that is not ordered around a single, central message or formal approach. I discuss how I came to use this method and the outcomes from it in Chapter 4.

Cixous observes that her texts are not authored by her proper name alone: she writes with regard to authorship that: 'I is not I, of course, because I is with the others, coming from

the others'.<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes observes, similarly, that any text is a 'multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, I agree with Christopher Bannermann that 'virtually all creative work in the arts is collaborative and any claim to single authorship is inherently unethical'.<sup>3</sup> Where multiple authorship is implicit to all writing, in theatre the collaborative process is explicit and I regard my practical outputs as multi-authored, intertextual adaptations. This means acknowledging that the creative practice has a multitude of authors, including Cixous, my collaborators and me. In spite of this, I believe it is also important to differentiate between the collaborative, multi-authored practice and the research embedded within it, which was conceived, managed and undertaken by me alone. As a consequence, I and the other artists involved in the pieces approached the work with different goals and expectations; while the performers mostly sought a creative space to develop their personal practices, my aim was to develop and progress the research inquiry.

Robin Nelson points out, that although 'practice as a research activity may be identical with art activity in key and necessary aspects', what differentiates the two is the direction of address.<sup>4</sup> Nelson proposes that practice-as-research is directed 'within and at the academy' in contrast to art that is directed 'within and at the art world'.<sup>5</sup> However, my practice-as-research process did not easily conform to this distinction: the first piece was shown in university buildings in Glasgow and Leeds to audiences comprising both academics and practitioners, while the second piece was performed at a theatre festival in Glasgow during which only a few spectators were aware of its purpose as research. The final piece was shown at the same theatre, a building mostly associated with the live art world, to an audience primarily composed of students and professional academics, most of whom were fully aware of its research imperative. My practice, therefore, was presented and received in diverse contexts, which cannot be neatly separated into the art world and the academy.

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London, New York: Routledge, 1997): p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977): p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Bannerman and Cahal McLaughlin, 'Collaborative Ethics in Practice-as-Research,' in *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, ed. Ludivine Allegue et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): pp. 66 - 67.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Nelson, 'Modes of Practice-as-Research Knowledge and Their Place in the Academy,' in *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, ed. Ludivine Allegue et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009): p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Practice-as-Research and Feminism

I believe that one of the particular benefits of a practice-as-research method for feminists is that it is able to traverse the divide between the academic world and the art world by not treating them as if they are distinct or by assuming that their interests are discordant and antagonistic. The relationship between theory and practice in feminism has often been tense, even within academic debates. In 1989 Jill Dolan, for instance, identifies a ‘general backlash against theory’ in feminist discourses,<sup>6</sup> and more recently Beatrice Hanssen has suggested that theory has ‘acquired a string of negative epithets’, including: ‘elitist, male-identified, reifying, totalising, [...] obscurantist, apolitical, universalising, hegemonic, occidental, imperialistic, Eurocentric’ and many more.<sup>7</sup> Hanssen’s list of adjectives is echoed by feminist scholars and practitioners who have variously cited ‘elitism’<sup>8</sup>; the apparent divorce of theory from the ‘everyday struggles of women’<sup>9</sup>; as well as ‘male-like’ and hence, unfeminist characteristics as problematic attributes of theory.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Christian, further, detects in relation to theory and literature - but the same might be said of theatre - a tendency toward ‘prescriptive’ over-generalisation when theory ‘is not rooted in practice’.<sup>11</sup> Jill Dolan has been particularly vocal in defending the importance of theory against claims of ‘militaristic maleness’,<sup>12</sup> proposing that theory ‘is not a so-called male game of divide and conquer’ but ‘a deeply political, committed effort to divide and name, to liberate one another from a yoke not only of cultural oppression but also a monolithic feminism’.<sup>13</sup> I agree with Dolan that theory is one place amongst others where one carries out feminist work, that it is also a kind of activism in its own right and should be acknowledged as such. However, I also believe that practice-as-research methods are able to relieve some of the tensions between theory and practice, combining them in a more situated and distinct way than theorising is capable of alone.

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<sup>6</sup> Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993): p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, ‘Whatever Happened to Feminist Theory?’, in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Case, 2008: p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, 1999: p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Dolan, 1993: p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Christian, ‘The Race for Theory,’ *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Dolan, 1993: p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*: p. 82.

The linking of theory and practice in practice-as-research makes it what Nelson calls a ‘praxis (theory imbricated within practice)’ which challenges ‘the schism in the Western intellectual tradition between theory and practice.’<sup>14</sup> Nelson’s choice of the word praxis and his emphasis on how it opposes traditional Western thought, betrays his debt to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. Arendt describes how Western philosophy has assigned ‘enormous superiority’ to the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) over the *vita activa* (active life), which is regarded merely as a means for sustaining the body that contemplates.<sup>15</sup> In order to investigate the *vita activa*, she differentiates between three types of activity: labour, which pertains to the biological processes and necessities of life; work, the creation of things outside of nature; and, action, which in contrast to the former two is free and unnecessary for survival. Arendt defines action as a process and a beginning:

To act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule’ indicates), to set something in motion [...]. Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men [sic] take initiative, are prompted into action.<sup>16</sup>

For Arendt action heralds the new, it is unpredictable and capable of producing novelty ‘against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability’.<sup>17</sup> Describing practice-as-research as a *praxis* carries a set of implications: it shifts the weight from the product that is created to the process of its production, emphasising the activity of making rather than the resulting work. It also politicises practice-as-research, since Arendt views action as the ‘central political activity’ that gives rise to change, which makes it appealing to feminists.<sup>18</sup>

Sue-Ellen Case’s claim that creating a new poetics is the ‘basic theoretical project for feminism’, already announces a potentially vital relationship between feminist theory and creative practice.<sup>19</sup> While Case implies that theory precedes practice, that practice should be a consequence of feminist theorising, practice-as-research methods go beyond this

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<sup>14</sup> Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*: p. 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*: p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in: *Ibid*, p. IX.

<sup>19</sup> Case, 2008: p. 114.

model, making it possible to conceive of practical experimentation as an act of theorising in itself. This facilitates theatre becoming, as Dolan envisages it, a ‘workplace’,<sup>20</sup> a ‘laboratory for culture’ in which feminism can be explored and developed with regard to both practical and theoretical concerns.<sup>21</sup> In addition, because practice-as-research methods are rooted in specific practices, they avoid theory’s tendency to totalise. As Simon Jones argues, practice-as-research challenges abstraction, ‘[reminding] scholarship of its necessary dependence upon and eventual return to the everyday’.<sup>22</sup>

However, this does not mean that the results of practice-as-research are too localised to be useful. Baz Kershaw describes the products of practice-as-research enquiries paradoxically as both ‘highly specific’ and ‘widely applicable’.<sup>23</sup> These two traits mean that practice-as-research methods both avoid the globalising tendencies of theory and tend to be strongly transferable and adaptable. In this respect, practice-as-research methods which transcend the binary between practice and theory, doing and knowing, are an important opportunity for feminists to correct what Gerry Harris and Elaine Aston have identified as a propensity to prioritise theorising over material practices by using practice as means of exemplifying theory without taking into account the individual work of art.<sup>24</sup> Instead, practice-as-research can enable Dolan’s vision of scholarship wherein ‘theory and practice [...] inform each other and combine’ in order to effect social change.<sup>25</sup> My thesis, then, aims to operate outside of the binarisation of theory and practice by employing a research method that seeks to reveal the political potential of practice for feminist scholarship and its value as a method for developing and refining theoretical concerns.

## Adaptation

Since Cixous’s prose suggests a variety of methods for producing *écriture féminine*, my practice projects adapted specific traits of her writing into theatre. The resulting laboratory performances did not intend to adapt the entirety of the source texts. Rather, the aim was to

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<sup>20</sup> Dolan, 1985: p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Dolan, 1993: 19.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Jones, ‘The Courage of Complimentary: Practice-as-Research as a Paradigm Shift in Performance Studies,’ in *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, ed. Ludivine Allegue et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Baz Kershaw, ‘Performance Practice as Research: Perspectives from a Small Island,’ in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Creative Act and Scholarly Cartographies*, ed. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Aston and Harris, 2007 (a): p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Dolan, 1993: p. 83.

identify and extract principles from Cixous's writing that I viewed as especially compelling for theatre practice, and to explore these in practice. Then, in a second step, I considered whether the practical outcomes resonated with postdramatic theatre. I propose that Cixous's *écriture féminine* should be regarded as a practical method I employed during my research, rather than the object of my research. This means that I did not primarily transcode the plot, characters and situations (in so far as these are present in the texts at all), but sought out theatrical equivalences to her formal strategies regarding signification, composition and the treatment of the signified. In adapting Cixous's prose I was particularly interested in both the similarities and differences between writing and theatre that emerged. Like Geraldine Harris, I believe that to develop *écriture féminine* in theatre Cixous's suggestions need to be 'substantially transformed and translated', which means that the performances at times departed from the source texts considerably.<sup>26</sup> The performances I developed, then, did not replicate Cixous's source materials, instead my approach was closer to Linda Hutcheon's description of adaptations as 'repetition without replication', laying the emphasis on the transformative aspect of adaptation.<sup>27</sup>

The relationship between different media has been at the forefront of debate in the field of adaptation studies. Brian McFarlane, for instance, suggests that some aspects of narrative media can be transferred between media with little difficulty: the hard data of characters, such as name and age, for example. Other aspects, such as the atmosphere and the narrative perspective, require 'adaptation proper': that is, the adaptor has to find suitable equivalences.<sup>28</sup> What is problematic about McFarlane's approach is that it presumes that the fable and the narrative are the main targets of adaptation. Cixous's prose often contains little hard data, and even atmosphere and narrative perspective are not easy to locate. Shiach concisely summarises the ways in which Cixous breaks with the conventions of the novel:

Cixous's 'fictions' stretch the limits of the novelistic. Character is uncertain, narrative point of view unstable, the apparent transparency of language is challenged, and linear temporality is unsettled, or completely undone.<sup>29</sup>

McFarlane's paradigm does not address the issues that arise from adapting Cixous's texts, which exposes the formal bias upon which his theories are premised. I prefer François

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<sup>26</sup> Harris, 1994: p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006): p. XVI.

<sup>28</sup> Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 69.

Jost's simpler observation, that because 'semiotic materials [...] are not the same, [...] one cannot mechanically transfer concepts forged in one domain to another domain'.<sup>30</sup> Because of the difference in semiotic material between media, adaptation always entails transformation and change. My practice needed to take the material differences of the media into consideration, and this is where the key practice-as-research findings arose. I believe that femininity – as a creative practice – manifests differently in theatre than in literature because the semiotic materials are different.

Over the course of the series of experiments and performances, my research progressively separated itself from Cixous's prose and developed into a personal practice, created in collaboration with other artists. This separation from Cixous's individual novels was necessary because I sought to explore the specific potentialities of theatre for *écriture féminine* and to create a theatre method based on it, rather than devise strategies for adapting individual prose texts. The first performance, of which *Inside* was the source text, adhered closely to the structure of Cixous's novel. The scenes corresponded to the order of chapters in the book, even if each chapter was condensed into only a few sentences and some chapters were cut entirely. The performance used texts from the novel exclusively. The second performance, in contrast, used texts from Cixous's *Book of Promethea* and writings on the Prometheus myth by other authors. The performance treated Cixous's novel as a primary resource, adapting many of the metaphors that weave through the original text but it neither adhered to the order of the book nor aimed to reproduce the main narrative arc. The final performance did not draw on a single source but was instead composed of motifs and formal features drawn from across Cixous's published *oeuvre*.

Critical thinking on adaptation practices and products has historically been fraught by an adherence to a discourse of fidelity. Although numerous theoretical writings dismiss the notion of fidelity in theory, they nevertheless, even 'accidentally' as Rochelle Hurst identifies, maintain it as 'the prevailing paradigm'.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Leitch succinctly states that regarding fidelity as the main criteria for the success of an adaptation also creates a paradox since 'source texts will always be better at being themselves'.<sup>32</sup> Hurst attributes

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<sup>30</sup> François Jost, 'The Look: From Film into Novel. An Essay in Comparative Narratology,' in *A Companion to Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Rochelle Hurst, 'Adaptation as an Undecidable: Fidelity and Binarity from Bluestone to Derrida,' in *In/Fidelity: Essays on Film Adaptation*, ed. David L Kranz and Nancy C. Mellersk (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Leitch, 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Studies,' *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): p. 161.

the tendency of scholars to return to the notion of fidelity to the unquestioning adherence to the ideas of the early pioneer of adaptation studies, George Bluestone, who purports that media are essentially different. In doing this, he minimises the merging and overlapping of media through adaptation. Rigidly media-specific approaches instate a binary relation between media and elevate the original over its adaptation, wherein the latter is relegated to the status of a secondary derivate in the process.

While I agree with Jost, that the difference between semiotic materials should not be underestimated, I am also sceptical towards media-specific approaches that erect insurmountable binaries. Instead, I find Hurst's proposal to draw on Jacques Derrida's notion of undecidability, in order to investigate the ontological status of the adaptation appealing. According to Derrida, undecidables are signs that are located at either end of two mutually exclusive poles of meaning. In his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', illustrating this concept, Derrida uses the example of the Ancient Greek term *pharmakon* which can mean both 'remedy' and its polar opposite 'poison'.<sup>33</sup> The undecidable upsets binary structures as it means both one *and* the other, and one *or* the other at the same time. The undecidable is impossible since it cannot attain fixed meaning; it is merely an indication of the possibility of meaning. To conceive of the adaptation as an undecidable leads to 'a rejection of binaries, a site of intersection and conflation of media', Hurst suggests.<sup>34</sup>

By viewing adaptations as hybrids between media, the activity of making adaptations is freed from the criterion of fidelity and makes the creative work accomplished by adaptations visible. I would also add to Hurst's proposition that conceiving of adaptations as undecidables goes some way towards exposing the historical specificity of what is assumed to be essentially novelistic, filmic or theatrical. Since both Cixous's prose and postdramatic theatre stretch the limits of what has been regarded as essential to their medium, a theoretical approach that is founded upon traditional ideas of these media would not suit a project engaged with them. Searching for a new paradigm for adaptation studies after fidelity, Hutcheon suggests returning to the original meaning of the word 'to adjust, to alter, to make suitable'.<sup>35</sup> Adapting Cixous's prose was a creative and transformative activity that altered her works and made them suitable for the stage by identifying

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): p. 103.

<sup>34</sup> Hurst: p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> Hutcheon: p. 7.

equivalent strategies between the two media, as well as revealing sites of difference and tension.

## Managing the Research Process

The practice-as-research performances I undertook for this thesis are experimental outcomes of a feminist theatre laboratory. Shannon Rose Riley observes that in many minds, ‘labs are often pictured as clean, controlled sites’ for ‘reproducing replicable outcomes’, while studios for art production are ‘uncontrolled, “dirty” spaces’ in which ‘unique moments of expression’ occur.<sup>36</sup> However, the emergence of practice-as-research methods makes it difficult to uphold such distinctions: studios have become sites for ‘experimentation’ and ‘production’.<sup>37</sup> This calls into question the notion that labs and studios exist as mutually exclusive spaces. Practice-as-research projects demand that experimentation and production are regarded as expressive moments and, in turn, draw attention to the experimental labour and explorative processes that lead to these moments. I approached my practice-as-research inquiry using an experimental design to the extent that experiment derives from the Latin verb *experiri* which means ‘to try’ or ‘to test’. I conducted my research into the relationship between postdramatic theatre and femininity in the way Cixous defines it by adapting samples and formal strategies from Cixous’s prose into theatre. I applied her *écriture féminine* to theatre in order *to try out* what would happen and *to test* how the outcomes – a feminine theatre practice – resonate with the notion of postdramatic theatre.

My practical research process was not always linear and controlled. John Freeman points out that practice-as-research is often ‘messy’ and at times ‘unpredictable’ – again, demonstrating an alignment with ‘studio practice’.<sup>38</sup> For example, while creating solo pieces with each performer was an important way of devising the performances, this method was, in part, prompted by necessity – to accommodate the busy schedules of my collaborators – but also motivated by a preference for working on solo performances that I had developed prior to this research investigation. These messy – lived – factors had a strong influence on the pieces. Moreover, in so far as practice-as-research is a *praxis* in Arendt’s sense, it will always be ‘inherently unpredictable’, since we cannot foresee what

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<sup>36</sup> Shannon Rose Riley, ‘Lab / Studio,’ in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Creative Act and Scholarly Cartographies*, ed. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): pp. 138 - 139.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*: p. 139.

<sup>38</sup> John Freeman, *Blood Sweat & Theory* (Faringdon: Libri Publishing, 2010): p. 81.

our actions will effect.<sup>39</sup> Freeman warns, that because of this, practice-as-research ‘sits uneasily with many ideas of academic objectivity and verification’.<sup>40</sup> Despite the challenges practice-as-research poses to traditional notions of scientific rigour, Freeman still considers that ‘there is [...] a place in practice-based investigations for research which is systematic, informed and verifiable’.<sup>41</sup> While I agree with Freeman that practice-as-research can and should be systematic and informed, I take issue with the notion that it is possible – or particularly desirable – for it to be verifiable. Freeman’s use of the term verifiable evokes the scientific method and empiricism, which are at odds with practice-as-research since, as Nelson points out, they ‘presuppose a complete separation between subject and object’.<sup>42</sup> Practice-as-research is, in contrast, necessarily subjective and situated: no two researchers will come to the same results given the same research enquiry. As such I believe academic rigour can be ensured in practice-as-research when the process is regarded as emergent, and this is accounted for in the research design of my project.

Graeme Sullivan, Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe have given the term ‘emergence’ a central position in their thinking on practice-as-research. The term is borrowed from systems theory where it is used to describe how complexity arises from the interaction of individual elements. Sullivan compellingly describes works of art as complex adaptive systems wherein the continual interaction between elements – these might be: the work, the artists, the audience, the historical context and so on – produces something new, something that is ‘bigger than the sum of its parts’.<sup>43</sup> This transformative quality of the complex system causes ‘emergence’, that is ‘new features emerge from an interaction that is independent of any of the parts themselves’.<sup>44</sup> Emergence is an element of artworks independent of whether they are also bound to research activity or not. However, as Haseman and Mafe stress, it needs to be accounted for in the research model if art is to be rigorous research.<sup>45</sup> Melissa Trimmingham has suggested a model for managing the

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt: p. 182.

<sup>40</sup> Freeman: p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid: p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> Nelson, 2013: p. 49. Nelson also draws attention to the fact that the paradigms of knowledge-creation used in scientific research are not static and that many contemporary paradigms take the interrelation between the researcher and the object of research into account. See: pp. 48 – 56.

<sup>43</sup> Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oakes: Sage, 2005): p. 154.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe, ‘Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-Led Researchers,’ in *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice*, ed. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): p. 217.

emergent nature of practical research, which I applied throughout the research process. She adapts Kurt Lewin's hermeneutic spiral to a model for practice-as-research processes. Premised on an 'in-built dynamism', the spiral indicates a continually emerging engagement with the research questions that is, in theory, unending.<sup>46</sup> Essential to her model is that the researcher exits the spiral in order to write-up the results before re-entering it. This affords the researcher the possibility of adjusting and developing the research inquiry while the practice is underway.

I put Trimmingham's model into action by exiting the practice spiral after the presentation of each of the performances to write up and then define and refine the field of interrogation for the next performance: the case that each of the three performances sought to adapt a specific formal feature that I had identified in Cixous's writing facilitated this separate but iterative process. Each new performance, then, engaged with and grew out of my written reflection upon the preceding performance. I suggest that the three performances should be regarded as a series, which, as Mark Fleishmann puts it, constitutes a 'creative evolution'.<sup>47</sup> Borrowing this term from Henri Bergson, Fleishmann further invokes Bergson's notion of duration in which 'changes and acts', or as Fleishmann describes them, 'processes and becomings', are prioritised over 'things and states'.<sup>48</sup> In drawing on Bergson, Fleishman resists a view of evolution as determined by a linear, mechanistic process. Instead, he allows for a view in which evolution becomes 'energy (an impulse, an idea, an intuition, a hunch) that is channelled, durationally, through repetition in variable and indeterminate directions'.<sup>49</sup> In my case, the different elements of the series do not relate to each other as a number of 'connectable points' between representations, rather the research is located in the series as a whole, spanning the durational process of creation and reflection.<sup>50</sup>

The research inquiry is embodied and embedded in my series of performances which makes it necessary, as Robin Nelson proposes, for me to 'make the tacit explicit' by means of critical reflection which, in the presentation of my thesis, means articulating the research findings in writing. Paul Clarke expresses some concern that writing up research might '[place] the reality of the performance events themselves under erasure', with the writing

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<sup>46</sup> Melissa Trimmingham, 'A Methodology for Practice,' *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 22, no. 1 (2002): p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Fleishman, 'The Difference of Performance as Research,' *Theatre Research International* 37 (2012): p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*: p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*: p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.

aiming to translate the practice.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, I believe it is important to defend the primacy of the practice not only in regard to how it constitutes the research process but also articulates the findings. Susan Kelly makes a case for the importance of the medium in which the practice is presented, writing that ‘medium might become a term that is used to describe a substance that is both *formed* by disparate knowledges [...] and that *holds* such research’.<sup>52</sup> However, if the research outcomes are held within the performance events alone, the potential for distributing the research outcomes to a wider audience is severely limited. This also places responsibility on the spectators to infer the research context.

I think Nelson proposes a useful way for thinking about the relationship between the practice and the written reflection that assigns the writing a vital and dynamic place alongside the practice without erasing or replacing it. This is the approach I have adopted in this thesis. Nelson stresses that the ‘research inquiry is not identical to the practice, though it is evidenced by it’,<sup>53</sup> and the whole process of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’ is to be regarded as the practice-as-research inquiry.<sup>54</sup> In order for the knowledge developed in this process to be claimed, entered into the public domain and circulated, a shift from tacit ‘liquid knowing’ (which Marina Abramovic calls ‘something that runs through your system’<sup>55</sup>) to the ‘know-what of shared and corroborated soft-knowledge’ is necessary.<sup>56</sup> This is achieved through the written accompaniment of the practice, which should not be regarded as translation of the practice but as a way of ‘articulating and evidencing [...] the research inquiry’.<sup>57</sup> Critically elucidating and articulating the research inquiry, which comprises practice, reflection and theoretical articulation, is the purpose of the second half of the written section of my thesis.

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Clarke, ‘An Experiential Approach to Theory From Within Practice,’ *University of Bristol: Select Bibliography for Practice as Research in Performance*, 2004, <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/clarke.htm>. Accessed: 12/10/2013.

<sup>52</sup> Susan Kelly, ‘Medium,’ in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Creative Act and Scholarly Cartographies*, ed. Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009): p. 143. Emphases in the original.

<sup>53</sup> Nelson, 2013: p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*: p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*: p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*: p. 60.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*: p. 70.

## Documentation

The three DVDs which accompany this thesis feature a full-length video of each the three performances as well as clips from the performances which are referenced in Chapters 4,5 and 6. I have opted to omit the scripts in the written section of the thesis since, in postdramatic theatre, the written text is treated as only one of many equally weighted sign-systems and, for this reason, I do not want to exaggerate the importance of the spoken word. I have, however, included the scripts on a CD to compensate for unclear sound in the recordings and to give the reader the possibility of looking up the sources, since these are referenced in the footnotes. The primary form I have chosen for documenting the practice-as-research performances – the practical element of my thesis – is video, although the written thesis also includes photographs where I considered them to be useful for illuminating or illustrating particular aspects of the performances. I suggest that the videos should be watched in chronological order since they demonstrate the creative evolution of the series and that the shorter clips should be watched whenever this is indicated in the text. The videos are not meant to replace the performances but act as an audio-visual aid for readers who did not attend the live performances. The documentation is also available online: <http://www.feministpostdramatic.tumblr.com>.

In creating the documentation of the performances I have been mindful of Peggy Phelan's assertion that 'performance's only life is in the present' and, because of this, 'performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance'.<sup>58</sup> Any attempt at preserving and fixing the performance work, especially if the intention is anything other than to be a 'spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present', runs the danger of altering and replacing the performance event itself.<sup>59</sup> As a consequence, Phelan suggests that writing about performance should, rather than aim to write 'toward preservation', be a writing 'toward disappearance'.<sup>60</sup> By this she means writing that acknowledges the impossibility of representing a performance event accurately without transforming it. Engaging with, but also extending Phelan's notion of writing towards disappearance, I have attempted to film (and edit) towards disappearance – making it clear that the documentation is not a 'faithful' record of a live act. I have employed techniques intended to communicate the video's status as a document, following Angela Piccini's and

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<sup>58</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993): p. 146.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 148.

Carolyn Rye's recommendation that 'the viewers must be able to recognise the relationship to the past event'.<sup>61</sup> One way in which I did this was to film the performances during their public presentation rather than during the dress rehearsal, which means that the sounds the spectators make and sometimes parts of their bodies are caught on camera, pointing toward the transient nature of the performances and their status as events.

Secondly, the way I edited the footage aimed to point towards the disappearance of the performance. Working with the images and sounds captured by the multiple cameras, I was aware that I was acting as an 'interpreter' of the material, as Adam Ledger, Simon Ellis and Fiona Wright suggest, by selecting, curating and assembling.<sup>62</sup> 'Even', as Patrice Pavis points out, 'if there is no editing [...] and if the scenes are shot from one fixed point with no camera change or close-ups, the video film imposes by its own particular framing a limited and partial vision'.<sup>63</sup> Bearing this in mind I decided to edit the films to resemble closely how I watched the performances and would have liked spectators to see them, too. This was especially the case with the final performance.

Whilst the first two pieces were shot from two angles with the cameras placed amongst the stationary audience and I then selected the footage that gave the clearest view of the stage, *Rings* presented some particular challenges. The performance space of *Rings* was a circular area in the middle of a black box studio. There was no seating and the spectators were encouraged to move around the central circle, choosing from which angle to watch the five solo performances that were in action. The performance was not only what Rye describes as 'multi-viewpoint' with unconnected actions being shown simultaneously, but the perspectives from which these multiple events were watched could be selected by the audience.<sup>64</sup> I experimented with different ways of communicating on video the simultaneity of the performances. While splitting the screen into five separate screens did emphasise the multi-perspective nature of the piece and gave the viewer the option to choose what to watch, it also compromised the quality of the video through file

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<sup>61</sup> Angela Piccini and Caroline Rye, 'Of Fevered Archives and the Quest for Total Documentation,' in *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, ed. Ludivine Allegue et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Adam Ledger, Simoe Ellis, and Fiona Wright, 'The Question of Documentation: Creative Strategies in Performance Research,' in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011): p. 182.

<sup>63</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982): p. 123.

<sup>64</sup> Caroline Rye, 'Incorporating Practice: A Multi-Viewpoint Approach to Performance Documentation,' *University of Bristol: Select Bibliography for Practice as Research in Performance*, 2001, [http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/s\\_cr.htm](http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/s_cr.htm). Accessed: 12 / 10 / 2013.

compression and the small size of the screens. Further, the split screen format detracted from the detail of what the performers were doing, showing only simultaneity. Instead, I decided to edit the film in a way that demonstrates one potential path through the performance. Similarly to how I watched the piece when it was performed, the camera lingers on one performer for some time, sometimes watching a performer in extreme close up, at others panning out to include the other performers surrounding her, before moving to the next. The film I created is inevitably selective and subjective – as was my experience of watching the performance. As Piccini and Rye state, the choices the spectators of the performance were confronted with ‘can never be repeated in the same way’.<sup>65</sup> Given this fact, I decided to show a series of choices rather than find ways to repeat them.

The documentation of live performance through video is often described in terms of loss. Rye and Piccini, as well as Nelson stress that the live encounters that are constitutive of much theatre work ‘exceed and escape’ the camera.<sup>66</sup> For instance, although the video of *Rings* tries to invoke the textures and intensities of the materials used during the performances through close-up shots, the move from three dimensions to two changes how the materials are experienced. While vision and sound are captured to some extent, the smell of the mulch, the sensation of the reverberations that frantic movements caused on the floor, and the sense that one would only need to reach out in order to touch the materials, cannot be transported. Although I created these videos in the knowledge that they cannot replace or reconstruct the performances, I hope that a sense of the live performance might develop through the dialogue between the written section and the videos.

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<sup>65</sup> Piccini and Rye: p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*: p. 42.

## PART 2:

# Research Findings



**ENCIRCLED BY THE  
IRON GRATING. INSIDE**



**fire into song**



**Rings: Sang, Souffle,  
Signe, Sein, Sens**

## A Note on Structure

The second half of this thesis comprises Chapters 4, 5 and 6. These chapters reflect on my practical research process and its outcomes. Each chapter presents one practice-as-research performance and centres on one trope that I explored – signification, dramaturgy and epistemology, respectively. The performances are discussed in the chronological order of their making. My research methodology entailed that each practice-led research exploration carried through the findings from its predecessor, with the research findings accumulating strategically across the series. As a consequence, while each chapter sheds light on one particular aspect of the laboratory performance in question, the findings from the preceding practice also shaped my decision-making while directing each piece. As such, the third and final practice-as-research performance exemplified the outcomes from all three pieces. I have chosen to present one trope per chapter as this allows me to discuss the practice outcomes in appropriate critical depth. By focussing on one aspect of the practical experimentation I hope to be able to consider the research outcomes in relation to theoretical and political categories that Cixous establishes, as well as the wider context of feminist thought.

The chapters that follow, then, seek to evidence what I found out by exploring Cixous's *écriture féminine* in theatre and how I arrived at my conclusions. My process of creation was not a simple remediation of Cixous's writing, instead, it entailed rebalancing priorities and exploring the specific potentialities of theatre in contrast to her writing. As a consequence, I choose to focus on the differences between writing and theatre in particular. I use a variety of media to demonstrate my findings: images and verbal description of the practice are presented in the written text, and I make references to clips and documents that are available on the DVDs and the CD, as well as the website: <http://www.feministpostdramatic.tumblr.com>. I direct the reader towards these when appropriate.

## Chapter 4

# Feminine Signification: *ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE*

Loving: Keeping Alive: Naming.<sup>1</sup>

Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing'

In 'Coming to Writing', an essay written in 1976, Hélène Cixous describes her feminine approach to language and writing. She contrasts two approaches to naming phenomena. On the one hand, she warns the reader, naming can have negative consequences: 'be wary of names; they are nothing but social tools, rigid concepts, little cages'.<sup>2</sup> In 'Castration or Decapitation?', which was published in the same year, she associates this naming scenario with 'a certain kind of masculine desire', drawing an analogy with police interrogations.<sup>3</sup> When language is used to fulfil a desire for ontological stability, to divide phenomena into recognisable and distinct categories, it plays into the hands of 'meaning' that is organised through binary relations and 'only [gets] constituted in a movement in which one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favour of the other'.<sup>4</sup> Under these conditions language becomes the handmaiden of phallogentrism in which woman and femininity have figured as the weaker term and are marginalised, othered or annihilated.

In contrast to masculine ways of naming, Cixous proposes that there is a method of naming that fulfils a maternal function. The act of naming can also invigorate and give life to what is being named without fixing or mastering it. The colons in the quotation that introduces this chapter functions in this way: they let the reader glide from one word to the next, back and forth along the sequence. Keeping alive comes to be defined as naming, and loving as keeping alive. But naming also opens up to keeping alive which in turn gives way to loving. *Écriture féminine*, by employing language in such a maternal way, does not do the 'work of meaning' but dismantles binary oppositions and ordinary causality.<sup>5</sup> By unleashing signifiers from the grip of binary structures *écriture féminine* aims to dismantle

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing,' in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell et al (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991): p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: p. 46.

phallogentrism in language and replace it with a less oppressive organisational structure. I regard this alternative approach to naming or signifying as a central method of Cixous's *écriture féminine*. As a consequence, my first practice-as-research performance was principally concerned with devising signifying strategies in theatre that function analogously to Cixous's signifying methods in her prose.

To do this I selected Cixous first novel *Inside* (1969 / 1986) which exemplifies several of Cixous's feminine signifying strategies as my source material. I found her techniques for exploiting the fact that signifiers are not stable or inert, but constantly in movement, particularly rich for beginning my practical research process since they unite a concrete poetic with a political agenda. Cixous's signifying strategies align her prose writing with Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Derrida argues that, because every sign is cited, every sign is similarly able to 'break with every context and engender infinitely new contexts in absolutely nonsaturable fashion'.<sup>6</sup> However, he cautions that this does not mean that a sign retains its meaning independent of context; rather, he proposes that 'there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchoring'.<sup>7</sup> The fact that signs have no permanent centre, no absolute meaning, threatens the phallogentric order that is founded upon binary relations and ontological certainty and, for this reason, perhaps, Cixous has claimed that to her 'working on the signifier has always seemed obvious'.<sup>8</sup>

I entered the rehearsal process with the aim of addressing the following questions:

- ◆ What kind of signifying strategies does *Inside*, as an example of *écriture féminine*, inspire in theatre practice?
- ◆ How does the passage from prose to theatre affect the priorities and potentialities of *écriture féminine* in relation to the signifier? What does this remediation enable?
- ◆ How do my practical findings connect with postdramatic theatre? Do they shed light on the politics of postdramatic theatre and its relationship with feminism?

To answer these questions, I adapted excerpts from *Inside* to create a performance entitled *ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE*. My title distinguishes the work from Cixous's book, signalling that the aim of the performance was not to deliver a full-length adaptation of the novel, but to adapt selected formal traits. *ENCIRCLED* was performed in

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982): p. 320.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cixous, 2008: p. 23.

May 2012 in a small black box studio theatre without a permanent seating bank to around 20 spectators who were seated on two sides of the performance space. The duration of the piece was 40 minutes. The cast with whom I began rehearsals was comprised of Victoria Beesley, an actor, and Vanessa Coffey, a dancer. However, a month before the performance showing Vanessa suffered a serious injury which prevented her from taking part. In her stead another actor, Josee Meredith, performed in the final version of the piece. Before discussing the signifying strategies Cixous uses in *Inside* and how these prompted me to employ signifiers in *ENCIRCLED*, I will briefly describe the main compositional and thematic traits of the novel in order to give the reader an impression of the text as a whole. I will also address an important directorial choice I made prior to beginning rehearsals that originated from my analysis of the structure of the novel: I employed two simultaneous yet independent performance scores. This decision laid the foundations for the practical research findings.

*Inside* is a formally experimental text that contains no easily identifiable or coherent narrative or characters, which has led Lynn Penrod to describe it as structured by an ‘apparent lack of structuring consistency’.<sup>9</sup> However, while the text might not feature formal traits traditionally expected of the novel, such as a storyline or consistent characters, there are a few structuring devices in place. It is heavily fragmented, consisting of 33 segments, split between two halves. The individual segments follow their own internal logic. I maintained this compositional feature in the performance by splitting it into eight scenes each of which was marked by a blackout at the beginning and end. While the time and place of the narration is inconsistent since the novel presents a series of fantasies and dreams, there are a few firm markers for the reader to hold on to. The first half, for instance, which is concerned with the narrator’s childhood, is explicitly set 20 years prior to the second. The novel begins sometime after the death of the narrator’s father, with the period of mourning and the experience of loss forming the contextual framework of the book.

The novel is narrated in the first person singular by a female narrator, however, her identity is far from stable or unambiguous. Throughout the book the narrator constantly negotiates the boundaries of herself. For instance, she experiences herself falling apart: ‘Inside my skin I was already at the point of rotting, my epidermis was peeling away. [...] At this rate,

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<sup>9</sup> Lynn Penrod, *Hélène Cixous* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996): p. 49.

time would soon have me in pieces'.<sup>10</sup> And she reconstitutes herself: 'Out of this dangerous multiplicity of my flesh, I created an impregnable city where I lived without fear'.<sup>11</sup> In *Inside* the borders between the inside and the outside, the self and the world, are not hard and fast but permeable. This has led Mairéad Hanrahan to point out that the novel constantly blurs 'all distinctions' and 'challenges the assumption that differences are stable'.<sup>12</sup> She proposes that *Inside* is best understood as an 'interior universe', or as 'a world where terms are not exterior to each other, not separate from each other'.<sup>13</sup> As such, *Inside* performs a deconstructive operation, challenging the binary logic that underpins phallogocentric thought. One aim of my practice was to devise a staging technique that would allow me to do the same in theatre.

The challenges *Inside* poses to the stability of distinctions and binary structures become more apparent as a result of repeatedly reading the novel since this allows the reader to trace individual motifs and discover ever-new ways in which binary complexes are shifted, undone and redone. However, this is not typically an option in theatre given its ephemeral and transient status. As a consequence, prior to beginning rehearsals, I decided to explore simultaneity in *ENCIRCLED* as a comparable, or even equivalent, effect. I adapted *Inside* into *ENCIRCLED* over the course of six weeks. For five weeks of the rehearsal period I worked with Victoria and Vanessa (and then Josee) separately, so as to develop two independent performance scores. These were only joined in the last week of rehearsals. The following table and still from the performance exemplify this staging technique (for a corresponding video clip see DVD: 'Simultaneity Example'). This is one of seven scenes that I developed from the first half of *Inside*, each of which roughly corresponds to a section from Cixous's novel, although some scenes feature material from several of the novel's different sections. While the first half of *Inside* has 23 such sections, I decided to reduce their number in order to focus on the formal aspects I sought to adapt rather than the full scope of the novel. In consequence, the script of *ENCIRCLED* condensed the 136 pages of the novel into six pages (see 'Text File CD' for the script). The left column of the table describes Josee's performance score and provides the text excerpt that inspired it, while the column on the right describes Victoria's score and the lines she spoke. Both

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<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Inside*, trans. Carol Barko (Berlin: Schocken, 1986): p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Hélène Cixous's *Dedans*: The Father Makes an Exit', in *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Margaret Attack and Phil Powry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990): p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

columns contain significant technical cues (such as ‘blackout’) in order to orientate the reader and emphasise the simultaneity of the scores.



<p><i>Josee</i></p> <p><i>Black out. Lights back on.</i></p> <p><i>Josee is lying on her back, eyes closed eagerly running her hands over the floor and her body, breathing heavily. Then she rolls on her side and curls up. She seems to be trying to make herself as small as possible.</i></p> <p><i>The lights go off again.</i></p> <p><i>Lights on.</i></p> <p><i>Josee performs a devised movement score based on the following text:</i></p> <p>If I regret I exist it's because it's so visible. To see me unrolled, my surface is roughly one metre thirty-three by a narrowness of 20 cm, which makes <math>133 \times 20 = 2,660</math> sq cm of skin. Which would allow one quarter of man's fingers to touch me in about 2636 portions of my person.</p> <p><i>Josee's hands seem to act independently of the rest of her body.</i></p>	<p><i>Victoria</i></p> <p><i>Black out. Lights back on.</i></p> <p><i>Victoria has a pen in her hand, she goes to the back wall that is covered in white sheets of paper and writes: 'OUTSIDE I SAY FATHER, MOTHER, GOD BUT WHAT IS IT?' on one of the sheets.</i></p> <p><i>When Victoria has finished writing she turns back to the audience, the lights go off again.</i></p> <p><i>Lights on.</i></p> <p><i>Victoria sitting atop a ladder. She holds a polystyrene head above her left shoulder. Both she and the head are watching Josee who is lying below. She says: He? She? One? Now that's a good question. There's a head with what's inside. There's the outside with the head out on the outside. Who neglected to tell me there's an inside and an outside? As for shame, that's my strength. I would say it's my mother. I am born of her. I'm ashamed of her. I want her, I'm afraid of her. She is my opening to the outside.</i></p>
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<p><i>The hands that earlier were her own and which she took pleasure from, now seem unwelcome. They grab her neck as though to strangle her. Her body contorts trying to get away from them.</i></p> <p><i>Black out.</i></p>	<p><i>Victoria's voice recorded says: With my shame I encountered the mysterious fragility of my belly, with my second shame I learned the importance of my sexual parts. Thus I learned that there was a me and there was a you, and that I could be one or the other.</i></p> <p><i>Black out.</i></p>
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Whilst this staging technique was practical in that it accommodated easily the schedule of my performers, it also reflected the compositional structure of Cixous's writing. The novel is organised into a succession of self-contained sections, which do not follow a logical storyline and which invite the reader to follow its associative leaps. By presenting two independent performance scores simultaneously, rather than successively, I aimed to exploit theatre as a medium of time and space. Doing this allowed me to present material from two different sections at the same time or, as in the above example, show different fragments from within one section. The effect I sought to recreate was how motifs re-appear and morph throughout the novel. An example is the tension between bodily shame and pleasure in the scene above. Josee's score oscillates between showing the touching of herself as pleasurable and as shameful. Simultaneously, Victoria speaks of shame as a 'strength' that allows her to recognise herself as a discrete being, while addressing the link between shame and desire in relation to the figure of the mother of whom she is 'ashamed' and 'afraid' but who she also '[wants]'.<sup>14</sup> By presenting two conflicting, or at least different, takes on a binary pair such as shame and pleasure, I aimed to produce the destabilisation of binary oppositions that Hanrahan identifies in the novel.

My exploration of feminine signifying strategies took place within this formal framework and was focussed on three deconstructive signifying strategies used by Cixous in *Inside*: she employs vibrating, material and synaesthetic signifiers. Through my practice-led research, I aimed to discover an equivalent method for each of Cixous's strategies in theatre practice. The section that follows details the three methods I developed. I discuss the implications of these findings for feminism and the politics of postdramatic theatre in the third section of this chapter.

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<sup>14</sup> Cixous, 1986: p. 15.

# Vibrating, Material and Synaesthetic Signifiers

## 1. Vibrating Signifiers

One way in which *Inside* challenged binary logic and phallogentrism on the level of signification is by making signifiers vibrate. This is a thoroughly feminine strategy since vibration dislodges signifiers from the system of binary oppositions by putting their *différance* into play. Like Hanrahan, Daniel Jourlait points out that differences between terms are in constant flux in *Inside*. He relates this observation particularly to the novel's 'leitmotif', the inside. The connotative and denotative dimensions of 'inside' are incessantly negotiated in the novel, creating a 'greenhouse network of language' in which 'the object of reflection' is continually created and destroyed.<sup>15</sup> Françoise Defromont further points out that the term 'inside' is itself already unstable and multiple since it is at once 'delimited by what is defined as outside' and 'non-delimited at the same time, since it may refer to any space'.<sup>16</sup> Cixous exploits this instability throughout the novel: being inside becomes a question of where one draws the boundaries, not a matter of fact, which leads Defromont to describe the inside in Cixous's text as a 'double space' that is at once enclosed and open.<sup>17</sup>

The novel begins with this configuration of the inside: 'MY HOUSE IS SURROUNDED. IT IS ENCIRCLED BY THE IRON GRATING. INSIDE, we live', the narrator explains.<sup>18</sup> Here, the inside is experienced as a prison or enclosure from which, as Morag Shiach points out, 'the narrator needs to escape'.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, the body is experienced as a trap, a restrictive and encaging limitation which is expressed through the narrator's obsession with measuring the dimensions of her body: 'to see me unrolled, my surface is roughly one metre thirty three by a narrowness of 20 cm, which makes  $133 \times 20 = 2,660$  sq cm of skin which would allow one quarter of man's fingers to touch me in about 2636 portions of my person'.<sup>20</sup> In this instance the skin demarcates the body, separating the

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel F. Jourlait, 'Dedans by Hélène Cixous's', *The French Review* 44, no. 1 (1970): p.174. Translation by the author.

<sup>16</sup> Françoise Defromont, 'L'épopée du Corps', in *Hélène Cixous: Chemins D'une Écriture*, ed. Françoise van Rossum-Guyon and Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 1990): p. 91. Translation by the author.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*: p. 92. Translation by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, 1986: p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Cixous, 1986: p. 14.

narrator from her surroundings: it erects an insurmountable boundary that designates her inside from the others' outside.

However, the clear delimitation of what is inside and what is outside is also frequently undercut in *Inside*. The narrator and her family try to 'protect the space between [their] bodies' so that the dead father might be able to 'slip in',<sup>21</sup> while an old family friend's flesh becomes 'a garden of mourning'.<sup>22</sup> Social relations are depicted as a constant negotiation of personal and communal space. The family creates an inside space amongst them, hoping that the father might return, or individuals separate out, becoming their own private agonised gardens. While the inside at times appears as a prison, the malleability of its boundaries also allows the narrator, as Defromont argues, to 'travel without limitation from the inside to the outside, from the skin to the substance'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the inside space also becomes an opening to the outside. Again, the way the body is experienced reflects this permeability. From time to time the body disintegrates and is experienced as fragmented:

My fingers are chopped up into joints, my hand, which to me is beautiful and alive, is carved up, jointed far away. Thus I learn that I don't know the fifty-thousand different parts of my body any more than fifty thousand other things. All I can do is name these fragments of myself.<sup>24</sup>

In these moments the skin no longer acts as an impermeable boundary. As Kathryn Robson suggests, the narrator stretches the 'limits of the skin' and it becomes possible for her to extend herself beyond her corporal boundaries.<sup>25</sup> Being inside is an ambiguous and contradictory state in Cixous's novel, the inside is at once a cage and an opening, a limitation and an opportunity.

By endowing the signifier 'inside', which is typically conceived as a binary term paired with 'outside', with extremely complex, fluid and ambivalent meaning Cixous fashions it into an undecidable term. Derrida has ascribed undecidability special importance in his theory of deconstruction. For him, as Jeffrey Nealon notes, undecidability does not occur because of an 'inherent ambiguity in a certain tropic use of figural language': in other words, it does not only occur because figurative language is open to interpretation, but

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid: p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid: p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Defromont: p. 92.

<sup>24</sup> Cixous, 1986: p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Kathryn Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1986 French Women's Life-Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): p. 74.

rather it is ‘the nature or structure of the field - of systematicity [...] in general’.<sup>26</sup>

Undecidability troubles meaning founded upon binary oppositions and, in turn, reveals that binary meaning is itself already troubled. As noted earlier, an example used by Derrida is the term *pharmakon* which can mean both poison and its polar opposite, remedy. The term reveals that meaning has ‘no stable essence’, it is always ‘undecided’.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Cixous exploits the nature of language’s systematicity to generate undecidability in her prose writing, as her work on the signifier ‘inside’ demonstrates, in order to dislodge binary structures. This process of destabilising the meaning of a signifier is bound to speed: writing of a later novel, *Neuter* (1972), Gilles Deleuze stresses the rapidity with which Cixous combines interconnecting themes and signifiers to form ‘variable figures’, making the text stroboscopic.<sup>28</sup> In using the term stroboscopic Deleuze invokes an undecidable state since the stroboscope is a scientific implement that makes fast movement appear slow or static. The same occurs with ‘inside’ in *Inside*: while the signifier moves rapidly across different contexts and accumulates a plethora of layered meanings, it still remains on the spot; that is, it vibrates. By making signifiers vibrate in *Inside*, Cixous is able to multiply the *différance* of the signifiers rather than repress it, and this is a vital source of *Inside*’s femininity.

Making signifiers vibrate is a key strategy for creating *écriture féminine* and because of this I sought to devise an equivalent technique in theatre. Initially, I expected that vibration would develop naturally from presenting the two performance scores simultaneously, as described in the previous section. I assumed that this simultaneity would make the signifiers vibrate through multiplying the potential meanings of the scores since they could be viewed as in isolation or interconnected. During the first rehearsal period, in which I worked with Josee and Victoria separately, the individual performance scores grew into autonomous solo performances. The first time I rehearsed with both the performers – halfway through the rehearsal process – the disadvantages of this approach became evident. Because we had been working with only half of the *mise en scène*, both performers had developed material that was noticeably linear and narrative. The result of this was that there was no singular way to watch the scores: they could be viewed on their own – by focussing on one performer – or interconnectedly – by focussing on the whole

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Nealon, *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993): p. 44.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, 1983: p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘Hélène Cixous or Stroboscopic Writing’, trans. Martin McQuillan, *Oxford Literary Review* 24 (2002): p. 204.

*mise en scène* or looking back and forth between them. While the latter method highlighted the impossibility of reducing the signifiers to a single meaning, it did not attain the quality of vibration I sought to produce, that is, to bring forth the manifold, undecidable ‘semantic subtlety’ of every signifier while still keeping it anchored to some extent.<sup>29</sup> I found that I had produced shifting meaning, not vibration.

In keeping with Cixous’s description of how she produces vibration in writing, I refocused my exploration of vibrating signifiers in theatre on repetition. Cixous explains that she uses a musical structure – ‘theme and variations’<sup>30</sup> – to make signifiers vibrate. To do this I prolonged and built more repetitions of one theme into Josee’s movement score. The decision to work on repetition proved to be the key to creating vibrating signs in theatre. An example of this is the first scene of *ENCIRCLED*, which was composed of text excerpts from the first section of *Inside* (See: ‘Vibration Example’ on DVD). Josee’s performance in this scene was a movement score based on depictions and photographs of mourners, which she repeated throughout.



Alongside Josee’s score three excerpts from the novel were recited. These were: the beginning of the section in which the narrator paints a bleak picture of living ‘inside’ while being ‘surrounded by fifty-thousand’;<sup>31</sup> an extract from the middle in which the narrator speaks of her reverence for her father; and a fragment from the end in which the narrator speaks of her decision to dismiss God since his ‘uselessness’ has become ‘too apparent’.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cixous, 1997: 66.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Cixous, 1986: p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid: p. 11.

These texts were either spoken by Victoria (the first and the last) or recorded and played back (the middle text which was arranged as a dialogue between Josee and Victoria). In addition to the excerpts from the text that were spoken, the text inspired two acting sequences, performed by Victoria. First, she performed the mourning neighbour wailing loudly, who appears in this section, and then the narrator dancing a waltz with her dead father, symbolised by a polystyrene head.<sup>33</sup> I propose that the presentation of Josee's repetitive score alongside Victoria's linear score made the signifiers Josee was producing vibrate.

Since Josee performed her score repeatedly over the course of a five-minute scene that provided a number of different contexts, the meaning of the gestures began to accumulate various connotative traces. Beginning synchronous to the text in which the narrator speaks of being inside, Josee's movements took on a metaphoric quality. Grabbing her belly, for instance, pointed to the body as the dividing line between the inside and outside. Next, the gestures appeared in their 'proper' context, alongside Victoria performing the mourning neighbour. Finally, they were shown together with the waltz during which other tones and connotations of the score were emphasised: the verve with which Josee performed her score, suddenly appeared joyful and celebratory. Throughout this scene the tone and meaning of Josee's score moved back and forth stroboscopically; marked by the residue of multiple associations, possible metaphoric readings and emotional atmospheres, the signifiers vibrated.

By introducing repetition into the performance in this way, the outcome of the rehearsal process drew closer to the formal strategies of the source text than I had initially intended, since Cixous also uses repetition to make signifiers vibrate. However, in contrast to *Inside* in which repetition works in one direction – the signifier accumulates various meanings through its successive use in different contexts – I found that the vibrating signifier in theatre can move in multiple directions at once. Since the signifier is surrounded by a number of different sign-systems which interact with each other, contradict each other and build upon each other all at once, individual signifiers or entire sign systems begin to vibrate in various directions. In the above-mentioned scene, for example, there was a moment in which Josee performed her score, Victoria wailed loudly while performing the mourning neighbour and the waltz melody began to play. These three elements, taken by

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<sup>33</sup> The idea of representing the father through a polystyrene head originated from a text passage in *Inside* in which the narrator recalls seeing her father and grandfather as 'two men' with 'transparent bodies' and 'opaque heads'. See: Cixous, 1986: p. 48.

themselves, would produce very different atmospheres and readings. Performed together they produce multi-directional vibrations between each other.

Using repetition in this way is decidedly postdramatic. Hans-Thies Lehmann even goes as far as to propose that ‘hardly any other procedure is as typical for postdramatic theatre’ as repetition.<sup>34</sup> He acknowledges that, while repetition is of import to any artistic form, repetition in the postdramatic is used in a particular way: to destructure and create disorder, rather than to create symmetry and order. My practice-as-research findings support this proposition, with repetition employed as a method for making signifiers vibrate. This, for instance, became apparent in scenes such as the one described above, in which a single gesture or sequence of gestures can come to mean in a variety of different ways, not only because it is open to interpretation but because it is repeated in changing constellations. The way Lehmann describes repetition as a ‘crystallisation of time’ that effects its ‘compression’, recalls Deleuze’s emphasis on speed in Cixous’s writing.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Bottoms proposes that when repetition in theatre is executed in changing contexts, a ‘mini-history’ of the repeated gesture develops that draws attention to the ‘shifting resonances’ of a sign.<sup>36</sup> Since the time-based nature of theatre is particularly conducive to drawing attention to the shifting resonances of a sign transforming over time, Cixous’s method of creating *écriture féminine* might actually be regarded *as* theatrical in the way it employs signifiers.

Similarly to how Cixous allows her signifiers to vibrate by making them traverse different contexts, thereby destabilising binary logic, repetition in postdramatic theatre is also used for ‘deconstructing [...] story, meaning and totality of form’.<sup>37</sup> I propose that postdramatic theatre practices employ repetition with a similar effect to Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. Both postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* render the inherent instability of the meaning of signifiers by repeating them across different contexts, which affect and alter them. Jenny Chamarette writes of Cixous’s prose that it employs signifiers in such a way that they ‘[highlight] the site of a multiplication of meaning, not a specification’,<sup>38</sup> which in Cixous’s paradigm of sexual difference is a characteristic of *écriture féminine*. Similarly,

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<sup>34</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 156.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Bottoms, ‘The Tangled Flora of Goat Island: Rhizome, Repetition, Reality’, *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 4 (1998): p. 442.

<sup>37</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> Jenny Chamarette, ‘Flesh, Folds and Textuality: Thinking Visual Ellipsis via Merleau-Ponty, Hélène Cixous and Robert Frank’, *Paragraph* 30, no. 2 (2007): p. 35.

postdramatic theatre employs repetition in order to let meaning proliferate and to let us ‘see something different in what we have seen before’, rather than reproduce the already known.<sup>39</sup> When postdramatic theatre practices employ repetition deconstructively, allowing meaning to proliferate and signifiers to vibrate, they put femininity into play. By emphasising the *différance* of signs, postdramatic practices challenge the phallogentric order. Since postdramatic theatre performs a deconstruction of binary oppositions on the level of the signifier, it offers a useful theatre aesthetic for feminist scholars and practitioners. Repetition is, then, of foundational importance to this thesis. Given this, I will return to it in Chapter 5 to discuss it in relation to Cixous’s poetic theory and the dramaturgy of postdramatic theatre.

## 2. Material Signifiers

Cixous does not highlight or exploit the undecidability of signifiers on a semantic level alone: she also draws attention to their materiality. She employs the materiality of the written word - its aural, tactile and pictorial qualities – in her prose. The effect of this is that the affective, sensual dimension of the signifier is emphasised above and beyond its semantic meaning. In her early descriptions of *écriture féminine*, Cixous draws on a plethora of sensory metaphors to portray the effects of the feminine text. She proposes that while the masculine libidinal economy is premised on specularity, femininity, in contrast, is ‘close to the voice’.<sup>40</sup> In an interview in 1984 she emphasises that she ‘[privileges] the ear over the eye’ and aims to write ‘with [her] eyes closed’.<sup>41</sup> However, I do not understand Cixous to be disparaging visual and pictorial forms since she involves vision in various ways in her writing, as I will exemplify below. Instead, I understand Cixous to be using the eye as a metaphor for ways of signifying that confirm binary oppositions, especially sexual opposition. Cixous associates the eye with the totalising mirror image that taxonomises bodies in line with a binary understanding of sex,<sup>42</sup> and which, as Judith Butler also criticises, is linguistically ‘sustained through time by the sexually marked name’.<sup>43</sup> Butler

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<sup>39</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> See: Conley, 1984 p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> I use the term taxonomy here in reference to Derrida who employs it to explain the distinction between difference and *différance*. He claims that whereas ‘difference’ can be taken to be taxonomic, that is classifiable in a ‘static structure’, *différance* refers to the productive moment in ‘the play of differences’. As such the latter is deconstructive, while the former includes, even invites, essentialist thought. (See: Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981]: p. 28. )

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993): p. 41.

proposes that it is not a ‘natural boundary or organic telos’ which separates human bodies into female and male but the ‘law of kinship that works through the name’.<sup>44</sup> In this way vision is bound to the oppositional logic of phallogentric language that imposes taxonomic categories on material bodies. It is this mode of perception that Cixous tries to circumvent in her *écriture féminine*.

In contrast to the eye that supports phallogentric structures and binary oppositions, Cixous associates the ear with the unconscious, since it is able to hear the voice that ‘sings from a time before the law, before the symbolic took one’s breath away’.<sup>45</sup> She bestows upon writing that speaks to the ear the ability to sidestep the phallogentric order and the system of sexual taxonomy, and speak directly to the material body. As a consequence, Cixous proposes that *écriture féminine* is attentive to rhythm, making ‘the text gasp’, forming it ‘out of suspenses and silences’, causing it to ‘lose its voice’ or rending it ‘with cries’.<sup>46</sup> Such writing creates a ‘superabundance’ of meaning by letting the ‘tongue try itself out’, so that the writing ‘never stops reverberating’.<sup>47</sup> Infusing written language with the voice, as Cixous does, stresses the sensory over the semantic qualities of the signifier. As such, *écriture féminine* does not ‘rush into meaning’ but finds itself ‘at the threshold of feeling’.<sup>48</sup> Feeling here is an ambiguous term, evoking both emotional impact and sensorial perception, and Cixous goes on to stress the tactility of the feminine text in which ‘touch passes through the ear’.<sup>49</sup> Writing with the ear, with attention to the materiality of the signifier, becomes a way of rendering the feminine Imaginary in writing and a strategy for challenging patriarchal law.

Cixous not only emphasises the sensory dimension of the word in her rhetoric on *écriture féminine*, she also produces it in her prose writing. In *Inside*, she uses various techniques that foreground the aural, pictorial and tactile dimensions of the signifier over its semantic qualities. This example from a dream sequence told by the narrator’s grandfather, composed of obscured, dead metaphors, is demonstrative:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid: p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 54. In the original French Cixous uses the verb *sentir*, which means to feel in an emotional sense or in regard to one’s health, to think or believe, and also to smell, invoking perceptual categories.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Non, non, pas de mots! pour l'amour du miel, non, était si heureux, tu ne te souviens pas, ma femme, ma lourde ma pêche, on était si heureux, si lencieux, si lents, on avait tous les temps.<sup>50</sup>

[No, no, not the words! for the love of honey, no, we were so happy, you don't remember, my wife, my heavy, my peach, we were so happy, so silencer, so slow, we had all the time.]

The gaps Cixous adds to the words *si lencieux* (silencer) and *si lents* (*si lent* is so slow, *silent* is silent) function as a reminder that words are notations of sounds that are strung together, invoking speech, and the sentence's use of alliteration (*silents / temps, heureux / si lencieux*) and rhythmic repetitions (*si*) have a similar effect. The word *si lencieux* is an example of Cixous's frequent use of homophony, the second fragment could also be heard as *l'en cieux*, in the skies or in heavens, which in this case ties sound and sight together since it is by visually altering the word that Cixous is able to let us hear it differently. The mistake in the stock expression *pour l'amour du ciel* (for the love of heaven), which becomes *pour l'amour du miel* (for the love of honey), highlights that language is a delicate operation, in which a single erroneous phoneme can wreak havoc, creating unintended outcomes. Cixous describes writing as a way to 'note down the music [...] of the body', which she achieves through such techniques: her writing is musicalised.<sup>51</sup> Diane Crowder, amongst others, has linked Cixous's frequent use of puns, wordplay, neologisms and respelling of words to her aim to insert the voice and the ear into writing.<sup>52</sup> In employing such formal techniques Cixous is able to invoke the bodily processes that produce words, the reverberations of the vocal folds that are articulated and shaped by the lips, tongue and larynx, as well as the processes by which the sounds of language are received as vibrations that resonate within the ear.

Cixous equates musicality in writing with feminist politics. She proposes that it is a method of putting sexual difference to work, explaining:

Sound is a difference, is it not? It is the rubbing of two notes between two drops of water, the breath between the note and the silence, the sound of thought. I think that one perceives sexual difference, one receives it and one enjoys it in the same manner: like relationships between notes coming from

<sup>50</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Dedans* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1986): p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> Diane Griffin Crowder, 'Amazons or Mothers? Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous and Theories of Women's Writing', *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 2 (1983): p. 126.

instruments that are different but that are in harmony, of course. Music is also a sexual difference.<sup>53</sup>

While musicality takes a primary position in her descriptions of *écriture féminine*, hearing is not the only sense Cixous invokes in her writing. She uses visual puns and exploits ‘the difference between orthography and spelling’, as Crowder points out.<sup>54</sup> Cixous draws attention to the visual space of the book and the written word by sculpting letters and blank spaces into pictorial arrangements on the page in *Inside*. The most overt example of this is that each section of *Inside* begins halfway down a page, which means that the individual sections are embraced by vast blank spaces. These blank spaces between segments communicate affectively through the purposeful absence of signifiers. Their meaning is multivalent: they might stand for the associative leaps the narrator takes, gaps in her memory, rapid movements across time and space or for the gap between the text and the reader that needs to be traversed in order for the reader to engage with the text. These blank spaces do not generate meaning through semantic means but through affective impact: what comes across is the materiality of space and sound, or rather their absence. Jenny Chamarette has identified that such visual gaps in Cixous’s writing slip ‘between materiality and metaphor’ which has the effect of ‘overflowing the signifying relationship of the written text’.<sup>55</sup> In employing signifiers in such a way, their visual and aural dimension come to the fore. Cixous foregrounds the material nature of the word and the space, and at the same time ensures that meaning proliferates and cannot settle.

In *ENCIRCLED*, I explored strategies for emphasising the materiality of the signifier. I began the research process with the goal of finding out what specific potentialities theatre might have with regard to materiality. I started by looking towards Cixous’s own suggestions on how to create *écriture féminine* in theatre. In ‘Aller à la mer’ Cixous proposes, in accordance with her notion that sound can be used in prose to create *écriture féminine*, that femininity in theatre can be expressed through ‘lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory’.<sup>56</sup> She explains that this means ‘learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them’.<sup>57</sup> Again, I do not think Cixous is suggesting that femininity can be created in theatre simply by privileging speech at the expense of the

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<sup>53</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> Crowder: p. 141.

<sup>55</sup> Chamarette: p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> Cixous, 1984: p. 547.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

image. Instead, I believe that she is calling for a theatre that functions outside the masculine specular order which designates differences as binarised and unchanging.

Cixous proposes that in order for theatre to be *écriture féminine*, it should produce ‘body-presence’ in which an outstretched hand ‘touches and transmits meaning’ so that there is ‘no need for plot and action’.<sup>58</sup> I understand Cixous’s suggestion, that feminine theatre creates body-presence rather than narrating a fable, as an indication that she believes, at the time of writing ‘Aller à la mer’ at least, that theatre is feminine when it emphasises the materiality of signifiers. Since Cixous’s contributions to theatre have always been as a playwright, she has never produced a kind of theatre that lives up to her descriptions in ‘Aller à la mer’. As such, *ENCIRCLED* aimed to go some way in trying out her suggestions.

In *ENCIRCLED* I aimed to stress the material dimension of signifiers in order to create affective impact rather than semantic sense, analogous to Cixous approach in *Inside*. I began my research process into the materiality of signifiers in theatre aware of the fact that, in contrast to writing in the Roman alphabet – which is primarily composed of vision (in the form of the grapheme) and sound (the represented phoneme) – theatre, from the outset, involves multiple materialities and multiple senses. As such, I anticipated that the material signifier in theatre might function differently than the material signifier in writing, and that Cixous’s emphasis on sound and vision in writing may fall short of the material signifier in theatre practice. The outcomes from the studio practice indeed indicate that Cixous’s discussion of the visual and the auditory at the expense of other senses does not do justice to the varied and multiple materialities involved in theatre.

This is exemplified by Josee’s movement sequences, for instance. I devised the movement scores with her, drawing on various sections of *Inside*. I started the devising process by giving her text excerpts and asking her to try to translate them into dance scores by herself. A recurring movement score we used was based on the following text:

Better to be a dog or a lizard [...]. Better to be dust, a dead cat, or a peach pit.  
[...] For the first time I envied the patience of things, the tininess of the speck  
of dust, the unfeeling flesh of fruit. [...] War, money, newspapers; [...] I heard

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

the rumblings of the world I would enter later on. [...] I had the right to rule my world created for my pleasure.<sup>59</sup>

Initially this process produced rather literal, gestural translations of the sentences. While we maintained this form in some cases (the movement score discussed in the next section is an example of this), in others, such as the movement score based on the above text excerpt, we worked on distorting the sequence by speeding it up or slowing it down. Through doing this, Josee was prompted to concentrate more on performing the movements than on their semantic meaning. This process transformed the hieroglyph-like gestural compositions into intense, repetitive movement sequences. The text quoted above, was turned into an eight-minute movement sequence in which Josee first contracted her body trying to become like ‘the tininess of the speck of dust’ and then began stroking the dusty floor. This grew into a fervently performed, exhausting movement score. Josee revelled in the dust, dropping herself on to the floor, collecting it, smearing herself in it, jumping up again, and dropping again. The stills from the performance shown below demonstrate the sequence (see: ‘Materiality Example 1’ on the DVD).



The effect I sought to create with Josee’s movement score was for the material reality of her body to exceed its destination as a signifier; the increasing effort of her performance, made manifest through her progressively heavy breathing, the smell of her sweat beginning to fill the small performance space and the sound of her body colliding with the floor, overrode the semantic meaning of her actions. Her body, moving in space, created reverberations that were transmitted to the audience: she left traces of sweat on the floor and the walls and the noise of her body slapping against objects dominated the aural sphere and drowned out the spoken text. All of this contributed to the sense that what was being

<sup>59</sup> Cixous, 1986: pp. 16 – 17.

transmitted was sensory data, composed in order to rouse the senses rather than relate information about a fable. As I try to indicate through my description, I found that the material intensity of Josee's performance could not be easily divided into discrete sensory regions, nor could the different senses be hierarchised.

While one might be tempted to propose that such multi-sensory materiality is particular to kinaesthetic performance modes, Victoria's voice-performance demonstrates the same outcomes. I worked with Victoria on presenting her lines in a way that emphasised the rhythm and texture of speech, alongside its semantic meaning. One strategy for doing this was to shift her lines that were spoken live, and text that had been previously recorded and was then played back (see: 'Materiality Example 2' on the DVD). The effect of this was that the difference between pitch and timbre in the live and recorded speech was emphasised. Although this example at first appears to be concerned with sound alone, its impact in performance demonstrates that materiality in theatre is multiple. The differences between the textures of Victoria's live voice and her voice played back accentuated the palpability of sound. Since the blackbox studio in which *ENCIRCLED* was performed is very small, and the speakers installed in it are powerful, the base tones of Victoria's recorded voice caused vibrations which could be experienced physically. Based on these findings, I propose that in theatre the material signifier stimulates many different regions of the sensorium: Josee's sweat could be both seen and smelled: the effect of her body colliding with objects was both audible and tangible (through the shockwaves it created); and Victoria's voice was both audible and palpable. Moreover, since all these sensory stimulants occurred simultaneously, the different layers could not be easily disentangled or experienced discretely.

Emphasising the materiality of the signifiers is a trait that Hans-Thies Lehmann regards as fundamental to postdramatic theatre. He proposes that postdramatic practices distinguish themselves primarily from dramatic theatre forms through the way they employ signifiers. He explains the difference between the two in regard to how they approach the performing body. In dramatic theatre the body is treated as a 'given',<sup>60</sup> and is disciplined into fulfilling its primary function as a signifier, which has led Martin Esslin to call the performer's body the iconic sign 'par excellence'.<sup>61</sup> Postdramatic theatre, in contrast, revels in 'overcoming the semantic body'.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, in postdramatic theatre, 'sensuality undermines sense'

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<sup>60</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p.162.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985): p. 56.

<sup>62</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 162.

and what is articulated is ‘energy’, not representations.<sup>63</sup> Lehmann’s description of postdramatic signs corresponds with the performance techniques I derived from Cixous’s novel, indicating a strong affinity between postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine*. If dramatic theatre minimises the specific energy and materiality of signifiers – in this example the body – keeping them caged in a semantic framework, then postdramatic modes lend themselves more readily to adapting the material, affective signifiers of *écriture féminine* that Cixous uses in *Inside*. Since, in postdramatic theatre, ‘the body’s visceral presence takes precedence over the logos’, it employs material signs - as Cixous also does in her *écriture féminine* - to challenge and subvert the logocentric order: postdramatic theatre might then be conceived as a realisation of the kind of theatre Cixous calls for in ‘Aller à la mer’.<sup>64</sup> By employing signifiers materially, stressing their sensory and affective dimensions, postdramatic theatre practices are able to circumvent the taxonomic logic that Cixous associates with the gaze.

My practical findings indicate that Cixous’s tendency to regard materiality as primarily visual and auditory cannot be simply translated to theatre. Since theatre always involves multiple materialities, which overlap or assail the sensorium simultaneously, the material sign in theatre needs to be re-conceived as multisensory. Moreover, while postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* both seek to involve senses that are typically marginalised from their respective art form – Cixous’s use of sound, postdramatic theatre’s emphasis on the multiplicity of sign systems – Cixous’s metaphorical description of feminine theatre as auditory, in fact sits somewhat awkwardly in theatre discourses. Lehmann, for instance, proposes that postdramatic theatre has a ‘visual dramaturgy’.<sup>65</sup> He explains that, by this, he does not mean theatre that is ‘exclusively visually organised’ but ‘one that is not subordinated to the text’.<sup>66</sup> Lehmann’s choice to favour the visual as a descriptor of how marginalised sensory zones take over in postdramatic practices might be motivated by the fact that, historically, the verbal sphere and the dramatic text dominated theatre discourse. Where Cixous sees the grip of logocentrism being loosened in and by the auditory sphere, Lehmann associates this quality with the visual.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Problematically, Lehmann’s pronunciations ignore that bodies exist within a raced and sexed matrix. I do not believe that postdramatic theatre overcomes or transcends racial and sexual markers. However, I would suggest that postdramatic theatre’s emphasis on energy creates the possibility of weakening the representational function of racial and sexual markers – a female body may no longer represent Woman, for example – by highlighting the irreducible singularity of every body.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid: p. 145.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid: p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

I believe that Cixous's emphasis on the relation between sound and sight in writing is at least in part, strategic, since she uses it to illustrate the mechanisms of binary thought in which one side of the pair, sound for instance, is repressed by the other, sight. By drawing a parallel between the pairing sound / sight with the feminine / masculine, Cixous demonstrates that binary structures not only pervade the realm of theoretical thought but also our sensorium. As a consequence, making space for the auditory in writing becomes a method for undoing the repression of the feminine. From this perspective the multi-sensory nature of theatre might afford *écriture féminine* the opportunity to go beyond a structure that is still dominated by binary pairings (albeit with transformed power relations), and move towards a structure in which multiple differences exist, figured as multiple sensory strata.

### 3. Synaesthetic Signifiers

Although Cixous's theoretical postulation often figures the materiality of writing in relation to a binary pairing of sight and sound, a number of scholars, as I discuss below, have suggested that her creative practice goes some way in creating multi-sensory experiences. While these discussions typically focus on the status of sound and vision in Cixous's writing, they often also include a third sense, touch. What is particularly appealing about these readings of Cixous's writing for my research project is that they detect a synaesthetic structure in Cixous's prose. Since theatre presents different materialities simultaneously, synaesthesia is a useful way for thinking about practising materiality in theatre. Before discussing synaesthesia in my practice-led research, I will elucidate the discourses on synaesthesia in Cixous's writing and their relevance to the politics of *écriture féminine*.

Clare Oboussier has been particularly rigorous in her analysis of synaesthesia in Cixous's writing. Citing Jakobsen's notion of poetic language, Oboussier proposes that Cixous employs writing in such a way that it 'touches [...] through the senses', which is consistent with the emphasis on materiality that I have argued for.<sup>67</sup> However, Oboussier further points out, that in synaesthetic writing 'sense categories overflow into each other',<sup>68</sup> showing that the 'partitioning of the sense is both artificial and constraining'.<sup>69</sup> This is

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<sup>67</sup> Claire Oboussier, 'Synaesthesia in Cixous and Barthes', in *Women and Representation*, ed. Diana Knight and Judith Still (Nottingham: WIF Publications, 1995): p. 117.

<sup>68</sup> Claire Oboussier, 'Barthes and Femininity: A Synaesthetic Writing', *Nottingham French Studies* 33 (1994): p. 92.

<sup>69</sup> Oboussier, 1995: 126.

evident in Cixous's use of blank spaces which she describes as 'silences', thus fusing sight and sound.<sup>70</sup> The 'eye listens' in Cixous's writing, as Oboussier puts it,<sup>71</sup> and Cixous believes that writing attentive to the musical dimension of the word uses sound and touch: it 'goes through the belly, through the entrails, through the chest'.<sup>72</sup> The pulse of sound travels through the body and touches it.

Emma Wilson identifies Cixous's fusion of different senses into synaesthetic writing as a political strategy.<sup>73</sup> The politics of Cixous's synaesthetic writing emerges from how the different senses have historically been treated in relation to knowledge and truth. Wilson quotes Michel Serres who proposes that:

Many philosophies refer to sight; few to hearing; fewer still place their trust in the tactile, or olfactory. Abstraction divides up the sentient body, eliminates taste, smell and touch, retains only sight and hearing, intuition and understanding.<sup>74</sup>

Wilson suggests that Cixous undoes the relationship between sight and scopic pleasure, wrestling it from its privileged place in Western culture and its relationship to patriarchal power by fusing it with less privileged senses such as touch. This entails re-thinking the division of the sentient body, putting it together anew with little regard for the traditional hierarchies.

I found that the two simultaneously performed scores in *ENCIRCLED* similarly functioned as a way of dehierarchising sensual perception. This was particularly manifest in the scene entitled US which adapted a fairy-tale like story from *Inside*. While all the other scenes paired scores developed from different excerpts from *Inside* – for example, Josee performed a movement sequence developed from one text excerpt, while Victoria spoke lines and performed actions developed from another – this scene is unique in so far as both performers' scores are based on one text excerpt (see: 'Synaesthesia Example' on DVD). The table below demonstrates the structure of the scene. The left hand column consists of

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<sup>70</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 66.

<sup>71</sup> Oboussier, 1995: p. 129.

<sup>72</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Emma Wilson, 'Identification and Melancholia : The Inner Cinema of Hélène Cixous,' *Paragraph* (1983): pp. 258 – 268.

<sup>74</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (I)*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Crowley (London, New York: Continuum, 2008): p. 26.

stills from Josee's movement score. These are paired with the relevant sentences from which they were devised that are shown in the column on the right.

	<p>This is a very old beast, she lives in the heart of the city.</p>
	<p>The bottom of her body looks like an enormous cow with withered tits.</p> <p>No one has ever seen the top of her body. All the men are afraid of the beast, though some have a morbid affection for her.</p>
	<p>What does she eat? If she's a beast what does she live on?</p> <p>What would a big cow camped in the city live on?</p>

Josee and I developed the movement sequence through devising gestures from each sentence and assembling these into a repetitive score. Meanwhile, I worked with Victoria on speaking the lines very deliberately and with appropriate pathos. In the performance they were delivered from a static place. This scene sprung from an interest in trying out whether the effect of combining a spoken text and a movement sequence developed from that text would be similar to how Cixous employs synaesthesia in her writing. I aimed to do this by separating two sensory dimensions, sound (the spoken text) and sight (the performed gestures), in order to provoke unexpected recombinations. To maximise the potential for this, I asked Josee to perform her movement score at a higher speed than Victoria spoke, so that the gestures did not align with the sentences from which they were devised.

Through doing this I became aware, as I emphasise in the previous section, that the different sensual regions cannot be easily separated in theatre from the outset. Josee's dance score, for instance, was not purely visual since her body created sounds while she moved, and Victoria's score was not purely auditory since she was visible on stage. Both performances impacted on a range of senses. I also found, however, that presenting the two separate scores simultaneously recreated the structure of synaesthesia. If synaesthesia is understood as a process in which senses spill over into each other, creating new connections between two previously separate categories, then the structure of the performance made the same happen between the two scores. The effect of this was not a neat synthesis between them, since each followed its own rhythm and logic. What developed instead was a *mise en scène* that, like *écriture féminine*, 'divides itself, pulls itself to pieces, dismembers itself', all the while 'proliferating'.<sup>75</sup>

Lehmann proposes that making meaning proliferate, by allowing the different systems that make up theatre to function according to their own logic, is a typical trait of postdramatic theatre. He also calls this method of employing signifiers synaesthetic, allowing another direct connection to be made to Cixous's formal strategies. He differentiates between synaesthetic, postdramatic signs, in which the different senses are not hierarchically organised, and synthetic methods of using theatre signs, which he regards as typical of dramatic theatre. The latter drives towards closure by trying to effect 'dramatic coherence' and by relying on 'comprehensive symbolic references'.<sup>76</sup> While total coherence and straight-forward symbolic denotation may have always been unattainable ideals, what differentiates postdramatic practices from dramatic practices is that they are no longer viewed as desirable, in fact synthesis is 'explicitly combated'.<sup>77</sup>

In '[renouncing] the long-incontestable criteria of unity and synthesis',<sup>78</sup> Lehmann proposes that postdramatic theatre breaks away from 'logocentrism' and, with it, 'structure, order and *telos*'.<sup>79</sup> The synaesthetic mode of signification in postdramatic theatre replaces the single logos that 'signifies a peculiar mixture of god, order, logic, causality, origin, father-image and word' with 'new visions of multiple logos'.<sup>80</sup> In postdramatic theatre

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<sup>75</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 84.

<sup>76</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 83.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid: p. 82.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> Lehmann, 1997: p. 56.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

synthesis is done away with in favour of heterogeneous connections that create individual moments of intense, sensory experience but which cannot be fused into a coherent unity. In as far as the synaesthetic form of signification in postdramatic theatre works against unity and singularity, increasing differences and de-centering the stage, it resonates with Cixous's procedures for creating *écriture féminine*. My practice suggests that the multi-sensory synaesthetic mode appears as a meeting point between *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre.

## The Hysteria of Postdramatic Theatre: Deappropriated Meaning

Through adapting *Inside*, I determined three ways in which *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre resemble each other with regard to how they use signifiers. Both *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre employ signifiers in ways that makes them vibrate; both emphasise the materiality of the signifier alongside, or even instead of, its semantic function; and both employ signifiers synaesthetically. Cixous uses these three techniques to feminist ends: specifically, to challenge the logocentric order and the notion that meaning is organised through binary oppositions upon which logocentrism is premised. This would suggest that postdramatic theatre might promote a similar politics to Cixous's writing. However, Cixous's politicisation of the signifier, which I suggest is related to her work on the hysteric, has not been uncontroversial.

Cixous discusses in detail how *écriture féminine* challenges logocentrism and unleashes femininity in *The Newly Born Woman*. She describes *écriture féminine* as a process for 'questioning (in) the between' which 'multiplies transformations by the thousands'.<sup>81</sup> *Écriture féminine* is both a signifying practice located in-between binary relations and a practice that effects the multiplication of spaces between opposed poles of meaning. In doing this it undoes the masculine economy of appropriation that she calls the Empire of the Selfsame (*L'Empire du Propre*) in which meaning is figured as singular and self-identical. She terms this process 'deappropriation'.

Brian Duren gives a useful reading of Cixous's neologism 'to deappropriate'. He explains that 'the *propre* is property (*propriété*), possession, the self (*mon propre*, my own), the generally accepted meaning of a word (*le sens propre*), that which defines or identifies

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<sup>81</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 86.

something' and it further 'designates the Hegelian dialectic of appropriation'.<sup>82</sup> The term *propre* also appears in the French original of what Cixous calls *The Empire of the Selfsame* (*L'Empire du Propre*). To depropriate, then, means to rid ourselves of propriety, to renounce appropriation and destabilise the proper relationship between signifier and signified. Cixous seeks to erode the *Empire of the Selfsame* because she views it as means to naturalise inequality since it values sameness over difference. She stresses that there is 'no place for the other' and for manifold, rather than dualistic, differences in the 'schema of recognition'.<sup>83</sup> *Écriture féminine* subverts the *Empire of the Selfsame* by replacing the organisation of meaning in binary structures with a form of signification in which the ability of the signifier to transform and become different from itself is magnified.

I suggest that, because postdramatic theatre treats signifiers in the same way, it has similar political effects. Since postdramatic theatre, like *écriture féminine*, undermines the dominance of the logos as a central organising principle of meaning, showing instead that meaning is constituted through a series of differences and intense percepts, it creates feminine effects. It resembles Cixous's method of practising *écriture féminine* in that it too depropriates meaning. The 'capacity' of the body mapped in a feminine way 'to deappropriate unselfishly'<sup>84</sup> is reflected in the way Cixous's writing and postdramatic theatre shift the signifier from the orderly context of the *Empire of the Selfsame* to a feminine, disorderly 'elsewhere'.<sup>85</sup> The meaning of the signifier is deappropriated in this shift and it escapes the grasp of the author.

I experienced this acutely throughout the practical research process. At first unnerving, but ultimately liberating, I came to see the process of deappropriating meaning as a nodal point at which the politics of postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine* intersect. However, the political efficacy of deappropriation is linked to the disagreement between feminists with regard to the usefulness of hysteria as a strategy for feminist politics. Diane Crowder explains that Cixous creates a 'surplus madness' in her writing, an 'overflowing verbal energy'<sup>86</sup> to 'release the feminine from the bond of phallographic language'.<sup>87</sup> Crowder's choice of words, which pathologise Cixous's writing technique, resonates with Cixous's

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<sup>82</sup> Brian Duren, 'Cixous's Exorbitant Texts,' *SubStance* 10, no. 3 (1981): p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*: pp. 39 - 40.

<sup>84</sup> Cixous, 1976: 889.

<sup>85</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> Crowder: p. 143.

<sup>87</sup> Crowder: p. 142.

early articulations on *écriture féminine* in which she proposes hysteria as a model for feminist resistance.

In *The Newly Born Woman* Cixous calls upon Dora, one of Freud's most famous hysteric patients, as an example of how the depropriation of meaning might 'explode' and 'turn [...] around' masculine discourse, which designates femininity and, by association, women as inferior to masculinity and men.<sup>88</sup> The hysteric body is afflicted by a wide array of symptoms that have never been fully described, as Christina von Braun points out. Von Braun divides the known hysteric symptoms into two types: those that produce 'an excess of body', such as 'attacks similar to epilepsy, cramps, choking fits, headaches, nausea, dizzy spells, phantom pregnancies'; and, those that diminish the body, such as 'frigidity, anaesthetisation of the skin, loss of vision, hearing and the sense of smell'.<sup>89</sup> Both, in the end, emphasise the body by either producing too much bodily experience or by 'calling attention to the body through its *absence*'.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Cixous sees the hysteric body as an author of 'body words'.<sup>91</sup> In Cixous's writing, the hysteric is figured as femininity that 'cannot be tamed' and who 'will write themselves against [...] men's grammar'.<sup>92</sup> Cixous's discussion of hysteria is premised on the notion that the hysteric symptom acts as an enigmatic signifier that speaks through the body of the patient. What grabs Cixous's attention, however, is not simply the signifier rendered fleshy but the havoc it wreaks on the theorems of psychoanalysts and philosophers. Freud was never able to solve the mystery of Dora – Cixous describes her as bombarding his 'mosaic statue' with her unreadable signifiers<sup>93</sup> – acknowledging that his account of the case can merely be fragmentary, as though Dora's symptoms had been transferred to his own psychoanalytical narrative.<sup>94</sup> The hysteric's propensity to explode

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<sup>88</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 887.

<sup>89</sup> Christina von Braun, *Nicht-Ich. Logik Lüge Libido* (Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik, 1985): pp. 28 – 29. Translation by the author.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 29.

<sup>91</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 95.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> He even goes as far as acknowledging the fragmentary nature of his study in its title. See: Sigmund Freud, 'Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', in *Standard Edition: Volume 7*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1975): pp. 1 – 122.

orderly, ‘proper’ systems erected by men is the ‘force’ that attracts Cixous and which she designates as feminine.<sup>95</sup>

I propose that Cixous’s *écriture féminine* can be regarded as hysteric with regard to how it treats signifiers. Martha Evans makes a compelling argument for this in relation to Cixous’s play text *Portrait of Dora* that dramatises Freud’s case study. In *Portrait of Dora* the ‘hysterical system’ renders meaning ambiguous ‘in the deeply etymological sense of the word: it literally *wanders around*’.<sup>96</sup> Just as the womb of the hysteric patient was once thought to wander around the body causing the symptoms of hysteria, to write from the vantage point of hysteria means to act as the ‘mistress’ of signifiers, to unsettle the system of proper relations between the signifier and the signified, causing meaning to wander.<sup>97</sup> The way Cixous employs signifiers in her prose writing, using various techniques to dislodge them from their proper context, equally causes meaning to hysterically wander around rather than settle. Since postdramatic theatre similarly dislodges signifiers from their proper place and depropriates their meaning, I suggest that this should be regarded as a ‘hystericisation’ of theatre.

Specifically, I see a continuity from Elin Diamond’s analysis of the relationship between theatrical realism and hysteria, to the hystericisation of theatre in the postdramatic mode. Diamond views theatrical realism to be deeply connected to hysteria as Henrik Ibsen’s many hysteric female characters demonstrate, for instance. However, in contrast to postdramatic theatre, realism is concerned with ‘deciphering the hysteric’s enigma’.<sup>98</sup> Realism is an attempt to assert the logocentric order by solving the mystery of the hysteric and assigning her symptoms their proper meaning. It roughly corresponds to Freud’s notion that producing an ‘intelligible, coherent, and unbroken’ account of her life is a step towards healing the hysteric.<sup>99</sup> Yet, as Diamond shows, in trying to appropriate the hysteric, realism is stretched to its limits, which causes realism to ‘[catch] her disease’.<sup>100</sup> I suggest that, with the emergence of postdramatic theatre, hysteria in theatre has stopped being the subject of theatrical representation but it has by no means disappeared: having

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<sup>95</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 156.

<sup>96</sup> Martha Evans, ‘Portrait of Dora: Freud’s Case History as Reviewed by Hélène Cixous’, *SubStance* 11, no. 3 (1982): p. 66.

<sup>97</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 886.

<sup>98</sup> Elin Diamond, ‘Realism and Hysteria: Towards a Feminist Mimesis’, *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): p. 60.

<sup>99</sup> Cited in: Robson: p. 37.

<sup>100</sup> Diamond, 1997: p. xiii.

ceased to be a plot element, represented by a character, it has now become the condition of signifying. Postdramatic theatre performs hysteria by depropriating the meaning of signifiers and causing meaning to wander around without settling.

*ENCIRCLED*, for example, was ‘hysterical’ in so far as it rendered meaning slippery throughout. This was particularly evident, I believe, in the synaesthetic form I used. Placing disconnected performance scores alongside each other generates not only a plethora of sensual percepts, but also an abundance of potential meaning. Meaning created through chiefly coincidental connections is unsettled and ambivalent. While I believe producing meaning in this way creates the possibility for ways of signifying outside of a static, binary framework, it also runs the danger of becoming entirely unintelligible. Although I second Lehmann’s contention that theatre can be meaningful through intense experiences and not only semantic sense, I am also concerned by the prospect of postdramatic theatre veering too close to arbitrariness. As I discuss in Chapter 5, while Cixous employs chance in the form of improvisation in her *écriture féminine* to work towards undoing taxonomic categories and moving towards new horizons of thought, I remain concerned that this can easily lead to a loss of political focus.

In so far as hysteria is a method for producing femininity, the hystericisation of theatre in the postdramatic mode might be welcomed by feminists. Lehmann’s idea of the politics of postdramatic theatre strongly resembles Cixous’s descriptions of the political efficacy of hysteria. Lehmann’s proposition that postdramatic theatre becomes political when it effects the ‘opening of the logo-centric procedure’, recalls Cixous’s comments on the feminine as a disruptive force that breaks open the organising structure of masculine discourse.<sup>101</sup> If postdramatic theatre ‘is political precisely to the degree in which it interrupts the categories of the political itself, deposing of them instead of betting on new laws’, then it participates in the hystericisation of discourse and is a depropriative, feminine strategy.<sup>102</sup>

However, given that Cixous’s writing on hysteria has caused much controversy, doubts might be raised with regard to the value of postdramatic theatre for feminist politics. Elaine Showalter cautions that ‘the Freudian vocabulary and the clinical history of hysteria have been so negative for women that there is no way to rehabilitate their terminology in a feminist critical context’.<sup>103</sup> Showalter’s comments indicate a difference of opinion

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<sup>101</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 179.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘On Hysterical Narrative’, *Narrative* 1, no. 1 (1993): p. 33.

between herself and Cixous over the effectiveness of reclaiming terms and literary figures. Reclaiming disempowering and oppressive tropes that have been used to denigrate women, and transforming them into powerful heralds of a feminine future is a typical strategy in Cixous's writing. She calls this *voler*, which in French means both to fly and to steal, in which the goal is 'to steal into language to make it fly', in the process reclaiming negatively marked positions.<sup>104</sup> The effectiveness of this strategy might vary from case to case, however the proposition that historically oppressive terms cannot be reclaimed is certainly challenged by the successful reclamation of the term queer, to take one example.

More importantly than criticising the choice of words, Toril Moi's critique of Cixous's use of hysteria centres on its effectivity and sustainability. While hysteria might represent a protest against patriarchal relations, Moi considers it highly inefficient since it does not suggest a collective movement, no 'way out'.<sup>105</sup> Like Catherine Clément, who problematises Cixous's enthusiasm for hysteria since the hysteric remains inside 'the net of the Imaginary in a tight grip' and the hysteric condition in consequence 'doesn't change the structures' that produce her,<sup>106</sup> Moi sees hysteria as a 'declaration of defeat' rather than a strategy of empowerment.<sup>107</sup> Since the hysteric is ultimately self-destructive, dismantling herself alongside the phallogocentric structures she rebels against, Cixous's hysteric runs the risk of ultimately folding back on herself, rendering feminine protest hopeless. While 'scrambling spatial order, disorienting it [...], breaking in, emptying structures, turning the selfsame, the proper upside down' sounds appealing due to its vitality and forcefulness, it is a surprisingly destructive view of the political efficacy of *écriture féminine* that Cixous paints.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, if the politics of postdramatic theatre are exhausted in and through their resistance to structure, if they are a temporary interruption of the logocentric order, they might only be of limited appeal to feminist politics since they do not establish a durable alternative to logocentrism.

Soon after first championing hysteria in 1976 Cixous begins to temper her enthusiasm for it. She admits that 'the great hysterics' are 'decapitated': they are purged of their voice both in a literal sense – aponia is a hysteric symptom to which Cixous draws particular

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<sup>104</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 96.

<sup>105</sup> Toril Moi, 'Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora,' *Feminist Review* no. 9 (1981): p. 67.

<sup>106</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 155.

<sup>107</sup> Moi, 1981: p. 67.

<sup>108</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 96.

attention – and metaphorically; their symptoms go unread, not understood even by themselves.<sup>109</sup> While Cixous still regards hysteria as a necessary first step towards the liberation of femininity from the bounds of phallogentrism, she concludes that ‘woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance’, and makes clear that remaining in a state of hysteria is undesirable.<sup>110</sup> Cixous’s hysteric writing similarly is in danger of remaining in a state of decapitated silence - full of expression but unheard - because it erodes structures of meaning to such an extent that it is rendered meaningless. In much the same way, Lehmann’s emphasis on the ‘retreat of signification’,<sup>111</sup> in which signifiers are apparently experienced as ‘mute’<sup>112</sup> and ‘redundant’, associates postdramatic theatre with hysteric aphonia.<sup>113</sup> However, following Cixous’s preoccupation with hysteria between 1973 and 1976, during which time she published *The Newly Born Woman*, and the novel *Portrait du Soleil* on which *Portrait of Dora* is based, she drops the term and in its stead begins to develop a notion of poetic language which emphasises the generative and relational aspects of *écriture féminine* over the resistant and deconstructing ones.

While developing *ENCIRCLED*, I noticed that the tension between hysterical deconstructing of meaning and creating the potential for generating meaning in new ways in Cixous’s prose infected my practice. The emphasis I placed on the materiality of signifiers rather than their meaning, meant that the performance could be potentially dismissed as unpolitical. On the other hand, concentrating on materiality also made room for unexpected meaning and poetic plurality which is very much in the spirit of *écriture féminine*. Since this tension remained unsolved through my reflection on the performance, I decided to explore it further in my second practice-as-research performance. My decision to work on this was further motivated by my belief that the same tension is evident in Lehmann’s writing on postdramatic theatre and politics. At times he seems to be suggesting that the politics of the postdramatic are entirely destructive: they destroy ‘the categories of the political’ without creating anything new.<sup>114</sup> In this formulation postdramatic politics are restricted to performing the hysteric loss of voice and meaning; specifically, Lehmann

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<sup>109</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 49.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 82. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>112</sup> Lehmann, 2011: p. 384. Translation by the author.

<sup>113</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 156.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid: p. 179.

imagines the politics of postdramatic theatre as a negative, hysteric politics. It would then seem that postdramatic theatre might suffer from the limits of hysteria.

However, in contrast to this he also suggests that postdramatic theatre might be a 'cultivation of affects', with emotions that are not structured by logocentrism.<sup>115</sup> Put this way postdramatic theatre might be conceived as a space beyond the dominion of the phallus and the logos in which a new, possibly feminine, politics can occur. I developed my second practice-as-research project as a means to explore whether Cixous's suggestions towards the politics of *écriture féminine* might shed light on the political potential of postdramatic theatre beyond destruction and deconstructing.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid: p. 186.

## Chapter 5

### The Femininity of Form: *fire into song*

Why poems, what songs, when women are being silenced? How can there be poems when political needs come first and are urgent? [...] How can there be a dynamic between fight and pleasure? An alliance between acting and singing? We need a poetic practice within / as a political practice. We must politicise poetry.

Hélène Cixous, 'Poetry and/or Politics'<sup>1</sup>

In 'Poetry and/or Politics' Hélène Cixous proposes that feminist politics and a feminine, poetic approach to the world can be joined in a feminist poetic praxis. Instead of understanding artistic goals and political action as separate, even irreconcilable, agendas, she advocates that it is 'impossible to be political in an alive way without a rapport to a poetic approach'.<sup>2</sup> She identifies what she calls the poetic approach as a 'praxis of unveiling',<sup>3</sup> based on an economy of approaching that avoids inserting phenomena into predefined and immobile taxonomic categories. A poetic approach conceives of the phenomena of the world as constantly transforming and becoming; they are different from each other and, over time, from themselves. The poetic approach preserves and encourages difference, rather than assimilating and appropriating it.

Practising this poetic approach in prose writing is a political action since it seeks to transform the binary discursive structures that create taxonomy and that designate one side of a binary pair as inferior to the other – positioning femininity as inferior to masculinity for instance. The system of binary relations is replaced with a vision of an open, mobile structure in which differences are multiple and evolving. Since this non-logocentric structure is founded upon the image of the feminine imaginary body that Cixous describes as a 'moving, limitless changing ensemble', lacking 'principle parts', a poetic approach entails reappraising psychosexual femininity as active rather than inert, culturally and politically relevant rather than negligible, and full rather than void.<sup>4</sup> Cixous insists that putting a feminine poetic into practice means rethinking the way books are composed. She

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous, 1977: p. 7. Translation by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 889.

proposes that *écriture féminine* does not create immobile ‘word-objects’, rather that it is realised by ‘creating paths, movements’ in writing.<sup>5</sup>

Through my first practice-as-research performance I identified that both postdramatic theatre and Cixous’s *écriture féminine* hystericise signification by dislodging the signifier from binary relations, as a consequence unsettling and depropriating meaning, setting it to wander around. I found that hystericisation is of limited appeal to feminist politics since, like the real-life hysterics, it revolts against logocentric, patriarchal structures, without suggesting sustainable alternatives. In my second practice-as-research performance, I therefore aimed to explore whether Cixous’s *écriture féminine* also enables another politics, one which does not run the risk of folding back on itself. As a consequence I sought to experiment with staging methods for realising this poetic approach in theatre. My second practice-as-research performance responded to a set of practical research questions that I had developed from reflecting on the one preceding it:

- ◆ How can the strategies that Cixous uses to create a feminist, poetic praxis in prose be utilised for the stage?
- ◆ Can I use Cixous’s poetic approach to develop a more generative politics of *écriture féminine* in theatre than my previous performance suggests?
- ◆ How do the methods I am developing relate to postdramatic practices? Do they indicate that it is possible to conceive of a politics of postdramatic theatre beyond hysteria?

The outcome of my exploration of these questions was a performance entitled *fire into song* that was loosely based on Cixous’s novel *The Book of Promethea*, which exemplifies a number of strategies that are central to her poetic method.

Through *fire into song*, I shifted my focus from hysteria to what Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers call Cixous’s ‘poetic theory’.<sup>6</sup> This shift is consistent with a development in Cixous’s writing that Susan Rubin Suleiman identifies. Suleiman proposes that Cixous’s early work tends towards ‘a mode of ironic feminist polemic’ that culminates and exhausts itself in the figure of the hysteric whose symptoms wreak havoc on logocentrism, while Cixous’s writing after she gives up on the figure of the hysteric prefers a ‘mode of lyrical

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<sup>5</sup> Cixous, 1977: p. 20. Translation by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Blyth and Sellers: pp. 67 - 81.

feminine celebration'.<sup>7</sup> I do not suggest that this development in Cixous's writing is antithetical to her earlier work on hysteria, rather I conceive of it as a modification and maturing of her work in relation to its political efficacy. Through my practice, I have come to view Cixous's poetic approach to writing as a method that might suggest a more generative and far-reaching political strategy. I, therefore, suggest that Cixous's practice of creating *écriture féminine* based on a poetic approach is more appealing to contemporary feminist politics, as I discuss in the third section of this chapter. Through it Cixous establishes a durable alternative to logocentrism and binarised thought, rather than merely resisting and temporarily dismantling it.

*The Book of Promethea* thematises one of the elemental aspects of Cixous's notion of the poetic approach: transformation. Sellers and Blyth stress the importance of transformation to Cixous's thought in relation to how her writing diverges from 'standard philosophical discourse'.<sup>8</sup> They explain that Cixous employs a poetic form in order to avoid immobilising, incorporating and appropriating the multi-faceted phenomena of the world. Cixous critiques philosophical discourse for functioning in the name of the Empire of Selfsame and advancing phallogentrism by creating systems that designate disparate beings as the same, as a consequence 'destroying the strange'.<sup>9</sup> She links the compulsion to designate things in taxonomic categories with a will to power, proposing that philosophy is an 'accomplice to power', used by the 'tyrants of the concept' to instil fear in those seeking the 'as-yet-unthought'.<sup>10</sup> The poetic impetus is kept at bay by what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, which 'bears down on every attempt to speak the feminine'.<sup>11</sup> Poetic discourse, in contrast, preserves the radical alterity of things, it creates a space for 'the unpredictability and freedom of that which is living', and as such it makes room for the feminine to appear uncensored.<sup>12</sup> Approaching the world poetically means transforming

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Writing Past the Wall of the Passion According to H.C.', in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Hélène Cixous (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1991): p. xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* In Lacan's psychoanalytic paradigm the Symbolic Order encompasses the intersubjective and social realm that is created through the exchange of signifiers. Lacan regards the Symbolic to be regulated by masculinity and the (symbolic) father, who intervenes in the mother-child dyad, propelling the child towards the exterior, social world, in particular. In so far as the Symbolic represses the mother's body, it can be seen to partake in the repression of femininity, and since the Symbolic 'binds and orientates' imaginary effects, it works against poetic plurality. See: Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006): pp. 6 – 50.

<sup>12</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 68.

one's view of the world from one composed of 'immobile objects', which philosophers assume and discursively enforce, to a view that acknowledges and nurtures movement, change and transformation.<sup>13</sup> Effectively, Cixous proposes that *écriture féminine* presupposes a different ontology from theoretical discourse, which is premised on categorisation. She views being as a process. Since the notion of being as processual is central to *écriture féminine*, I sought to develop staging methods that would present ontology in this way in theatre. To do this, I examined the techniques Cixous uses in *The Book of Promethea* to depict being as a process.

In *The Book of Promethea* Cixous presents what a poetic approach to life might look like. Sellers describes Cixous's novel as a 'blaze of creation',<sup>14</sup> in which the Prometheus myth is 'continually created afresh'.<sup>15</sup> As the novel's title announces, the myth of Prometheus is a prominent intertext. In mythology Prometheus is a titan who shaped humankind from clay and, upon discovering that his creation was unable to defend and provide for itself, stole fire from the gods for which he was bound to Mount Caucasus and tortured by an eagle that tore out his ever re-growing liver day after day. While *The Book of Promethea* does not re-narrate the myth in an overt manner, many of its themes are woven into the text through metaphors. Fire, the eagle and creation are continually invoked throughout the text and the novel's title character is imagined as a feminine and female creative force, a feminine Prometheus. Cixous's book is concerned with the relationship between a narrator who splits herself into two (into the narrator of the text who speaks in the first person singular and H, a subject in the narrative) and a woman named Promethea. The narrator reflects upon her love for Promethea, whom Morag Shiach has identified as an 'exemplary' embodiment of the 'revolutionary changes' that *écriture féminine* heralds.<sup>16</sup> By casting Prometheus as a woman, Cixous associates creative innovation with femininity, explicitly placing their relationship at the heart of her novel. The strong link Cixous establishes between femininity and poetic creation was one of the reasons I chose to explore the methods of *The Book of Promethea* in theatre practice.

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<sup>13</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva*, ed. Verena Conley Andermatt, trans. Verena Andermatt Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001): p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Shiach, 1991: p. 99.

Cixous uses adaptation as a method for showing being as processual in *The Book of Promethea*. While the Prometheus myth writes the female body and the mother out of the process of creation by imagining that humankind was shaped from clay, *The Book of Promethea* displaces the notion of originary creation. Creation and innovation are figured as continual becomings in the novel, not as singular, discrete acts. Cixous views a resistance to positing a singular origin as characteristic of *écriture féminine*. She states that ‘the origin is a masculine myth’ that expresses the desire to immobilise, appropriate and submit things to phallogocentric dominion.<sup>17</sup> It imposes a static view of ontology. Adapting familiar mythological material becomes a political strategy aimed at transforming our current culture in Cixous’s hands. Betsy Wing, for example, suggests that through citing familiar cultural material Cixous is able to project her, presumably feminine, ‘desires into culture’.<sup>18</sup>

Cixous practises *écriture féminine* by employing repetition to effect difference and change. She uses repetition on a number of levels including: the thematic content, exemplified by her rewriting of the Prometheus myth; the way she employs signifiers; and, how she approaches structure. I was particularly struck by Cixous’s strategy of employing repetition to create transformation in *The Book of Promethea* since it resonates with Judith Butler’s feminist theory.<sup>19</sup> Cixous is keenly aware of the fact that language structures thought and being: so the narrator of *Promethea* at one point comes to realise that she had ‘fallen under the influence of a metaphor with very evil powers’.<sup>20</sup> Like Cixous, Butler does not believe that language is a neutral, exterior medium through which an agent self is expressed and from which one is able to ‘glean a reflection of that self’.<sup>21</sup> Instead, she suggests that the rules and practices of language precede and regulate the self. Although questioning traditional notions of agency, Butler does not abolish all hope for agency and agential actions. Influenced by Derrida, Butler proposes that language should be regarded as an ‘open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested’.<sup>22</sup> Since

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<sup>17</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Betsy Wing, ‘A Translator’s Imaginary Choices,’ in *The Book of Promethea*, ed. Hélène Cixous (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): p. xiii.

<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Butler’s thinking lies in close proximity to theatre and performance. Although Butler is careful to distinguish between ‘acting in the theatrical sense’ and the notion of ‘acts’ in philosophy, she acknowledges that these retain ‘associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting’. See: Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): p. 519.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in: Shiach, 1991: p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Butler, 1990: p 196.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*: p. 198.

intelligibility is ensured, but also challenged, through repetition, or what Derrida calls iterability,<sup>23</sup> Butler proposes that ‘agency [...] is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition’.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that increasing those instances in which repetition might fail, in which it produces variations and unexpected results, can be a powerful political strategy.

This, I believe, lies at the heart of Cixous’s poetic method and her politics. In contrast to Butler, who produces linear philosophical discourse and provides a logical structure that enables the recognition of such instances, Cixous’s theorised, political writing performs ‘oppositional gestures’ by exploiting the transformative potential of repetition.<sup>25</sup> Framed through Butler’s theoretical formulations, the political impetus behind Cixous’s poetic method comes to the fore. It also reveals the way Cixous’s poetic writing is a method of both deconstruction and regeneration. Just as Butler hopes that, through deconstruction terms such as woman might ‘stand a chance of being opened up, [...] of coming to signify in ways that none of us can predict in advance’, Cixous employs a deconstructive approach to formal structures in order to open her writing up to the unexpected and the unreckonable.<sup>26</sup> This generative aspect of her poetic writing differentiates *The Book of Promethea* from her earlier work on hysteria.

In *fire into song* I explored how Cixous’s interplay between repetition and transformation - the latency of transformation in repetition - in the formal structure of her novel might be recreated in theatre. Doing this prompted me to turn my attention from individual signifiers to composition and dramaturgy. Just as the signifier is in constant movement in Cixous’s writing, she proposes, that in *écriture féminine*, the text is composed in such a way that it becomes ‘endless, without end, there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop’.<sup>27</sup> By this she means that *écriture féminine* aims not to provide closure or offer itself up to complete intelligibility, instead it is more interested in the ‘send-off’, in enabling beginnings rather than arriving at conclusions.<sup>28</sup> While masculine texts are ‘architectural’, in Cixous’s words,<sup>29</sup> they provide the reader with an intelligible, mapped terrain to explore, so that the reader does not need

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<sup>23</sup> He develops this idea in: ‘Signature Event Context,’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982): pp. 307 – 330.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, 1990: p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Cixous, 2008: p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, 1993: p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Cixous, 1977: p. 79. Translation by the author.

to fear becoming lost, the feminine text, in contrast, ‘takes the metaphorical form of wandering’ that manifests as a text that is unpredictable and ‘unforeseeable’.<sup>30</sup> Due to its lack of architectural structure, *écriture féminine* makes it impossible for the author or the reader to arrest the meaning of the text: every renewed, repeated reading brings forth new meanings and the reader is sent-off in a new direction. In this way, *écriture féminine* effects transformation and change. In response to Cixous’s suggestion that *écriture féminine* is endless I set myself the impossible task of creating a performance that has no end. Since theatre, in contrast to the book, is a time-based medium that is fleeting and ephemeral, the task was unachievable in a literal sense but its promise and possibilities prompted me to work through the relationship between composition and time for creating *écriture féminine* in my theatre practice which I discuss in detail in the third section of this chapter.

## **‘A chain of creation, continuation, continuity’: Oceanic Dramaturgy**

To develop theatrical strategies equivalent to what Cixous calls poetic writing, I considered both her fiction writing, with *The Book of Promethea* as the main example, and her theoretical formulations on the topic. In a series of lectures given in 1990, seven years after the publication of *The Book of Promethea*, and published as *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, Cixous explains that she understands poetic writing to be a method for reaching towards the unknown. It is an attempt to ‘think the unthinkable’ by writing ‘what you cannot know before you have written’.<sup>31</sup> In her emphasis on writing as a process for touching on the unknown, not in order to submit it to the categories and concepts of philosophers but in order to preserve its mysteries, she has, as Sellers and Blyth point out, to keep her writing ‘open and responsive to the unexpected’.<sup>32</sup> While attempting to think the unthinkable is, as the two authors caution, ‘in all probability unachievable’, Cixous is less invested in arriving at a final destination and rather more keen to set in motion a process of brushing against the unknown and unthinkable.<sup>33</sup> Poetic writing is ‘not arriving’, Cixous explains.<sup>34</sup> Her emphasis on the creative process, rather than its outcomes, and the fact that she values the unexpected and the unknown, make *écriture féminine* take on an

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<sup>30</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Cixous, 1994: p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid: p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> Cixous, 1994: p. 65.

improvisational quality. In fact, the Latin adjective *imprōvīsus*, from which improvisation derives, means ‘unforeseen’ or ‘unexpected’. Improvisation, in terms of Cixous’s writing, suggests allowing the present time of creation to mark the text. She does this for instance by using her dream journals as source material for her writing as well as her many notebooks in which she captures the ‘sudden flash of metaphor’.<sup>35</sup> The goal in doing this is to write in the present and commit ‘the eternity of the instant’ to the page.<sup>36</sup> Cixous’s method of working on the present in writing is evident in *The Book of Promethea* and, perhaps surprisingly, is related to her ideas on repetition. Since the techniques she uses in this novel prompted my decisions in *fire into song*, I will discuss how Cixous relates writing and the present before discussing my practice.

Several authors have pointed out that *The Book of Promethea* is concerned with writing in the present. Susan Sellers, for instance, proposes that ‘writing the present reality of Promethea’ is a ‘key concern’ of the novel.<sup>37</sup> It is in this respect, by writing ‘as presently as possible’,<sup>38</sup> that Cixous most successfully translates her aim to preserve difference through a poetic approach to writing, rather than submitting it to the categories of philosophy. Liedeke Plate explains that Cixous is able to make the present moment of writing tangible to the reader by introducing the level of *composition time* into the narration.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, reflections on the process of composing are woven into the text throughout: ‘In this book (expanding and growing richer as I sit here stewing), which is Promethea’s book, a young, vigorous book is growing, one I don’t know how to write’.<sup>40</sup> The narrator cautions the reader that ‘Promethea’s book is a rough draft’ which the narrator ‘will not touch’ because ‘it is pure blood’, so fresh that ‘sometimes [...] raw blood spurts out’.<sup>41</sup> Through this approach Cixous lays bare her creative process, gesturing towards the present moment in which the text was composed, reminding the reader of the author’s past present.

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<sup>35</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Magnetizing the World: An Interview with Hélène Cixous,’ in *The Writing Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Susan Sellers (New York, London: Continuum, 2004): p. 116.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in: Blyth and Sellers: p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Sellers, 1996: p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Hélène Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*, trans. Betsy Wing (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): p. 92.

<sup>39</sup> Liedeke Plate, ‘“I Come from a Woman”: Writing, Gender, and Authorship in Hélène Cixous’s *The Book of Promethea*,’ *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 26, no. 2 (1996): p. 168.

<sup>40</sup> Cixous, 1991 (c): p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*: p. 54.

The impression of writing in the present is further supported by Cixous's choice to compose the novel as two notebooks with a reflective text preceding them. Mairéad Hanrahan has persuasively argued that the book 'borders on the diary', since 'the diary is a form of writing which borders on the present'.<sup>42</sup> At first the notebooks are composed of rough and ready notes, ostensibly jotted down in the spur of a moment. When the writing draws closest to the format of a diary, the narrator recounts past events or addresses Promethea directly, apparently formulating thoughts as she goes along. Although the act of writing in *The Book of Promethea* seems to skirt the present moment it cannot catch up with it. Cixous is keenly aware that it is impossible to write fully in the present moment and to capture it: 'one cannot write in the present because one writes after the present', she concedes.<sup>43</sup> Inescapably, Plate explains, writing 'inserts itself between the subject and her narrator in many ways'.<sup>44</sup> Writing Promethea becomes an exercise in trying, futilely, to catch up with the present moment, tracing the passing of time. The second notebook, apparently composed in the present, reflects on the first one and, as Hanrahan highlights, 'passages commenting on the *cahiers* [notebooks] figure right up to the end of the text'.<sup>45</sup> Destroying the appearance of writing in the present, the narrator informs the reader that she has been copying the notebooks and editing them while doing so. In some instances she has had to copy her notes because they have been destroyed by 'tears' that 'washed out the first draft'.<sup>46</sup> Like writing that is annihilated by the narrator's tears, the book reflects on how the present moment slips from the author's grasp and proposes that the present moment, now past, can only be approached through repetition, by starting over again and again.

The author can, then, never arrest the present moment; she can never arrive at it. What she can do, however, is set out on a process of constant creation and re-creation, trying to draw ever closer to the lost present. And it is at this point that poetic writing and *écriture féminine* intersect. Just as the 'poetic' is 'not stoppable' – like life, and unlike philosophy, that 'entails a discontinuity, a cut' there is 'continuity'<sup>47</sup> – *écriture féminine* is composed in such a way that it is 'endless', Cixous claims.<sup>48</sup> She explains what she means by this

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<sup>42</sup> Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Cixous's *Le Livre de Promethea*: A Diary in an Other Form,' *French Studies* LV, no. 2 (2001): p. 202.

<sup>43</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 78.

<sup>44</sup> Plate: p. 168.

<sup>45</sup> Hanrahan, 2001: p. 200.

<sup>46</sup> Cixous, 1991 (c): p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Cixous, 1997: p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 53.

assertion: a ‘feminine text goes on and on and at a certain point the volume comes to an end but the writing continues’; feminine texts are ‘texts that work on the beginning’.<sup>49</sup> In emphasising the beginning and continuity of creation, Cixous is advocating a notion of writing that never exhausts itself, that never becomes fully present and known. The narrator makes similar comments with regard to the formal structure of *The Book of Promethea*. Since it is ‘a book of now’ it asks the reader to read ‘for no reason’ to impart on a beginning ‘without asking: ‘Then what? What happened at the end? Because there is no ending’.<sup>50</sup> Poetically approaching the world is a labour of love, delighting in the failure to fully grasp the present and the presence of what it seeks to represent. The narrator rejoices in the fact that Promethea is ‘untranslatable’.<sup>51</sup> Because Promethea is in constant movement – she ‘races on in an out-of-breath language’ – the narrator’s writing is unable to catch up with her and pin her down.<sup>52</sup> Promethea embodies the principle of the poetic: she is in constant flux and transformation. She inspires the narrator incessantly to invent new words and metaphors, constantly to produce and develop her writing just as the Promethea myth is continuously changing.

### **Exploring a Feminine Dramaturgy: *fire into song***

Rather than adapting the narrative of *The Book of Promethea*, I sought to develop an approach to dramaturgical form that is equivalent to Cixous’s method for attempting to write in the present. Since my reading of *The Book of Promethea* suggested that the interplay between repetition and transformation is at the heart of Cixous’s poetic method, and that repetition has been given a particularly prominent place in theatre scholarship, I decided to develop a performance that used repetition as a means to create the unexpected. Since repetition plays out over time, I concentrated on dramaturgy and composition in *fire into song* and my reflection on the performance centres on these aspects. To create the performance, I used similar techniques to the ones I developed in *ENCIRCLED*. For example, I worked on emphasising the material dimension of the signifier alongside its potential semantic meaning with the performers, and I created a synaesthetic structure, similar to the one I had used in *ENCIRCLED*, by developing independent performance scores with my collaborators.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, 1991 (c): p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid: p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The resulting laboratory performance, entitled *fire into song*, was shown on 18 and 19 September 2012 at the Arches Theatre during the Arches Live Festival. It was performed by Victoria Beesley, an actor, and Vanessa Coffey, a dancer and actor. Further collaborators included sonic artist Joshua Payne, poet Calum Rodger, coder Sebastian Charles (who programmed a poetry generator as devised by Calum) and lighting designer Tamsyn Mackay. The stage was a floor-level circle surrounded by straw mats and chairs for the 30 spectators to sit on. The stage was strewn with various symbols of creation and fertility as well as discarded objects from the rehearsal process: large plastic flowers, a golden rope, a blue rope, a piece of blue material, flower bulbs, apples, artificial moss, glittering stars, two white feather boas, a bird mask and boiled eggs. On the chairs and mats there were slips of paper with different versions of the Prometheus myth by authors including Plato, Pseudo-Hygnius and Kafka.



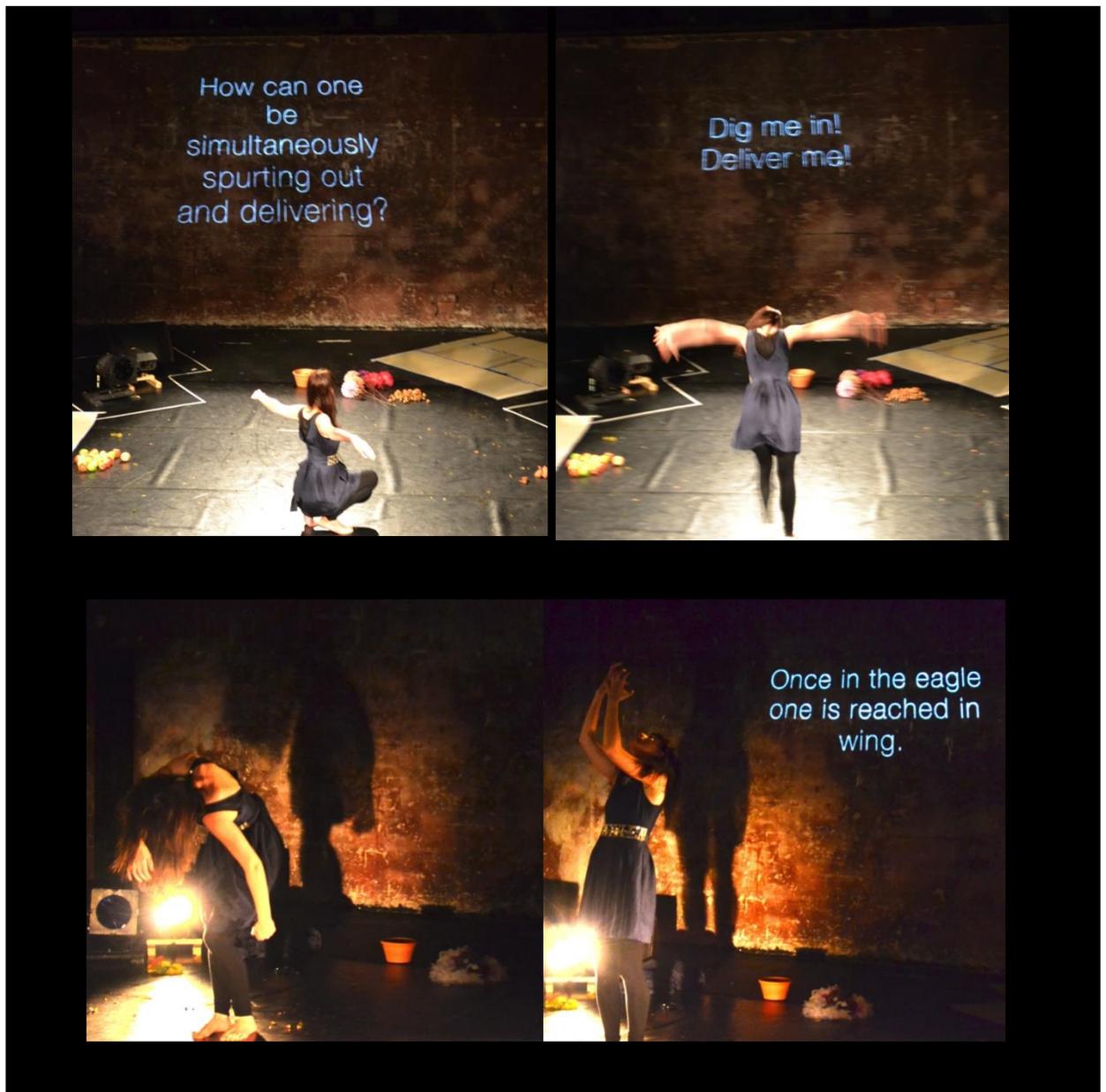
At the heart of the performance was a 20-minute improvised sequence. I will focus on this in my discussion since it demonstrates most clearly how I developed a feminine, poetic approach to dramaturgy. This section of the performance was embraced by a non-improvised performance score: *fire into song* began with a soundscape composed of the spectator's voices reading out sentences, as they entered the space. This was followed by a recitation of a poem by Ted Hughes based on Ovid's narration of the creation of the world in his *Metamorphoses* that tells of the development of the world from chaos, culminating in the creation of humankind by Prometheus. Spoken by Victoria, while Vanessa tidied and partitioned the objects on the stage to Joshua's live-mixed soundtrack of water gushing,

rain, the shifting of tectonic plates and the crackling of fire, this section served to introduce the audience to the mythical intertext of the performance. Following the section that I have selected as the focus of my discussion, the two performers involved the audience in a word association game for which the spectators were rewarded with a female plasticine figure to take away with them.

I adapted Cixous's poetic writing method in *The Book of Promethea* by introducing an element of improvisation at the heart of the performance. My reasoning for this was twofold: on the one hand, improvisation is a strategy for creating in the present moment, which is analogous to Cixous's attempt to write in the present; and, on the other, using improvisation is a gesture towards letting the unknown enter the stage, which Cixous views as fundamental to poetic writing. The improvisation served to combine the performances of a number of separate artists, controlling different sign systems, which melded into a single but fragmented *mise en scène*. The sequence was based on 14 sentences from *The Book of Promethea*, which I selected together with Vanessa. There was no rigorous selection method. The sentences chosen merely reflected the conversations Vanessa and I had in the rehearsal room about Cixous's novel and included:

- ◆ How can one be simultaneously inside and outside?
- ◆ Deliver me. Taste me. Swallow me. Absorb me.
- ◆ Don't burn me too fast! I want to taste every spark.
- ◆ A devourable devouring human being.
- ◆ I shall tear you apart. I shall make your blood spurt out.
- ◆ There is a small external organ on my body where I hurt.
- ◆ Be the eagle! Dig in!
- ◆ You can cut me up into bits and eat me.
- ◆ Take me into your fire and consume me.
- ◆ I, the arrow, she the archer.
- ◆ A mutual invasion.
- ◆ Impregnate me! Melt me!
- ◆ Singing, burning, abolishing, liquidating, flowing, gushing.
- ◆ Once in the fire one is bathed in sweetness.

The sentences formed the basis for the creations of the various artists involved in the improvised sequence. Vanessa and I developed a set of movements based on these. The exact sequence of movements was improvised each night and Vanessa could spontaneously add new ones. There were four basic states that structured the movements overall, which we referred to as ‘bird’, ‘flesh’, ‘attack’ and ‘fire’. We extracted these states from our shared reading of how Cixous’s novel uses tropes from the Prometheus myth, since we wanted the gestural material to echo the mythical intertext. Each state contained a number of movements that were strongly associated with it, but any one movement could be used in any state. This series of stills shows some of gestures we developed (a high-quality version of the sequence filmed during rehearsals is available on the DVD, see: ‘Oceanic Dramaturgy Example’).





Calum and Sebastian developed a poetry generator based on the sentences from *The Book of Promethea*.<sup>53</sup> The generator retained the basic sentence structures while randomising verbs, nouns and adjectives. The newly generated sentences were projected onto a wall behind Vanessa. During the performance Calum was able to control the speed at which new sentences were generated and projected. Examples of the kind of poetry that was generated are:

- ◆ A miraculous feeling word.
- ◆ I, the body, she the flight.
- ◆ Be the invasion! Grasp!
- ◆ You can write me into waters and liquidate me.
- ◆ How can one be tearing apart and gushing?

Two artists shaped the aural dimension of the performance. Victoria spoke the projected sentences into a microphone. She used her voice to emphasise the materiality of sounds rather than the semantic meaning of the words. Varying pitch, speed, volume and timbre, she rendered the sentences into a musical texture. Joshua subsequently used Victoria's voice, captured by the microphone, to create a live soundscape that consisted of sentence fragments echoed and superimposed onto each other, which he then sent to different

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<sup>53</sup> The idea for the poetry generator developed from my collaboration with Calum. Calum's interest in digital poetics lead us to adopt a computerised approach while searching for methods for creating a text that would include an element of coincidence, similarly to Vanessa's dance.

speakers in the room, creating a surround sound. In addition to Victoria's voice he also used a pre-recorded sound effect that resembled wings beating the air.

The final element of the improvisation was the lighting design by Tamsyn. The piece was lit in increasingly bold colours: blue, red and purple. While the lighting design in this section was operated by hand, rather than being pre-programmed, which is unusual, there was less room for improvisation since Tamsyn followed a rehearsed lighting score. This was largely due to limited access to lighting equipment and Tamsyn's busy work schedule, which precluded her from rehearsing prior to production week. None of the artists improvising on the night were instructed to react to any one particular element, with the intention that no single element would lead the improvisation. Instead, I encouraged the improviser to be responsive to the rhythm developing between them while also feeling free to break away from it or change it. There was no set cue to end the sequence. However, we had rehearsed it to 20 minutes and each time the piece was performed, the sequence was about that length.

Similar to the way in which Cixous tries to herald the unknown through repeatedly writing and re-writing, continually repeating and creating, the improvised section of *fire into song* was based on the tension between repetition and creation. It made use of repetition in various ways: the limited sentence structures and words in the poetry machine meant that its elements were repeated throughout. The dance drew on a limited range of movements most of which were repeated during the improvisation. Victoria repeated the sentences generated through the poetry machine and Joshua's soundtrack repeated fragments of Victoria's voice. These repetitions were never exact reproductions of rehearsals or of earlier performances, instead new combinations of sounds, words and gestures developed all the time. The improvisation sequence of *fire into song* was composed of a finite ensemble of textual, gestural and aural signifiers that continually recombined. The elements of the stage were organised as an ever-changing assemblage, similar to how Cixous describes the feminine imaginary body, rather than being organised around a single, phallic logos.

On the level of formal structure this created, what I would like to call, an oceanic dramaturgy. I am borrowing the term oceanic from Sigmund Freud. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, prompted by a letter from an unnamed friend, known to be Romain Rolland, Freud discusses the 'oceanic feeling' – the feeling of being 'limitless' and 'unbounded' –

which Rolland suggests is seized upon by religious institutions.<sup>54</sup> Like Freud, I am not so much interested in the connection between the oceanic feeling and spirituality that Rolland suggests; instead, I am more interested in proposing that a propensity towards creating an oceanic form on the level of the formal structure connects *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre. While Freud denies experiencing the oceanic feeling himself, he is still able to offer Roland his thoughts on the matter. He hypothesises that the sense of oceanic boundlessness is created by the fact that the ego is not as stable and distinct from the world as we think. It is, in fact, porous and at certain moments, ‘the height of being in love’ for example, the ‘boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away’.<sup>55</sup> Freud further proposes that the adult ego is a ‘shrunk residue’ of what was originally a ‘much more inclusive feeling’ in which the boundaries between the self and the world outside were less distinct.<sup>56</sup> In Freud’s conception the oceanic feeling is a momentary regression to a time where the boundary between the self and that which lies beyond the self was less stable.

The formal structure of the improvisation sequence of *fire into song* evoked the oceanic. Its dramaturgy is best described through the form of waves, as each of the separate components at once conformed to its own structure and rhythm and, at the same time, was impacted by the movements and rhythms around it, like individual waves in an ocean. The effect of this was not a complete fragmentation of the rhythm of the whole, but a watery dramaturgy in which intense moments constantly swelled and subsided, like ebb and flow. What emerged was akin to ripples and waves: successions of increasing and declining intensity followed each other without driving towards a final destination or resolution. Traditional dramaturgical features such as the arc of suspense and closure were absent from the sequence, emphasised through the repetitive structure of the separate elements. There was no logical endpoint or linear progression to the sequence which could have served as a boundary or limit. As such, the sequence touched on an oceanic structure, unbounded by dramatic ordering devices it continually flowed, moving back and forth.

Cixous’s descriptions of *écriture féminine*, especially after her discovery of Clarice Lispector, recall the oceanic. She likens the structure of Lispector’s novel *Stream of Life*, which she regards as one of the best examples of *écriture féminine*, to a ‘pouring of water’;

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<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961): p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

like the efforts of the narrator in *The Book of Promethea* to inscribe the present moment, watery writing is ‘a chain of creation, continuation, continuity’.<sup>57</sup> *Stream of Life* (1973 / 1971) is Lispector’s most experimental novel. It is composed as a stream of consciousness in which glimpses of events show up and disappear again. Cixous notes that Lispector’s novel ‘disobeys all organising laws’.<sup>58</sup> She continues to explain what this means: ‘It escapes the first rule of text. It is not linear, not formally constructed [...] there is no story’.<sup>59</sup> *Fire into song* similarly avoided linearity by invoking circularity through the constant repetition of its components. In a further essay on Roni Horn’s artistic interpretation of *Stream of Life; Rings of Lispector*, Cixous speaks of the ring, not as a static, geometric object but evoking the gesture of tracing and re-tracing it when drawing it. She writes: ‘Ring never stops spinning, around its round, it’s ringing’.<sup>60</sup> The ring does not remain in one place but moves along, in the way it appears as ‘the last syllable of an English verb in the progressive form’.<sup>61</sup> Cixous evokes the endlessly repeating waves of the ocean, which are repetitive but not identical, when she describes Lispector’s text as practising ‘scales without stopping’ while introducing variations all the time.<sup>62</sup> Writing an oceanic structure means using the interplay between repetition and creation to move forward and to effect transformation. Just as she describes *The Book of Promethea* as a ‘book of first pages’, Cixous views Lispector’s liquid novel as being composed of ‘only beginnings’.<sup>63</sup> By evading the common ordering devices of the novel, *écriture féminine* strives towards the unbounded.<sup>64</sup>

Cixous views dividing, ordering devices like chapters as antithetical to *écriture féminine*. Similarly, the dramaturgy of the improvisation sequence of *fire into song* had no scenes, no interruptions, no closure. From this uninterruptedness a sense of oceanic continuity

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<sup>57</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 56.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid: p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> H el ene Cixous and Roni Horn, ‘On the Banks of “Agua Viva”, Roni Horn, in Secret,’ in *Rings of Lispector (Agua Viva)* (Zurich: Hauser & Wirth, 2006): p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid: p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Cixous, 1994: p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> Cixous frequently alludes to images relating to water when writing about the feminine. Her essay on *écriture féminine* in theatre, ‘Aller   la mer’, for example, plays on the homophony between sea (*mer*) and mother (*m ere*) in French. Water, the ocean and liquid states permeate her entire *oeuvre*. A recent example of her work on the ocean includes, for example, a research seminar she gave together with Alexandra Grant: ‘H el ene Cixous in Conversation with Alexandra Grant’. Nottingham University. Research Seminar. 10 Sep 2013.  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMPVbpNcDa4>>

emerged which Cixous sees as characteristic of *écriture féminine*: ‘with the body [writing] leads toward noninterruption’, she proposes.<sup>65</sup> By writing the feminine, Cixous predicts:

you will have literary texts that tolerate all kinds of freedom – unlike the more classical texts – which are not texts that delimit themselves, are not texts of territory with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, endings, etc., and which will be a little disquieting because you do not feel the arrest of the edge.<sup>66</sup>

The unbounded, oceanic dramaturgical form I developed in *fire into song*, then, closely resembles Cixous’s ideas in regard to the formal structure of *écriture féminine*. I regard such an oceanic dramaturgy to be a key form for realising Cixous’s poetic, feminine writing on stage. An unbounded dramaturgical form is also typical of postdramatic theatre. Hans-Thies Lehmann cites the Belgian dramaturge Marianne van Kerkhoven when examining the dramaturgy of postdramatic theatre. While he points out that it would be futile to try to develop a definitive dramaturgy of postdramatic practices analogous to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s attempts to define ‘the’ dramaturgy of theatre, he nonetheless identifies a common trait in the way different postdramatic practices are composed.<sup>67</sup> He draws attention to the fact that in the postdramatic mode ‘dramatic coherence’ has been replaced by a ‘density of intensive moments’.<sup>68</sup>

In accordance with van Kerkhoven, Lehmann suggests that the dramaturgy of postdramatic theatre is influenced by the findings of chaos theory, which proposes that reality is composed of ‘unstable systems’ rather than ‘closed circuits’.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Helga Arend emphasises the role of chance in postdramatic theatre. She argues that chance is typically used as a generative and creative tool that actively encourages the strange (*das Fremde* in German indicates something that is foreign, different or unknown) to enter the stage.<sup>70</sup> In doing this, postdramatic practices reappraise chaos as a perpetual creative force rather than as a destructive threat that needs to be tamed. I understand chaos in this context as qualitatively different from hysteria: while hysteria is a reaction to structure, it dismantles extant systems without escaping them; chaos, on the other hand, precedes systemacy. In

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<sup>65</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> Conley, 1984: p. 137.

<sup>67</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Helga Arend, ‘Der Zufall Im Postdramatischen Theater,’ in *Gegenwärtigkeit Und Fremdheit: Wissenschaft Und Künste Im Dialog Über Bildung*, ed. Kristin Westphal (Weinheim, München: Juventa, 2009): pp.135 – 148.

contrast to the bounded dramaturgy of dramatic theatre that seeks to create ‘harmony’ by bringing logic and order to the ‘confusing plethora and chaos of being’,<sup>71</sup> postdramatic theatre values the generative potential of the chaos of being. As a consequence, postdramatic theatre practices are structurally ‘works in progress’ rather than completed works, wherein the process of discovery usually outweighs the presentation of results.<sup>72</sup>

Postdramatic theatre practices typically resist the ‘linear time’ of narrative.<sup>73</sup> Similar to how Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as resisting ordering features, postdramatic practices tend not to be structurally bounded by a beginning, a middle and an end. In the place of the ‘enclosing frame’ of the bounded dramaturgy, there is a ‘time shared’ by the audience and the performers, Lehmann proposes.<sup>74</sup> Shared time emerges when there is no separation between the time represented on stage and the real time of the spectators and performers: time is ‘directly’ experienced by both performers and spectators.<sup>75</sup> Lehmann does not assume that such shared time renders the performers and the audience fully present to themselves and each other. Instead of participating in a metaphysics of presence, postdramatic theatre is a ‘theatre of the present’, in which the present is conceived ‘as a process, as a verb’.<sup>76</sup> Like the narrator in *The Book of Promethea*, postdramatic theatre acknowledges that the present is perpetually disappearing and, because of this, ‘the present is necessarily the erosion and slippage of presence’.<sup>77</sup>

By adapting Cixous’s impossible writing in the present into an improvised, unbounded formal structure I found that *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre both relate to the oceanic feeling of connectedness and continuity described by Freud. The role of ‘processuality’ in postdramatic theatre can be regarded as inscriptions of a feminine libidinal economy when considered through the prism of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*.<sup>78</sup> The form of the feminine text, which as described by Cixous, lies outside generic prescriptions and resists being bounded by ordering devices, is echoed by the dissolution of bounded dramaturgical compositions in postdramatic theatre. Considered in reference to Lacan’s re-

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<sup>71</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 160.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid: p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid: p. 58.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid: p. 155.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid: p. 152.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid: p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid: p. 144.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid: p. 155.

reading of Freud, the oceanic feeling becomes maternally coded since it refers to a sense of self that pre-dates the intervention into the maternal bond by the name-of-the-father, as Mary Caputi suggests.<sup>79</sup> Cixous's description of *écriture féminine* as continuous and lacking interruption at first glance suggests a link between the psychoanalytic notion of the maternal and *écriture féminine*.

However, Cixous's emphasis on movement and development stands in contradiction to Lacan's notion of the pre-Oedipal experience and the maternal. In Lacan, the oceanic feeling of the mother-child dyad is also associated with 'totality' and 'cohesion', two terms that Cixous associates with the desires of psychosexual masculinity.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Freud proposes that the oceanic feeling is an expression of narcissism; it presses the desires of the self onto the whole world. In these formulations the oceanic feeling appears coded masculine and conforms to phallogocentric desires: that is, it speaks of the wish to be a fully present, independent, selfsame totality. Referring back to Romain Rolland, William Parsons suggests an alternative reading of the oceanic feeling that is closer to what I believe Cixous to be promoting. Parsons suggests that the oceanic feeling Rolland describes is not a 'momentary regression to the unitive consciousness of primary narcissism' but an enduring state of becoming.<sup>81</sup> The oceanic feeling in Parson's reading is 'a state of continual and intimate contact with world'.<sup>82</sup> This means neither assimilating the world into a narcissistic totality nor shutting the world out as other, but regarding the self and the world as emergent works in progress.

Embodied by the figure of Promethea, Cixous rewrites the notion of feminine creativity. No longer does the dream of maternal totality and immobility prevail. In the place of the psychoanalytic mother, Cixous envisions a feminine figure who is never whole, never completely self-present, who is instead always becoming and open to those around her, inhabited by an abundance of traces. This is a politicised invention, as Rosi Braidotti notes:

In a phallogocentric system where the Name-of-the-Father provides the operative metaphor for the constitution of the subject, the idea of a 'feminine

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<sup>79</sup> Mary Caputi, 'The Maternal Metaphor in Feminist Scholarship,' *Political Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1993): p. 322. Lacan terms the role of the father in the Symbolic Order 'Name-of-the-Father'. Playing on the homophony between *non* (no) and *nom* (name), he proposes that with the entry into the Symbolic Order and the acquisition of language any access to presence is lost.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> William B. Parsons, 'The Oceanic Feeling Revisited,' *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 4 (1998): p. 512.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 521.

symbolic function' amounts to a revindication of the structuring function of the mother. It attempts to invest the maternal site with affirmative, positive force.<sup>83</sup>

The maternally-coded oceanic feeling, understood not as the desire to return to a state of undifferentiated totality but as a force that moves us to see ourselves in a dynamic relation to the world, constantly being constructed in the present moment and always a step behind our own becoming, is reflected in the structure of both *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre. Both favour the present tense, while being conscious of how it slips from their grasp, and both have in common the gesture of improvisation that heralds the unknown or not-yet known.<sup>84</sup>

## Poetry *imprōvīsa*: Working-in-Progress as a Feminine Political Praxis

In *ENCIRCLED* I detected a tension between destruction and creation in the methods *écriture féminine* and postdramatic use to deconstruct meaning and form. I proposed that this tension might be central to thinking about the politics of both. A purely destructive politics, like that of the hysteric, I suggest, is of limited appeal to contemporary feminism. *Fire into song* did not resolve this tension but amplified it, as a series of interviews I conducted with spectators of the performance demonstrate. A number of interviewees commented on the fact that the improvisation sequence on the whole did not offer itself up to semantic interpretation and, as such, it was difficult to pinpoint what was being created, if creating meaning was not its primary goal. While one interviewee felt that he had noticed 'bits that had specific meanings', he experienced the piece overall as 'a kind of flow, a continuation' (see on Text File CD: 'Interview with Andrew'). Another spectator explained that, while watching the performance she had been under the impression that the improvisation sequence was cohesive, though not necessarily legible. She felt, however, upon reflection that she would have liked the 'fragments to join up more than they did' (see on Text File CD: 'Interview with Lucy'). One person I interviewed described her frustration and confusion with the sequence: she had assumed that a logical story was being narrated but that she had no access to decoding it (see on Text File CD: 'Interview with Emma'). In contrast to this, another interviewee mentioned experiencing particular

<sup>83</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): p. 181.

<sup>84</sup> The oceanic dramaturgy I propose bears some similarities with what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*. For Kristeva the semiotic with its maternal connotations is always present in signification. In contrast to Cixous, however, Kristeva construes the maternal as pre-discursive and biological as Judith Butler analyses. See: Judith Butler, 'The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva', *Hypatia* 3, no. 3 (1989): pp. 104 – 118.

pleasure in not being able to extract semantic meaning from the sequence (see on Text File CD: 'Interview with Harry'). What does unite the spectators' accounts is that they felt unable to synthesise the sequence into a logical and legible whole. The effect of this was that some felt alienated and frustrated while others enjoyed and welcomed the stream of signs.

The interviews in part confirm my worry that the destructive and fragmenting aspects of *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre alike run the risk of shutting down and shutting out political engagement with the work. To the extent that some spectators felt that *fire into song* did nothing but fragment meaning, the performance was still confronted with problems of hysteria. On the other hand, some responses also give me reason to believe that, while *fire into song* did not solve the tension between destruction and creation, it shed light on it from another perspective, which might be more appealing to feminists. In as far as spectators found themselves carried away in the overflowing dramaturgy, not needing a clear interpretative framework or structure to engage with the material, *fire into song* suggested another kind of feminine politics beyond hysteria. I discuss in the following how this politics is connected to improvisation and to time, and suggest that it can be found in *écriture féminine* as well as postdramatic theatre.

I propose that both *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre are characterised by an *improvisatory attitude*. Although using improvisation in *fire into song* prompted this proposition, it does not mean that either necessarily uses methods of improvisation such as automatic writing or playing improvisation games on stage, for instance, in their creation or realisation. Rather, I would like to suggest that an improvisatory attitude is fundamental to both. In musicology, composition and improvisation have been traditionally regarded as antithetical and, like all binary oppositions, one term is perceived to have superseded the other in Western culture: in this example, composition has come to be valued more highly than improvisation.<sup>85</sup> While improvisation has by no means been absent from European and Western musical cultures, as Robin Moore argues,<sup>86</sup> it is often associated with non-Western cultures. It is regarded as 'embryonic', underdeveloped, and not valued as fully equivalent to art, Laudan Nooshin suggests.<sup>87</sup> Improvisation is positioned as a primitive

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<sup>85</sup> Laudan Nooshin discusses this at length in 'Improvisation as "Other": Creativity, Knowledge and Power: The Case of Iranian Classical Music,' *Journal of Royal Musical Association* 128, no. 2 (2003): pp. 242 - 296.

<sup>86</sup> Robin Moore, 'The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change,' *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (1992): pp. 61 – 84.

<sup>87</sup> Nooshin: p. 245.

other of Western art. I suggest that *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre, by taking an improvisatory attitude to art, challenge the value systems of classical Western art and, further, that this can be seen as a gendered, political activity.

What I am calling an ‘improvisatory attitude’ is the intersection of two factors, time and repetition, used in structuring a work of art. Against a naïve conception of improvisation as untamed, unique and unrestricted by generic structures, Moore points out that improvisation is not free, instead it is better likened to ‘other creative and yet culturally structured behaviours’ since it relies on tradition and repetition.<sup>88</sup> Derrida similarly urges us to move away from conceiving of improvisation in such a simplistic manner. He warns that ‘it’s not easy to improvise’, and that, in fact, ‘it’s the most difficult thing to do’.<sup>89</sup> The complexity of improvisation lies in its relation to predetermined patterns: ‘one can’t say what ever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse’ since the sign systems that render one’s improvisation intelligible in the first place, precedes the improviser.<sup>90</sup> For this reason improvisation is ‘impossible’ Derrida warns, while declaring that he is nonetheless prepared to ‘fight’ for it.<sup>91</sup> Cixous holds that what Derrida regards as impossible is, in fact, possible, even inevitable: the ‘infernally repetition’ of the Selfsame can be undone by allowing the effects of *différance* to take hold.<sup>92</sup>

While this view of improvisation still rests on the notion that, as its etymological roots suggest, it ushers in the new, it debunks the myth of creativity and innovation as a unique and discrete act. The narrator’s perpetual redrafting of her journals in *The Book of Promethea*, executed in order to keep up with time slipping from her grasp, exemplifies the importance of repetition to Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. I adapted this gesture of writing and re-writing into theatre in the improvisation sequence of *fire into song*. As this sequence was composed of a finite number of signifiers, which appeared over and over again, meaning settled occasionally and momentarily but was quickly succeeded by new constellations of sounds, words and images. As is typical for postdramatic theatre, it showed that ‘there is no such thing as true repetition’ since time and contexts are not

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<sup>88</sup> Moore: p. 64.

<sup>89</sup> Unpublished interview. Cited in: Sara Ramshaw, *Justice as Improvisation: The Law of the Extempore* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013): p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 72.

static.<sup>93</sup> *Fire into song* exploited the creative force of repetition that derives from time: it showed that time changes repetitions and as such they escape towards the unprecedented. This became evident to me when rehearsing with Vanessa in particular. Watching her improvise on a few gestures for extended periods - the initial improvisations we did in rehearsals often exceeded 40 minutes - made me consider the significance of time in theatre, and that theatre is particularly suited to exposing the process of creation through repetition.

The improvisation sequence grew out of a desire to try out how theatre can demonstrate this process of creation. I aimed to show that the impossibility of repetition lets us appreciate that every moment carries in it the seed of the new. Invoking the dictionary definition of improvisation as creation *extempore* (in the spur of the moment, literally out of time or proceeding from time), Sara Ramshaw proposes that improvisation is, at once, 'away from time' and 'absolutely of the time, in tune with time'.<sup>94</sup> As such, improvisation is processual and temporal, it is orientated towards the future since it configures time as open-ended and incomplete. This notion of time underlies Cixous's *écriture féminine*, which revels in not arriving. Similarly, Lehmann proposes that, in the postdramatic, theatre is conceived of as 'a gift, and an inscription of a process, not so much a final product'.<sup>95</sup> An improvisatory attitude then means conceiving the work of art as a work-in-process, rather than a discrete and finite product.<sup>96</sup>

Making *fire into song* I found, however, that theatre and writing differ substantially in their relationship to time and that, because of this, it is vital to make a distinction between them in relation to improvisation: at root, the improvisatory attitude features differently in theatre than in writing. Cixous's notion that *écriture féminine* is endless writing, that it proposes a myriad of beginnings without arriving, is realised in the relationship between the text and the reader: 'a capacity for improvisation should mark a reading process that

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<sup>93</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 157.

<sup>94</sup> Sara Ramshaw, 'Time Out of Time: Derrida, Cixous, Improvisation,' *New Sound* 32 (2008): p. 162.

<sup>95</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann. 'Tragödie, Trauerspiel. Geschichte'. Seminarprogramm. 16. Internationale Schillertage. 03 – 06 Jun 2011. Seminar. Translation by the author.

<sup>96</sup> I do not regard improvisation and composition as binary oppositions. Instead, I suggest the former might be understood as the generative and transformative dynamic that lies within repetition while the latter refers to the architectural, masculine elements of a text or performance that keeps improvisation keeps in check. Just as masculinity and femininity are both present in individuals, as Cixous proposes, works of art are also composed of feminine and masculine features.

could be qualified as feminine', she writes.<sup>97</sup> Feminine writing is met by a feminine reading process, which Susan Sellers succinctly describes

'feminine' reading [...] implies 'opening' the self to what the text is saying, [...] reading to see how a text is made, by exploring the various resources for meaning a writer has at their disposal: the writer's intended meaning, as well the 'other' meanings, that contradict, complement, unsettle or dislodge this meaning.<sup>98</sup>

Such feminine reading hinges, to some extent, on the object-character of the text. Just as the narrator of *The Book of Promethea* must write and re-write incessantly in order to approach Promethea, who, as already described, is a perpetual becoming, the feminine reader acknowledges that the text is endless. The reading, like the writing, never ceases, it never dries up. The constancy of the object, that can be returned to over and over, that can be read slowly or rapidly, that can be skimmed or closely studied, is essential for allowing the reader to embark on this journey.

Performance, in contrast, is ephemeral; it is inscribed in time rather than laid down as an object. As Peggy Phelan remarks, the very ontological premise of performance is that it 'becomes itself through disappearance'.<sup>99</sup> Since it is a time-bound art, theatre has a beginning and an end, which gets in the way of Cixous's notion of unboundedness: with regard to time, theatre is extremely bounded. The improvisation sequence in *fire into song* could only gesture at continuity in lacking closure and resolution, it could not perform it. At the end nothing had been solved or finished, the performance ceased solely due to a time cue. But it did stop. I considered employing techniques from what are often referred to as durational performance styles in order to make the performance appear endless. One such technique might be not allowing the spectator to witness the start and the end of a performance, as is often be the case in very long durational performances –for example, Forced Entertainment's 24 hour version of *Quizoola!* A remnant of this technique did remain in the performance as Victoria and Vanessa were already on stage performing when the audience entered. However, I decided not to use more durational techniques than this since durational performance too, in the end, cannot enact continuity. It is still understood that there will be an end and that, after this, the spectator will no longer be able to access or

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<sup>97</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Susan Sellers, 'Learning to Read the Feminine,' in *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous Reading and Teaching*, ed. Helen Wilcox et al. (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990): p. 192.

<sup>99</sup> Phelan, 1993: p. 146.

come back to the performance. This means that, while theatre may be processual and emphasise duration, like much postdramatic theatre does, it does not overcome the boundaries of beginning and ending. The physical, if not semantic, permanence of the written word, which can be returned to over time, cannot be replicated in theatre.

In contrast to Phelan, who holds that theatre ‘plunges into visibility [...] and disappears into memory’ and because of this is ‘traceless’, Rebecca Schneider offers a way of thinking about performance that looks towards what remains.<sup>100</sup> She argues that the notion of performance as disappearance is founded upon ‘a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified [...] logic of the archive’.<sup>101</sup> Schneider associates the logic of the archive with logocentrism and its dependence on the notions of authenticity, singularity and originality. Against this logic she suggests that performance might remain different, pointing towards ‘other ways of knowing’ and ‘other ways of remembering’.<sup>102</sup> Schneider cites improvisation among a list of practices that can operate outside the logic of the archive, that acknowledge that the ephemeral leaves traces and residues that reside in ‘a network of body-to-body transmissions of affect and engagement’.<sup>103</sup>

Theatre shows might have an end, but their impact does not cease. I tried to explore how theatre might continue to have an impact after the event by giving the spectators I interviewed creative tasks to fulfil during the interview. I asked them to draw a picture that summarised their viewing experience and to make a clay figure of a feminine Prometheus. One of the interviewees expressed her surprise over how appropriate, in relation to the myth, the picture she had drawn of the performance appeared to her. This interviewee was not familiar with the myth when she watched the performance but had read about it afterwards. She explained that she felt that the picture showed that she had understood more of the performance than she had thought (see on Text File CD: ‘Interview with Lucy’). I would like to suggest that instances such as this support Schneider’s claim that although theatre is a fleeting medium, it remains with us in ways we might not always be aware of ourselves. After reading about the myth and talking about *fire into song*, the interviewee was able to frame her experience differently. She experienced her memory of it transforming which reveals that theatre still has an effect after the fact. In suggesting that

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<sup>100</sup> Phelan: p. 148.

<sup>101</sup> Rebecca Schneider, ‘Performance Remains’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012): p. 138.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 141.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

performance remains, Schneider embeds it in a complex weave of time and she stresses that performance is a way of remembering while remembering differently, creating the new out of memory, defiling the notion of the original by being ‘relentlessly citational’, unoriginal.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, my interviewee created the performance anew from her memory, offering it to continual interpretation, and destabilising the notion of an original experience.

Schneider likens performance to femininity which threatens the logocentric, masculine notion of originality and singularity since it is associated with ‘the rib, the second’, and it is only through the second that the first can be confirmed.<sup>105</sup> The second runs the risk of replacing the first, toppling it from its privileged place. Postdramatic theatre, which emphasises repetition, performs a feminine displacement of origins that Cixous regards as fundamental to a feminine political praxis since it dislodges the system of taxonomic categorisation. By emphasising the interplay between time and repetition that leads toward the new, *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre debunk the Romantic notion of the creative genius who produces *ex nihilo* which, as Derrida points out, is coded masculine culturally and, in French, also grammatically: ‘we have always kept [the noun *le génie*] for the masculine and as well as the singular’.<sup>106</sup> Inspired by Cixous’s writing, Derrida suggests that a feminine, plural notion of invention might not be predicated on a masculine subject and, instead, be regarded simply as ‘what happens’.<sup>107</sup> The feminine genius activates creative forces that lie dormant in the rule of the selfsame: she strives towards the new and the unknown by letting things happen, by improvising, durationally, without arriving. I propose that postdramatic theatre, in foregrounding the improvisatory elements of performance by emphasising that theatre is a process in time, participates in shifting the phallogocentric culture that values composition above improvisation – just as it positions men above women – towards a feminine orientation.

Julie Smith writes that improvisation and woman – and in reference to Cixous’s cultural analysis the feminine might be included in this grouping - are in much the same position, as both are confined to the lesser side of a binary opposition, regarded as abject and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid: p. 140.

<sup>105</sup> Rebecca Schneider, ‘Hello Dolly, Well Hello Dolly’, in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London, New York: Routledge, 2001): p. 96.

<sup>106</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*, trans. Beverly Brie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid: p. 78.

‘uncontainable’.<sup>108</sup> Ellen Waterman brings together femininity and improvisation, suggesting that improvisation can be framed as feminine *jouissance*; it ushers the improviser ‘into an erotic relationship with present moment’ by giving oneself up ‘entirely (luxuriously, generously) to the *now* over and over again’.<sup>109</sup> While Waterman believes that improvisation creates a latent possibility for feminine *jouissance* to take hold, she cautions that she is not proposing a ‘feminist aesthetics of improvisation’, since the styles of improvisation are multiple, ranging from ‘serene minimalism’ to ‘furious virtuosity’.<sup>110</sup> In contrast to Waterman, I would like to suggest that the improvisatory gesture might be regarded as feminist strategy. This means paying less attention to the products of improvisation, which indeed vary vastly, and rather more to the structural principles that underpin it.

The improvisational attitude of *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre can be understood as a feminine praxis. Through it psycho-sexual femininity is made manifest and enacted: creativity is figured as creation from repetition, *ex tempore* instead of *ex nihilo*, the second (and the third and the fourth, etc.) is valued next to the first. Conceiving of improvisation as feminine means reconsidering femininity not as characterised by ‘immobility / inertia’ but as a creative force that leads towards the unknown.<sup>111</sup> This view of femininity, that also underlies Cixous’s poetic theory, is a far cry from the limited politics of hysteria that folds back on itself and is, in the end, returned to patriarchal control. If hysteria runs the danger of fragmenting the structures that create meaning only to tear them down, poetic improvisation does so in order to create anew. Structurally this praxis overlaps with Butler’s deconstructive approach to feminism. Since, Butler suggests, identity is ‘instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*’, it is bound to time.<sup>112</sup> Precisely because of this gender is in flux and transforming, it is not a ‘seamless identity’ but ‘a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint’.<sup>113</sup> While improvisation might take place in a field of constraints, *écriture féminine* suggests that the constraints are impacted

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<sup>108</sup> Julie Smith, ‘Diva-Dogs: Sounding Women Improvising’. Unpublished PhD Thesis. (University of British Columbia, 2001).

<sup>109</sup> Ellen Waterman, ‘Naked Intimacy: Eroticism, Improvisation, and Gender’, *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008): p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Cixous, 1981: p. 44.

<sup>112</sup> Butler, 1988: p. 519. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>113</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Introduction: Acting in Concert,’ in *Undoing Gender* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004): p. 1.

by improvisation: the boundaries of taxonomic distinctions are slowly shifted, one repetition after another, step by step.

Cixous's poetic, improvisatory, feminine praxis is then a more sustainable political strategy than her practice of hystericisation: it is an incessant labour that slowly erodes the structures that uphold phallogentrism and makes way for other configurations of being and expression rather than only destroying the extant ones. And postdramatic theatre, valuing feminine improvisation in a similar way, can create a space beyond phallogentrism. By '[weaving] together a new sensory fabric', the process which Jacques Rancière views as fundamental to the political efficacy of art, postdramatic theatre participates in redistributing the sensible towards femininity.<sup>114</sup> By following the path of poetry, however, as Mireille Calle-Gruber suggests, Cixous values the 'terrain of imagination' above 'feminist ideology'.<sup>115</sup> After all writing poetically, improvising, creating an oceanic assemblage, means giving oneself over to the unknown and, as Rancière is quick to point out, we cannot determine beforehand what the practical effects our weaving of sensations will have.<sup>116</sup> One cannot control what will appear. As such, an attempt to ascribe a direct feminist politics to *écriture féminine* or postdramatic theatre might be troubled. Instead, they are both better described as a feminine praxis that extends the boundaries of imagination and seeks to suggest an alternative to a taxonomic, logocentric view of the world that has greatly damaged women. By chipping away at the fundament of phallogentrism, the organisation of meaning and phenomena in a structure of binary relations, a poetic, improvisational approach to formal structures supports feminist goals. Via a detour to the psychosocial significance of form, a feminine arts praxis can be conceived as a feminist political strategy, orientated towards wearing down patriarchal dominion. This creates opportunities for redistributing the fabric of the sensible towards a political configuration in which women are not subjugated for lacking a relationship to the phallic signifier and excluded from politics and culture.

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<sup>114</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 56.

<sup>115</sup> Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'Portrait of the Writing', in *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, ed. Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London, New York: Routledge, 1997): p. 152.

<sup>116</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 82.

## Chapter 6

### Feminine Epistemology: *Rings: Sang, Souffle, Signe, Sein, Sens*

The first fable of our first book is a fable in which what is at stake is the relationship to the law. There are two principle elements, two main puppets: the word of the Law or the discourse of God and the Apple. It's a struggle between the Apple and the discourse of God. All this transpires in a short scene before a woman. [...] At the beginning of everything there is an apple, and this apple, when it is talked about, is said to be a not-to-be-fruit. There is an apple, and straight away there is the law. [...] God says, if you taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge, you will die. It is absolutely incomprehensible [...] since for Eve 'you will die' does not mean anything, she is in the paradisiac state where there is no death. She receives the most hermetic discourse there is, the absolute discourse. [...] It is the experience of the secret, the enigma of the apple, of this apple, which is invested with every kind of power. And what we are told is that knowledge might begin with the mouth, with the discovery of the taste of something: knowledge and taste go together. [...] And what Eve will discover in her relationship to simple reality, is the inside of the apple, and that the inside is good.

Hélène Cixous, 'Extreme Fidelity'<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I discuss how I explored methods for adapting Cixous's feminine approach to knowledge for theatre. My motivation to do this grew out of my second practice-as-research performance, which was concerned with how Cixous premises *écriture féminine* on a non-static notion of being and the methods she uses to refigure being as work-in-progress. Since I found that Cixous employs a poetic approach to writing, which can also be detected in postdramatic practices, to enable such a processual notion of ontology, I began to wonder whether art can be used as a means to acquire and disseminate knowledge of this mode of being. I believe that Cixous's thought, following her discovery of Clarice Lispector, suggests that *écriture féminine* is an epistemological praxis that challenges commonplace, masculinised notions of knowledge. Based on this finding, I developed the following research questions which I explored in my practical research:

- ♦ What methods can I develop from Cixous's writing for performing feminine knowledge and / or using that knowledge in performance?
- ♦ What specific potentials does theatre, as opposed to writing, offer to a feminine epistemological practice?

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous, 1988: p.16.

- ◆ Does postdramatic theatre express feminine knowledge? If so, what does this mean for the relationship between theatre and feminism?

Before discussing my practical research in the second and third section of this chapter, I will elucidate Cixous's take on knowledge, femininity and feminism, which informed my practical process. While Cixous develops her notion of a feminine epistemology from Lispector's writing, I think it is most clearly demonstrated in her re-writing of the biblical figure of Eve, which is cited above. In her reading, Cixous sets Eve up in opposition to the law, which she associates with a paternalistic and patriarchal God. The law seeks to foreclose the taste of the apple, it institutes separation and desire motivated by absence. The law that Cixous writes of strongly resembles Jacques Lacan's Name-of-the-Father principle that 'from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law' and, as such, institutes prohibitions and taboos, the first of which is the mother's body.<sup>2</sup> Kirsten Campbell proposes, and I believe Cixous's position stems from a similar reading, that the Symbolic order produces a 'lack-in-being' that the masculine subject 'displaces [...] to a castrated other', the mother.<sup>3</sup> The lacking, castrated mother motivates desire, and this desire structures epistemology: 'the knower desires the repudiated mother to complete his being'.<sup>4</sup> God's law in Cixous's fable expresses the logic of masculine epistemology that Campbell summarises as 'knowledge that is predicated on lack, and so is structured in the negativity of desire'.<sup>5</sup> Masculine epistemology is premised on the notion that we can only come to know the world mediated by the Symbolic order, which is founded upon abstraction, distance and absence.

Knowledge that is grounded in absence, motivated by a desire for the absent thing, is problematic for feminists. Jacques-Alain Miller's reading of Lacan makes this evident. Miller points out that knowledge, as it is traditionally conceived, predating Lacan's theories, rests on an 'ideal of the union of subject and object'.<sup>6</sup> He qualifies this union as a 'co-naturality of subject and object, a pre-established harmony between, the subject who knows and the object known'.<sup>7</sup> Miller explains that, viewed through a Lacanian framework

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, New York: Routledge, 2001): p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Campbell, *Jacques Lacan and Feminist Epistemology* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004): p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Elements of Epistemology', *The Symptom: Issue 9*, 2008. <<http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?p=37>> Accessed 08 Dec 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

this notion of knowledge is mirrored in the structure of sexual difference, or rather sexual difference becomes a paradigm of knowledge: the subjectification of the knower and the objectification of the known is mirrored in the subjectification of man and objectification of woman. 'In the theory of knowledge' the object is positioned as 'complementary to the subject' and, as such, epistemology is 'also a way of taming the woman': as woman is figured as complementary to man, the object to his subject-being.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge is, then, bound up with the absence and repression of woman, which makes it a feminist concern to develop an epistemological practice not based on the principles of lack, negative desire and the ultimate yearning for wholeness that the masculine subject imagines can be quenched by incorporating the other.

Against a notion of knowledge mediated by the Name-of-the-Father, Cixous's Eve embodies a way of seeking knowledge that is premised on proximity and presence. Knowledge is reformulated as knowing, as a gerund, a non-finite verb, indicating that it is a praxis, not a static object. Eve discovers that knowledge emerges from the senses, from touching the apple with her tongue, tasting it. In doing this Eve is able to learn that the apple has an inside that 'is, is, is'.<sup>9</sup> Cixous envisions feminine knowledge as sensual and pleasurable, it is developed in close contact with the object of discovery rather than at a distance from it. Instead of being motivated by a desire for the absent thing, Cixous's knowledge-seeking is driven by *jouissance*. Lacan assigns the law as having the function to 'divide up, distribute or reattribute' *jouissance*, it funnels *jouissance* towards a purpose and as such is 'not related to the other'.<sup>10</sup> Cixous's lawless feminine epistemological drive, in contrast, does not divide the world into the useful and the purposeful, but revels in a surplus, feminine *jouissance* that Lacan regards as beyond the knowable since it 'doesn't signify anything'.<sup>11</sup> Through the figure of Eve, Cixous imagines a knowledgeable, feminine *jouissance* that *is* related to the other, in which knowledge is not imagined as mastery but as a form of 'approaching' all others, the things of the world.<sup>12</sup> Feminine knowledge hinges on an experience of material presence and, as such, directs Cixous towards the referent.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Cixous, 1988: p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, 1999: p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> H el ene Cixous, 'Clarice Lispector: The Approach', in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jensen, trans. Sarah Cornell et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991): p. 64.

Cixous returns to the empirical object, the signified behind the signifier, and with this the world behind her writing, after she encounters Clarice Lispector's novels in 1978. Lispector, a Brazilian modernist novelist with a particular interest in what is 'abject', expelled from proper society, figuring it as a 'source of subversion and oppositionality', inspires Cixous to advance her *écriture féminine* in new directions.<sup>13</sup> Cixous's writing after her discovery of Lispector shows an enduring fascination with the signified. This does not mean that Cixous begins to favour 'old notions like representation',<sup>14</sup> instead she searches for inscriptions that 'let effects of reality, effects of life sift through in a mode that is infinitely more faithful to our experience than that of classical literature with its procedures of psychological inscriptions'.<sup>15</sup> By drawing attention to the 'effects' of the signified, Cixous works on forging a relationship between *écriture féminine* and phenomenology. Susan Sellers notes that this change of orientation in Cixous's writing can be 'fruitfully compared' with the ideas of Martin Heidegger.<sup>16</sup> Heidegger seeks to uncover the thingness of objects that he believes is annihilated by scientific discourse since it 'encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science' in the first place.<sup>17</sup> Appreciating thingness means accepting what lies beyond 'human cognition' and its compulsion towards explanations, allowing us to conceive of 'the thing's worlding being'.<sup>18</sup> Cixous takes interest in Heideggerian phenomenology since it provides a means for overthrowing the traditional division of the world into knowing subjects and objects of knowledge, a division that sees women on the side of objects.

Cixous's suggestion that the phenomenology of things is feminine knowledge formed the starting point for my practical research. I set out to develop methods to work on how to explore feminine knowledge in devising and to communicate this knowledge in the public performance. Because my practice focussed on strategies for working with the sensory effects of empirical objects, I do not consider the semiotic character of the performance at length in this chapter. I agree with Bert O. States' contention that anything presented on a

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<sup>13</sup> Bray, 2004: p. 127. Examples of the abject in Lispector's writing that Cixous frequently cites are a cockroach encountered by the narrator of *The Passion according to G.H.* [trans. Ronald Sousa (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).] and the extremely destitute girl Macabea who features in *The Hour of the Star* [trans. Giovanni Pontiero (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992).]

<sup>14</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Hélène Cixous and Susan Sellers, *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994): p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing,' in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (London, New York: Harper Perennial, 1971): p. 168. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 178.

stage has both a semiotic and a phenomenological quality: objects on stage both ‘[signify] the world’ and ‘[are] of it’.<sup>19</sup> My practical research, however, has led me to prioritise the latter quality. Since Cixous metaphorises knowledge in spatial terms, my discussion of the practice shifts the focus from time to space.

In suggesting that Cixous detects a feminine epistemology in Lispector’s writing and develops it in order to sharpen the political approach of her *écriture féminine*, I am not advocating a notion of a singular feminist epistemology nor a female epistemology grounded in biology. On the one hand, I believe that Cixous’s work on epistemology is important as a strategy for enabling what can be voiced as knowledge outside of paradigms that are coded masculine. On the other, Elizabeth Anderson’s contribution to the issue of feminist epistemology flags up a significant problem that might be associated with the notion of a feminine knowledge. She cautions that feminine knowledge, when feminine is assumed to be a property of women alone, might be used as a ‘pretext’ to keep women from acquiring masculine-coded knowledge, hence curtailing their access to education and cutting short their voices.<sup>20</sup> Here, it is important to note that Cixous does not view feminine epistemology as originating from female biology. While Cixous, problematically, invokes female morphology when discussing Eve, writing that it is a positive relationship ‘to penetration’ that allows Eve to enter into a different relationship with the other,<sup>21</sup> she also immediately undercuts any essentialist reading of her work making clear that ‘it is not anatomical sex that determines anything here’.<sup>22</sup> Instead, she proposes that ‘cultural schema’ allow women to approach knowledge in a feminine way more easily than men.<sup>23</sup> While feminine knowledge develops through embodied experiences, it is not dependent on biological sex. In turn this means that women do not exclusively produce feminine knowledge. Feminine knowledge is only a small piece of the knowledge base that women can craft.

Although I recognise Anderson’s warnings, I believe that there is still room for working on a concept of feminine knowledge. Anderson herself provides the reasons for this. She points out that the prestige attached to registers of knowledge is coded by sexual

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<sup>19</sup> Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, ‘Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense,’ *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Cixous, 1988: p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*: p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*: p. 16.

opposition: ‘echoing the sexist norm that women must obey men but men need not listen to women, the gender-coded hierarchy of knowledge embodies the norm that personal knowledge must submit to the judgments of impersonal theoretical knowledge’.<sup>24</sup> Cixous’s project to re-validate feminine knowledge – which does not suppress embodiment and sensuality, nor view them as antagonistic to intellectuality – is a feminist, strategic intervention into the phallogocentric order that positions everything associated with woman as inferior, including what might be termed feminine knowledge. In light of this, I find Campbell’s recent approach to the field of feminist epistemology useful for contextualising the status of feminine knowledge. Campbell stresses the plurality of the field that is ‘multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary’.<sup>25</sup> There is no singular feminist epistemological perspective or method and, as such, Cixous’s position occupies a niche in the greater field of feminist epistemology. It does, however, contain the potential to make significant impact: Campbell argues that it is still useful to assert ‘feminist models of knowing’, even after the heated debates of the 1980s and 1990s have cooled, because it orientates feminism towards the future. Feminism is figured as ‘a potentially transformative knowledge that can change not only how we understand objects, but also subjects and their relationships’, and this is precisely the force Cixous assigns to feminine approaches to knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

## Performing Feminine Knowledge: Potentialities and Limits

*Rings: Sang, Souffle, Signe, Sein, Sens* was my third and final practice-as-research performance and, as such, the culmination of my practical research process. It proposed a feminine theatre practice developed from three strata of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*: signification, composition and its relation to feminine knowledge. As such, the performance built upon all the research findings of my practice-as-research process. Of all the performances, *Rings* moved farthest away from Cixous’s writing since it was not based on a single source text but was derived from several different formal strategies and motifs that I drew out of Cixous’s *oeuvre*. It demonstrated a personal theatre practice developed in dialogue with Cixous’s ideas on *écriture féminine*. I began developing *Rings* in order to explore how theatre might articulate a feminine epistemological practice and how it diverges from literary expressions of such a practice, in order to determine whether

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson: p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell: p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*: p. 12.

postdramatic theatre expresses a feminine epistemology. Since Cixous develops her notion of a feminine epistemology from Lispector's novels, her writing on Lispector was my primary source for developing the practice.

*Rings* was shown publicly on the 21 March 2013 in the Arches studio theatre to an invited audience of about 25 and lasted 70 minutes. It was performed by five women from a variety of performance backgrounds, spanning dance, performance art, physical theatre, contact improvisation, and devised theatre and used the voices of three further women on the soundtrack. The texts used in the devising process and the performance ranged across Cixous's *oeuvre*: spanning *Souffles* from 1975, written before Cixous discovered Lispector, to an essay on Roni Horn's interpretation of Lispector's novel, *The Stream of Life*, published in 2006. The scope of the writing I used was wide, but not unfocussed. The most important texts in the development of *Rings* were Cixous's essays on Lispector collected in *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (1990) and *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (1991), in which Cixous develops her notion of a feminine epistemology. For Cixous, Lispector writes at a perfect distance from the thing that she seeks to know; she is an expert in using her senses to approach phenomena, and inscribing this sensual relation in writing, creating a form of writing that expresses feminine knowledge. Starting with her texts on Lispector at the centre I looked forwards and backwards through Cixous's writing career, tracking recurring motifs and ideas, which led me to also use texts that predate Cixous's encounter with Lispector.

I developed *Rings* over the course of five weeks in collaboration with the performers. I began the devising process by selecting text excerpts corresponding to five nouns which frequently appear in Cixous's work and which she uses as metaphors for ways of establishing a sensual contact with the world, assigning one to each performer. The table below pairs the performers with the word they used in devising and a still from the performance.

Nina Ravnholdt-Enemark	<i>Sang</i> (French: blood)	
Aby Watson	<i>Souffle</i> (French: breath, air)	
Catherine Elliot	<i>Signe</i> (French: sign, mark)	
Jodie Wilkinson	<i>Sein</i> (French: womb, centre, breast; German: to be)	
Stephanie Black	<i>Sens</i> (French: meaning, sense, feeling)	

The words I chose represent methods for connecting with the phenomena of the world. These encompassed: the biological – breathing as a process of incorporation and exchange with the atmosphere; the cultural – sign systems’ and, the phenomenological – sense used to ‘make sense’ of the world. The nouns were used as a foundation for devising movement-

centred solo performances.<sup>27</sup> These solos were rehearsed separately and then presented in one space at the same time. A number of texts that we used in devising were also compiled into the script for a soundtrack, so that themes interacted, refracted and echoed between the solos and the soundtrack.<sup>28</sup>

All the pieces, with the exception of Stephanie's, were shorter than the full length of the performance and these were repeated several times until the end. They were all motivated by an interrogation of the material properties of things that appear in the texts (water, eggs, apples), the space, or a handful of sentences, and this interrogation was ongoing during the public performance (a short description of each piece and the process that led to it, is available on the 'Text File CD'). As a consequence *Rings* produced a multiplicity of material textures: the smell of soil, the sound of recorded speech, the erratic breath of the dancer, blended with the sculptural arrangement of the bodies in space. The fact that the explorations were ongoing meant that the performers were free to change aspects of their pieces if they felt this was necessary. However, none of the performers decided to break radically with the loose structures we had developed. The performance began with the performers drawing a ring of soil that demarcated the performance while the audience entered. The solos were then performed simultaneously in the circular space with four of the pieces (*Sens*, *Signe*, *Sang*, and *Souffle*) mostly performed close to the outer rim of the circle and one (*Sein*), performed in the centre of the ring. During the performance, the audience was free to walk around the ring. The circular space emphasised the simultaneity of the performances, as each viewing angle gave the audience a different picture of the whole. This scenography also expanded on the circular space in which my previous practice-as-research performance, *fire into song*, had taken place. At the end of the piece, following a time cue, the performers came together to step out of the circle and join the audience on the outer rim. The following picture shows the performance space being created in the beginning of the performance:

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<sup>27</sup> I will not describe the individual solo pieces in detail here, however a short exegesis of the process of devising each piece and a description of the final shape is available on the Text File CD or online at: <http://www.feministpostdramatic.tumblr.com>.

<sup>28</sup> The full text of the soundtrack is available on the Text File CD or online at: <http://www.feministpostdramatic.tumblr.com>. It was spoken by Cassandra Rutherford, Louise Gaw and Cara Berger.



In *Rings* I sought to explore strategies for communicating feminine knowledge that Cixous analyses in Lispector's writing in theatre. The approach towards knowing the world that Lispector cultivates is grounded in a sensual way of approaching things. While Cixous frequently discusses the difference between seeing and listening in her early writing, associating the former with the masculine specular order that confirms binary oppositions and the latter with feminine difference, she begins to prioritise touch after her encounter with Lispector. This has led Sarah Jackson to suggest that Cixous, after Lispector, practices a 'tactile poetics'.<sup>29</sup> Fundamental to Jackson's proposition is that Cixous does not 'simply write *about* tact' but that she '*performs* touch'.<sup>30</sup> She does this, Jackson suggests, by '[demonstrating] the power of language to make contact: to lift, to embrace, to hold and to return to the earth'.<sup>31</sup> What Jackson sees in Cixous's writing, I propose, originates from Cixous's reading of Lispector. Lispector's ability to write 'the rainy aspect of rain' is what draws Cixous to her.<sup>32</sup> For Sellers and Blyth, Lispector's writing affirms material being, showing a feminine mode of knowing, rather than seeking to subsume phenomena into static categories of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Lispector performs a writing that makes contact; between

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Jackson, 'So Close : Writing That Touches,' *New Writing* 9, no. 3 (November 2012): p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*: p. 3. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*: p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> Blyth and Sellers: p. 93.

the author and the word, the reader and the word, the word and the thing, and, finally, the reader and the thing.

I agree with Jackson that Cixous emphasises touch and seeks to perform a kind of touching in her writing. Based on this observation, I began the devising process by prompting the performers to explore their assigned word and the motif of the ring tactily. I did this in order to explore the difference between touching in performance, which is literal, and in writing in which touching is figurative. For instance, I led solo workshops with each performer, exploring methods for working in the circular space based on touch. This included exercises during which I marked a circular space around the performer and then asked them to visualise touching the space with their eyes closed. Following this, I asked them to explore the circular space with their bodies, touching it in different ways and with different body parts (palms, hands, face and so on). After giving the performers time to reflect on this experience and to describe it, I then invited them to improvise a movement score in the circle. I first asked them to develop a score in which the circle motivated their movements and then introduced a variation during which I asked them to ‘move’ the circle. (A video recording of one of these improvisations is available on the DVD, see: ‘Circle Improvisation’.) Doing this led us to reconsider the relationship between moving and being moved, touching and being touched or, in other words, the notion that the human performer is active and the material around her passive and inert. The performers found that, when they started paying attention to the materials they were working with through touch, and began considering the physical relationship between them and the material the binary notion of activity and passivity was called into question.

Reflecting on the results from these improvisations with the performers, I found that the term ‘tactile poetics’, that Jackson suggests falls short of theatre practice and also, I argue, Cixous’s *écriture féminine*. While Jackson acknowledges that ‘touch is not one of a kind’, that there is not a single way or register of touching, I believe that in regard to *écriture féminine*, Cixous has a very specific kind of touching in mind.<sup>34</sup> Some forms of touching after all, are highly problematic from a feminist perspective. Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, presents an incomplete ‘corpus of tact’:

skimming, grazing, squeezing, thrusting, pressing, smoothing, scraping, rubbing, caressing, palpating, fingering, kneading, massaging, entwining, hugging, striking, pinching, biting, sucking, moistening, taking, releasing,

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<sup>34</sup> Jackson: p. 4.

licking, jerking off, looking, listening, smelling, tasting, ducking, fucking, rocking, balancing, carrying, weighing...<sup>35</sup>

Touch includes the pleasant (massaging), the violent (striking), and registers that fall in between, depending on whether they are welcome or not (caressing, for instance). Not every form of touch should be welcomed by feminists, since touch can also be used as a means of patriarchal control: domestic and sexual violence, for instance, are both forms of unwelcome touch that violate the boundaries and integrity of the one touched. Indeed, Nancy's corpus seems to suggest that touch is something done by an active doer upon a passive object, thus replicating the division between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge that is bound to the phallogentric order. Cixous's mode of touch is a different economy of touching, one in which the other is not violated or objectified. It is closer to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of touching 'that makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity', since this kind of touching means 'to reach out' towards something or someone and at the same time be touched in return.<sup>36</sup> Cixous similarly emphasises the gesture of reaching out in touching, embodied in the notion of *mansuetude* – meaning 'gentleness', the term derives from *manus* (hand) in Latin – that she borrows from Lispector. Such *mansuetude* is also a more accurate description of the experiences of my performers during their improvisations. Drawing on the etymological origin of *mansuetude*, 'the custom of offering one's hand', Cixous makes clear that she understands touching as a gentle movement towards the other, rather than a violent imposition.<sup>37</sup>

Cixous proposes that *écriture féminine*, especially as practiced by Lispector, is written in such a way that gentle touching intermingles with all our senses: vision occurs through light touching our retina, sound through waves touching on our ear drums, taste through particles touching receptors on our tongues. All sensations in some way include a contact with the other, a physical touching or brushing. Cixous sees Lispector as an expert in 'knowing how to "see" before sight, knowing how to hear before comprehension', associating seeing and hearing with gentleness and tact, and sight and comprehension with an objectifying type of perception and knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Cixous's description of how Lispector

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<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Cixous, 1991 (a): p. 166.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*: p. 62.

employs her senses makes clear that she is very aware of the fact that our senses are not free from historical and ideological determination. A feminine way of coming to know the world is multisensory and synaesthetic to the extent that it finds one sense, touch, in another, vision, for instance. As such, Cixous's propensity towards tact grows out of her play with synaesthetic signifiers which I discuss in Chapter 4 (see: pp. 96 - 100).

Having found that the term touch does not accurately describe the *mansuetude* of *écriture féminine*, nor the experiences my performers related, I searched for a more appropriate way of thinking about touch. I found that Cixous's writing on Lispector is echoed in Laura Marks' theorisation of hapticity. Marks distinguishes between two types of seeing: optical visuality and haptic visuality. The former she views as bound to 'European post-Enlightenment rationality' that denies vision as 'a form of contact'.<sup>39</sup> Seeing, in this context, becomes a disembodied activity that 'requires distance and a centre'.<sup>40</sup> Optical visuality is bound to a notion of epistemology that masters and objectifies. Haptic visuality, in contrast, is premised on 'touching, not mastering',<sup>41</sup> it '[acknowledges] the material presence of the other'.<sup>42</sup> In the context of Cixous's notion of sexual difference, optical visuality can be identified with masculinity, and haptic visuality with femininity. Cixous's distinction between hearing and comprehension that parallels her distinction between seeing and sight, might similarly suggest that Lispector also practises a haptic aurality; she touches things by listening to them, and is touched in return.<sup>43</sup> Her emphasis on the sensual over the abstract, and on touching over comprehending, when framed through Marks' ideas, shows that Cixous privileges haptics in her description of how feminine knowledge is acquired. In her encounter with Lispector, Cixous begins to view *écriture féminine* not as a tactile practice, which would include violent, oppressive forms of touching, but as a haptic practice.

While Marks ascribes an epistemological impulse to optical visuality only, Cixous's notion of feminine epistemology allows for an understanding of haptic perception as a method for

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<sup>39</sup> Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): p. xiii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*: p. xvi.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: p. xii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*: p. xviii.

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Coulthard develops the notion of haptic aurality for film studies. She describes it as 'all those sensory elements not geared at pure understanding', exemplified in moments in which we realise that 'sound literally touches our bodies [...] in order for us to hear'. [18] See: Lisa Coulthard, 'Haptic Aurality: Listening to the Films of Michael Haneke', *Film-Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2012): pp.16 – 29.

acquiring knowledge also. Feminine knowledge is, then, gathered through haptic approaches to the world, and writing that produces haptic experiences, as Lispector's does, becomes a method for acquiring and disseminating such knowledge. Consequently, I sought to devise strategies for emphasising forms of perception in theatre in *Rings*. I did this in two ways: firstly, I used haptic approaches to materials as a method for devising the performances; and, secondly, I sought to arrange the performance space in such a way that it was conducive to haptic perception. In the following, I will discuss: first how I used hapticity in devising the performance score, while calling attention to the limits of this approach; and, then, I will then discuss how the spatial arrangement of *Rings* more successfully employed haptics in such a way that it emphasised a feminine epistemology.

### **Haptics I: Solos**

Together with the performers, I worked on approaching things haptically, which meant trying to make discoveries through bodily encounters with the materials. Each solo grew out of a haptic encounter with the sensual properties of things: Aby worked on the materiality of the circular performance space; Catherine worked on the possibilities and limitations of her bod; Jodie's performance developed from physical engagement with eggs; Nina's with water; and, Stephanie's with apples. My method for creating these haptic solos was based on a series of workshops that I undertook with each performer, in which we explored the different physical properties of the materials with which we were working. For example, Nina's performance, entitled *Sang* (blood), focussed on the property of blood being liquid when it circulates in the body. In rehearsals, we explored how water could become a partner in performance. Water is a peculiar material to perform with since it is boundless and needs to be contained to be present on stage. It does not offer an immediate physical boundary for the performer to play off or move with. Lacking a way of physically engaging with it at first, Nina developed ways of interlocking with water aurally. She tried out various ways of listening to the water and making it sound. Following from this we created a movement score in which Nina was able to engage with water physically, using its specific aural properties: dripping, running, gushing, and so on.

The process of exploring the properties of the materials did not end with the rehearsals; the performers carried the dynamic of exploration through into the public performance. In the following, I would like to single out Stephanie's solo to discuss the outcomes of using haptic perception in the public performance. (A show reel of Stephanie's performance is available on the DVD, see: 'Haptic Solo',)

Stephanie begins her performance by 'laying' the two apples she has kept hidden in her dress as a chicken would lay an egg.

One apple is on the floor; she circles around it, her arms outstretched, holding the second apple. She compares the two apples, measuring their differences. She demonstrates that this performance is about these individual apples, not 'the apple', a general, taxonomic category.

For the duration of the piece she tests the various properties of these unique apples. She finds out how they roll, how long she can balance them on her head for, how often she has to drop them before they break.

Once broken, she assembles all the pieces into a line, beginning with the largest piece, ending with the smallest. She then starts taking bites out of the apple she has not broken, adding those pieces as she goes along. Later, she sucks the juice out of some of the remainders.

Finally, she reassembles the pieces of the apples into a new apple.



Stephanie's performance score took off from Cixous's writing on Eve and the apple. Wanting to know the sensual dimensions of the apples she was working with motivated her piece. During rehearsals, Stephanie and I were particularly concerned with how we dealt with the 'strangeness' of the apples. Cixous advocates a new approach to strangeness throughout her writing on *écriture féminine* – in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' she condemns 'desire [...] that stultifies the strange' and contrasts it with feminine desire that '[watch-think-seeks] the other in the other'<sup>44</sup> – but particularly in her writing on feminine knowledge. She admires Lispector's 'struggle [...] against the movement of appropriation'<sup>45</sup> of strangeness by '*knowing how not to know*, knowing how not to avoid getting closed in by knowledge, [...] knowing how to not understand without being on the side of ignorance'.<sup>46</sup> While Cixous proposes that feminine modes of knowledge-seeking do not appropriate strangeness, she emphasises that the coming to know the other and its strangeness entails a transformation of both parties. Pamela Hofer, for example, describes this form of union as an 'absorption without destruction of the other' in which 'one becomes the other'.<sup>47</sup>

Stephanie and I sought to find out whether haptic approaches might be a strategy for establishing a contact with the other without diminishing its strangeness. In conducting a sequence of tests with the apples, Stephanie aimed to discover their specific properties. Through the sustained investigation of the texture, flavour and shape of the apples, she developed a particular way of being with them through touch and taste. She tried to let the apples drive her investigation, rather than acting upon them: her body followed the rhythm of their encounter as she followed the accidental path of the apples as they rolled, unpredictably, across the stage. Her body and the body of the apple coalesced for the duration of the piece as they depended on one another and shaped each other's movements and actions. Stage arrangements in which bodies and objects are equally expressive are typical of postdramatic practices. Lehmann, for instance, draws attention to the fact that postdramatic theatre has 'a curious tendency to foreground objects' with regard to their 'tactile' and intense qualities.<sup>48</sup> I propose that when the intensities of objects are foregrounded in such a way they come to be seen as equal to the human performers and are

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<sup>44</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 893.

<sup>45</sup> Cixous, 1988: p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 22. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Pamela Marie Hoffer, *Reflets Réciproques: A Prismatic Reading of Stéphane Mallarmé and Hélène Cixous* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006): p. 113.

<sup>48</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 72

no longer treated as passive materials that are acted upon. In this way theatre produces feminine hapticity.

However, Stephanie's performance also demonstrated how difficult it is to maintain a feminine position without slipping into appropriation. While we worked hard to develop a performance score in which Stephanie did not appropriate the apple and act upon it, we could not sustain a feminine relation to the apple throughout the performance. In order to reach the inside of the apple, Stephanie had to enact violence upon it: for instance, she dropped it several times on the floor until it split. The difficulty of maintaining a non-appropriating position has been flagged up by several critics of Cixous. Marta Peixoto, for example, critiques that Cixous is only able to claim that Lispector writes in a feminine style by 'freezing and magnifying' specific moments of her writing while ignoring others.<sup>49</sup> In doing this, Peixoto argues, Cixous is appropriating Lispector for her own purposes, enacting a 'disguised authoritarianism' that conflicts with her ideas on femininity.<sup>50</sup> Rosemary Arrojo further draws attention to the character of the black maid in Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* with whom the narrator has an 'undoubtedly aggressive' relationship, implying that there are unexamined class and race conflicts beneath the surface of Lispector's writing that Cixous ignores.<sup>51</sup> Arrojo, in turn, overlooks that Cixous's interpretation of story of G.H. as a fable of change in which the narrator learns to interact with otherness. Cixous does not view G.H. as a flawless embodiment of femininity. Still, both these accounts of Cixous and Lispector do suggest that revoking appropriation is not simple. It is a process that includes mistakes and dead ends, though this does not mean that the ultimate goal to approach strangeness without objectifying it, should be given up all together.

This also means that postdramatic practices only partially fulfil Cixous's demand for a renewed relationship with the other and for an epistemology in which the other is not mastered or appropriated. While postdramatic theatre might give greater place to things, this does not mean that they are completely freed from a utilitarian, mastering discourse. I would like to suggest that the impasse we encountered in trying not to appropriate the materials we were working with was to some extent caused by the differences between

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<sup>49</sup> Marta Peixoto, *Passionate Fictions: Gender, Narrative, and Violence in Clarice Lispector* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*: p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> Rosemary Arrojo, 'Interpretation as Possessive Love: Hélène Cixous, Clarice Lispector and the Ambivalence of Fidelity', in *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London, New York: Routledge, 1999): p. 158.

theatre and writing. I will draw on Cixous's reading of *The Passion According to G.H.* to explain this. In the novel, the female narrator, G.H., discovers a cockroach in her house, in the maid's room to be precise. She accidentally crushes it, while not killing it immediately. G.H. is struck by the creature's endurance and will to survive. In a ceremonial gesture she decides to consume some of the fluids oozing from the insect's body, evoking the symbolic incorporation of Christ in some Christian traditions. Cixous notes that the narrator realises that she has committed a mistake and that her action was appropriating and objectifying:

the marvellous thing about this story: she immediately realises, passing through the portal of error, that she was mistaken. Her mistake was that she did not give up the space to the other. [...] The text teaches us that the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification. The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity.<sup>52</sup>

Stephanie had to act upon the apples in order to prime them for the expectations that the theatre carries with it: that something will happen. In the same way as the reader of the story of G.H., according to Cixous, realises that the cockroach cannot be subsumed into the human symbolic system without violence, I realised through making *Rings* that theatre's demand that something must happen, independent of whether this action represents a fable or not, inevitably leads us to master the apples. The apples were incorporated into the symbolic order of theatre which meant treating them as passive objects, rather than worlding things.

## Haptics II: The Performance Space

While the way I employed hapticity in the solo performances only partially achieved my goal of developing a method for producing a non-appropriating, feminine epistemological practice in theatre, I regard the second method I explored to have been more successful. This method was based on the use of space and scenography. Cixous points out that avoiding objectification and mastering the other hinges on how space is negotiated. Like Heidegger, she believes that distance is key to learning to appreciate thingness, which leads Cixous to adapt his notion of nearness and distance into what she calls a politics of approaching.<sup>53</sup> Rosi Braidotti helpfully summarises Cixous's notion of approaching as 'a

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<sup>52</sup> Cixous, 1991 (a): pp. 170 - 171.

<sup>53</sup> Cixous discusses Lispector's writing in reference to Heidegger in *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (1990: pp. 28 – 43) as well as in the essay 'Clarice Lispector: The Approach' (Cixous, 1991 [a]: pp. 50 – 77.). She also makes reference to him throughout *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (1991 [b]).

new science' that demands the ability to 'receive the other', based on the idea that 'all living matter is a sensitive web of mutually receptive energies'.<sup>54</sup> It is about getting close to something without giving up the distance that is needed to acknowledge its absolute strangeness. Reaching out, crossing space, is a delicate operation that needs time, Cixous emphasises. It is only possible by going ahead slowly. And it is also about being at the 'right distance': if one gets too close to the thing, one runs the danger of pressing oneself onto the other, subsuming it, as Stephanie did at times.<sup>55</sup>

This negotiation of space is achieved in a particular way in writing in which, as a symbolic practice, there is a great deal of space between the signifier and the signified. Cixous explains this in relation to Clarice Lispector's writing. Using flowers as an example, she contrasts two ways of using word. On the one hand 'there is a way of saying "tulip" that kills every tulip'.<sup>56</sup> When the word comes too close to the thing, it presses itself onto the thing, crossing the bar between the two, violating the tulip. On the other hand, she writes, 'there is a Clarice way of making-the-tulip, and from the stem to the eye's pupils, I see how the tulip is real'.<sup>57</sup> Lispector's writing in Cixous's description is able to touch the sensory reality behind the word. The signifier ceases to function as a taxonomic division of the world and becomes a way of evoking an absent sensate reality. This does not mean that Cixous begins to assume that writing brings forth unmediated presence – she negates representation as presencing – but that writing and reading can produce the *jouissance* of material encounters. This haptic poetics avoids the potential for violence in touch by remaining at a distance. As Marks writes, by not 'actually touching' the 'unknowability' of the other is maintained.<sup>58</sup> The kind of touching that interests Cixous includes distance that needs to be traversed: the distance between the thing and its symbolic representation, the word, for instance.

Since writing relies on symbolic signs, a certain distance to the thing is always given. While writing must work on approaching the thing, traversing the distance without mastering it in order to produce feminine knowledge, the thing is often already present in theatre, especially postdramatic theatre which relies more on intense signification than representational properties. Viewed through the prism of States' suggestion that everything

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<sup>54</sup> Braidotti, 1994: p. 194.

<sup>55</sup> Cixous, 1988: p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Cixous, 1991 (a): p. 72.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Marks: p. xviii.

presented on stage is both semiotic and phenomenological, postdramatic theatre might be seen as tipping the balance towards the latter. This does not mean that the semiotic properties of theatre are eradicated but that they are minimised or pushed into the background. The conclusion from the fact that the thing is empirically present in theatre might be that theatre must step back, increase the distance between it and the thing, in order to allow the thing to appear in its strangeness. This, however, risks losing touch with the thing and foreclosing a haptic approach to it: keeping too great a distance risks losing the other 'to oblivion', surrendering it to forgetting.<sup>59</sup> Alternatively, and this is what I suggest happened in *Rings* in its most successful moments, the thing might be brought into extreme close-up, so that it appears strange again and haptic forms of perception overtake categorising perception. Parallel to Marks' reorientation of the discourse on haptics in film theory from centring on the 'viewer's inclination to perceive haptically', to discussing how a 'work might offer haptic images', I tried to create a type of theatre in *Rings* that would offer itself up to haptic perception.<sup>60</sup>

Marks suggests that haptic images in film 'do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image'.<sup>61</sup> To achieve a similar effect in theatre, to produce the sense of the 'close-up', I initially considered asking the audience to touch the materials the performers were working with. However, I quickly decided that in order to explore the play between proximity and distance that is important to Cixous's notion of arriving, the audience should remain at a distance from the actual objects. Since haptic perception highlights that touch is an element of vision, sound, smell and taste, I sought to create a staging method in which this would come to the fore. Trying to create a type of theatre that gives itself to haptic perception drove my decisions with regard, in particular, to the spatial arrangement of *Rings*. The following example demonstrates a moment I observed during the performance at the dress rehearsal on 20 of March (a similar scene is available on the DVD, see: 'Haptic Space'). The illustrating pictures, which were taken during the dress rehearsal, loosely correspond to the description.

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<sup>59</sup> Cixous, 1991 (a): p. 105.

<sup>60</sup> Marks: p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

				
<p>Nina has just begun investigating the tactile dimension of the water. She dips her fingers in the bucket in front of her and lets the water slowly run down her fingers.</p>	<p>Catherine is in the middle of writing a sentence when she is interrupted by an apple rolling in to her space. She pauses, unsure what to do. After a moment she rolls the apple back to Stephanie. Then she begins to dance.</p>	<p>One of Jodie's eggs has cracked. She is carefully investigating it. At the same time she keeps an eye on Aby, who is moving with her eyes closed, to ensure that she stays within her demarcated space.</p>	<p>Aby has closed her eyes and is executing a sequence of exhausting movements. During this she holds a microphone to her lips, which amplifies the sound of her breathing.</p>	<p>Stephanie is balancing one of her two apples on her head. It falls and rolls into Catherine's space. When Catherine rolls it back to her, she lies down and balances it upon the other apple.</p>
<p>Soundtrack:          Louise: 'The voice opens my eyes and I am born from this'.          Cara: 'It is in order to have something that I want something'.          Cassandra: 'I drink myself down'.</p>				

The way I have presented the excerpt from the performance here – divided into five columns and a vertical text box that cannot be simultaneously read while they occupy a shared space – replicates the spatial arrangements of the performance. The performance space and the kind of perceptual experience it sought to facilitate emerged from how Cixous believes one can approach or come to know phenomena in a feminine manner. Typically, she is more interested in the detail and the part than the greater picture. She explains the reason for this in an essay on Lispector's short story 'The Chicken and the Egg'. In it she warns that we cannot see phenomena, in this case the egg, by looking at them directly. She writes that the 'egg does not lend itself to a "look"', rather, so as to 'respect' the egg, 'one has to give it a quick glance'.<sup>62</sup> Not just one glance will do, however, one must '[put] the egg into orbit' and glance at it from all sides and angles to

<sup>62</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 102.

see it.<sup>63</sup> This method of approaching means that the egg ‘remains unseizable’.<sup>64</sup> This fragmented approach to the egg acknowledges that we can never arrive at a state of complete knowingness, solving the other, but that we can traverse some of the distance to the other by taking our time. In doing this the most mundane thing, an egg for instance, can be seen as an endlessly evolving mystery whose worlding force creates the subject of knowledge, upsetting the dichotomy between subject and object.

As Cixous proposes that feminine knowledge is gathered by gazing at the egg, touching it with glances, incessantly, from all angles without fixing it, so the spatial arrangement of *Rings* encouraged the spectators to look at the performance from all angles, moving around it, without finally arriving at a stable, fixed position or distance. The spectator’s gaze could not survey or take in the entirety of the performance because the five solos and the soundtrack were shown simultaneously. Spectators were encouraged to momentarily zoom in on details – body parts, objects, sounds and gestures. My own experience of watching the performance and of informal conversations with spectators after the event confirm that most spectators flicked between a close-up, detail-orientated mode of seeing and a wider image, encompassing the whole space. However, neither mode of watching allowed the spectator’s gaze to master fully the *mise en scène*: either the simultaneity of the five performances overloaded the attempts to survey the entire performance; or, the gaze became stuck on fragments, forfeiting the whole. By arranging the space in such a way that details were emphasised rather than the wholeness of the *mise en scène*, I intended the spectators to be brought close to the material, to engage with things as textures and to perceive the performance haptically, without literally touching the materials as the circle kept the spectators at a distance.

Lehmann emphasises that postdramatic theatre has a different relationship with space than dramatic theatre forms. He writes that, whereas dramatic theatre takes place in ‘medium spaces’ in which ‘the stage frame functions like a mirror that ideally allows a homogeneous world of the viewers to recognize itself in the equally coherent world of the drama’,<sup>65</sup> postdramatic practices, in contrast, are more suited to very large or very intimate spaces. With regard to the latter, of which the space in *Rings* is an example, he explains:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid: p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 150.

A theatre [...] in which not the transmission of signs and signals but what Grotowski called ‘the proximity of living organisms’ dominates perception, runs counter to the distance and abstraction essential to drama. If one reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of a tense centripetal dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs.<sup>66</sup>

Lehmann has introduced the notion of unsurveyability to describe this tendency towards the extreme. While the ideal of dramatic theatre is to present phenomena as surveyable and abstract, as taxonomically stable, postdramatic theatre revels in the unsurveyable, the too close and the too far away. I would argue, however, that the emphasis that postdramatic theatre places on the materiality of things and bodies to some extent favours the up-close over the far away. By bringing the textural, material reality of theatre to the fore, postdramatic theatre tends to draw on haptic forms of perception to establish a contact between the stage and the auditorium.

Haptic encounters allow us to know the other relationally, as a continually changing, worlding thing rather than a static, empirical object, frozen in time and positioned at arm’s length. In so far as postdramatic theatre not only presents objects alongside human bodies but facilitates haptic, close-up experiences of the material textures and intensities of objects, bodies and other stimulants of the sensorium, it creates a space in which feminine knowledge is expressed and gathered. However, Marks stresses that haptic and non-haptic perception are not dichotomous, neither exists by itself fully to the exclusion of the other. My experience of watching *Rings* confirms Marks’ contention. I found myself moving between perceiving the performance haptically, enjoying how the textures, sounds and smells touched me, and snapping out of this mode of perception. This typically happened when I was reminded of the presence of the other spectators; in these moments I found myself detaching from the materials, and re-entering a taxonomic relationship with them.

Postdramatic theatre and, I suggest *écriture féminine* also, cannot entirely erase perceptive modes that are based on taxonomy and detachment. Rather, they both succeed in momentarily tipping the balance towards haptic experiences which defy epistemological models premised on desire for the absent thing by going beyond ‘classification’ that ‘falls under the coup of all the laws’ and, instead, foregrounding the *jouissance* of coming to

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

know the present thing.<sup>67</sup> Although touching things beyond the law does not become a sustained way of being, I still propose that it is more than a mere rupture of the law or rebellion against it. In this, I am proposing a more hopeful politics of postdramatic theatre than Lehmann. While he acknowledges that in postdramatic practices, objects emancipate themselves from verbal discourse, he still tends to describe object practices as ‘mute’ since they deny representation.<sup>68</sup> According to Lehmann, the intensity of objects and bodies on stage are powerful because they are disruptive, not because they are articulate; he appears to be describing the hysteric condition. However, when Cixous’s notion of tactile, haptic knowledge is taken into account, the emphasis on the intensities of objects can be seen as more than disruptive: it articulates feminine, sensual knowledge. Cixous’s idea of feminine epistemological practices suggests that the relationships between people and objects in postdramatic practices go beyond hysteric muteness and its political limitation, and point toward a different kind of politics and knowledge.

## **What kind of a Libidinal Education is a Postdramatic Education?**

A feminine approach to knowledge is a highly political issue, Cixous insists, and it is connected to what she terms libidinal economies which refer to questions of property; one has to ask oneself ‘is this mine or does this belong to me’ Cixous writes, and acquisition: masculine narcissism, for instance, ‘annexes, takes possession bit by bit, [...] it spreads out on to the others, on to property and other objects, all objects’.<sup>69</sup> As such, the way we approach even the smallest thing is paradigmatic for every larger political issue; our ‘relationship to things’ exposes our political and libidinal conditioning, Cixous explains.<sup>70</sup> Premised on an idea similar to Jean-François Lyotard’s notion that ‘every political economy is libidinal’, Cixous proposes that masculinity and femininity, two different types of libidinal composition, influence our political outlook, our relationship to knowledge and impact on our political institutions.<sup>71</sup>

In one of the first versions of her reading of Eve, that also features some of her earliest writing on Lispector, Cixous explains that a masculine libidinal economy is geared towards

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<sup>67</sup> Cixous, 1990: p. 12.

<sup>68</sup> Lehmann, 2011: p. 384. Translation by the author.

<sup>69</sup> Cixous, 1977: p. 68. Translation by the author.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid: p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993): p. 108.

‘pure interdiction, pure you mustn’t’, it is premised on accepting the father’s no, and the absence of things, following the father without questioning.<sup>72</sup> Invoking the famous orgasmic ending to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Cixous sees a feminine libidinal economy as premised on a yes, ‘the yes of Molly Bloom’.<sup>73</sup> Cixous theorises the orgasmic yes as the corner stone of feminine libidinality: in contrast to masculine libidinality that is premised on lack and appropriation, and that values others only according to their use-value, femininity figures the other as a Heideggerian thing, a worlding being that commands respect of its strangeness on its own terms.

It is thanks to Lispector that Cixous is able to develop and sharpen her descriptions of a feminine libidinal economy, especially in relation to epistemology: Cixous ‘[takes] lessons of things’ at ‘the school of Clarice Lispector’.<sup>74</sup> The lessons Lispector provides, Cixous writes, are lessons of ‘letting come, receiving’, approaching.<sup>75</sup> Feminine epistemological practices make room for a feminine politics that preserves difference and strangeness without barring access to the other. *Rings* demonstrated how feminine epistemology, rooted in feminine libidinality, might be produced in theatre. Although, as I point out in the preceding section, this was not entirely successful since the performers returned to acting upon materials rather than receiving them, the performance demonstrated that hapticity can be employed as a method for approaching. In its most successful moments, the performance allowed its spectators to forge haptic connections with the performers, materials and actions. In these instances, *Rings* disregarded the father’s no and revelled in the pleasures of sensual perception, producing feminine libidinality.

It is important to note, as Judith Still points out, that libidinal economies in Cixous’s understanding are not innate and ahistorical, but are produced by, and in turn produce ‘ideological state apparatuses’.<sup>76</sup> Even in one of her earliest essays, ‘Sorties’, that walks a fine line between essentialism and non-essentialism Cixous makes clear that she believes that ‘training, education, supervision’ are methods for the ‘reproduction of ideological

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<sup>72</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Reaching the Point of Wheat, or a Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman’, *New Literary History* 19, no. 1 (1987): p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Cixous, 1991 (a): p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid: p. 61.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Still, ‘A Feminine Economy: Some Preliminary Thoughts,’ in *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous Reading and Teaching*, ed. Helen Wilcox et al. (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990): p. 51. Still borrows the idea of ideological state apparatuses from Louis Althusser who uses the term to describe all those institutions that transmit ideological values while not being part of the state itself. Examples might include: education, religion and the media amongst others.

results' which sediment in our libidinal composition.<sup>77</sup> Precisely because our libidinal training is anchored in history it is possible to imagine a 'radical transformation' of culture by putting different forms of desire into circulation.<sup>78</sup> Cixous's comments on the ideological, rather than innate, foundations of sexed libidinal structures arguably problematise my decision in *Rings* to work with female performers only. By doing this, I did not wish to imply that only women can access a feminine libidinality. However, because of the feminist nature of the research project I regarded it as important to create a space for women to collaborate, develop their practice and perform together. On reflection, I consider this decision to be potentially problematic since it allowed for too easy a slippage from feminine to female, risking re-iterating the patriarchal norm that women are more naturally inclined to feminine libidinality and sensuality. Were I to perform *Rings* again, I would consider working with performers of different sexes.

Writing and reading both express and participate in our libidinal education. *Écriture féminine* is, then, a type of writing that is marked by a feminine libidinal economy and expresses feminine knowledge. Cixous imagines writing as a space where this 'transformation of social and cultural structures' can take place: it provides 'the very possibility of change', she claims.<sup>79</sup> Writing and reading are a political pedagogy, a method of learning to approach the world in a manner that is grounded in feminine epistemology: writing becomes a politico-poetic praxis. If writing and reading can be understood as potentially revolutionary practices because they participate in our libidinal education, the same applies for theatre: it also expresses different libidinal compositions. Asking under what circumstances postdramatic theatre is feminine means asking: what kind of a libidinal education does postdramatic theatre provide?

Since libidinal economies are exposed in how we treat that which we view as 'other', the status of objects is a useful indicator of what kind of libidinal composition works of art express. Birgit Haas has criticised the status of objects in postdramatic theatre. For Haas postdramatic theatre is disempowering and 'postpolitical' since it 'dissolves the division between subject and object'.<sup>80</sup> According to Haas, it does away with the notion of the agent, political human and, thereby, any hope for political change. She proposes that the flattening of hierarchies between people and objects in postdramatic theatre depicts the

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<sup>77</sup> Cixous and Clément, 1986: p. 83.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Cixous, 1976: p. 879.

<sup>80</sup> Haas: p. 54. Translation by the author.

endpoint of human agency by validating stasis, brings history to a standstill and, as a consequence, affirms the dominion of capital and commodity fetishism in late capitalism. Haas even ascribes fascistic tendencies to its aesthetics. Since it shows the human subject 'descend' to parity with objects: human life is degraded to a 'material'; the human subject is no longer figured as the rational 'ruler of nature' (*naturbeherrschendes Wesen*) but as a dominated and subjugated object, she writes.<sup>81</sup> Haas' critique of postdramatic theatre concentrates primarily on the hysteric aspects of its politics. She interprets its resistance to the law of political categories as an expression of apathy and nihilistic acceptance of inertia. Her criticism should not be underestimated and, if it is accepted, has dire consequences for proposing a feminist, or indeed feminine, politics of postdramatic theatre. If the human subject is victimised and objectified in postdramatic practices, and all hope for political change is vanquished, then postdramatic theatre cannot be useful for feminist politics. Moreover, if postdramatic theatre objectifies human life, irrespective of gender, nurturing a dangerous ideology that have been used historically to legitimise violence and oppression, then feminists should actively reject postdramatic forms.

Making *Rings*, however, gave me a different impression of the relationship between subjects and objects in postdramatic theatre. I believe it prompts a different reading, one that should appeal to feminists. Instead of seeing human beings as degraded by sinking to the level of objects and, thus, instating a global objectification that resembles late capitalist and neoliberal ideologies as well as oppressive, fascist structures, postdramatic theatre might be regarded as revaluing objects and those human beings who have been historically, culturally and symbolically figured as objects: women, for example. During the development of *Rings*, the performers were not degraded or disempowered. Rather, making the performance, as one collaborator commented to me after the public showing, allowed them to take part in a process of gathering knowledge.<sup>82</sup> By embarking on a rehearsal process that was not geared towards creating a representation of the knowledge developed in its course, but embodying and performing it, the performers were able to gather knowledge of Heideggerian thingness and appreciate the ability of all materials to create themselves as subjects, without themselves being constructed as objects.

I propose that the performance did not annihilate the performers' agency and that they did not 'descend' to the level of objects. Instead, they and the spectators actively participated

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid: p. 102. Translation by the author.

<sup>82</sup> From a private conversation with Jodie Wilkinson.

in creating a space in which the world-creating properties of things were allowed to flourish. Lehmann proposes that doing this is a common trait of postdramatic theatre. Postdramatic theatre, he suggests, makes it possible to create a *mise en scène* in which the thingness of all beings is acknowledged: ‘when human bodies join with objects, animals and energy lines into a single reality, [...] theatre makes it possible to imagine a reality other than that of man dominating nature’.<sup>83</sup> He observes that, at times, ‘dialogue between people and objects’ replaces the ‘verbal dialogue of drama’ in postdramatic theatre with the effect of flattening the hierarchy between the human and the non-human.<sup>84</sup> Just as the many sign-systems of theatre are presented with equal weighting and without a unifying logos, people, objects and percepts are presented in ‘landscape-like spatial structures’ alongside each other.<sup>85</sup> The finding that feminine epistemology is, at its heart, connected with thingness, points towards the need for further research on the relationship between *écriture féminine*, contemporary discourses on thingness – from which Cixous’s work is surprisingly absent – and theatre.<sup>86</sup> While a discussion of this lies outside of the scope of this thesis, I suggest that this might constitute a future research project.

The question, then, is whether postdramatic theatre expresses feminine libidinality towards things, in which case Haas’ critique might no longer apply. I do not believe that the answer is simply one or the other. Just as every person’s libidinal make-up is not entirely feminine or masculine, but a complex mixture of both, postdramatic theatre too can show elements of both masculinity and femininity. *Rings*, for instance, demonstrated how difficult it is to maintain a non-violent, non-objectifying approach to things in a symbolic structure. Lehmann’s precise formulation, that postdramatic theatre ‘makes it possible to imagine’ a

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<sup>83</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 81.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid: p. 73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid: p. 81. Lehmann’s use of the term ‘landscape’ presents some problems here in relation to *écriture féminine* since it might be taken to imply a spectator who consumes and appropriates the landscape. Cixous’s recent pronouncements on the ability of literature to ‘remind us of the landscape state’ that includes the spectator within the landscape, might offer a different perspective on this structure. She discussed the ‘landscape state’ in a research seminar at the University of Sussex, claiming that writing is a method for allowing ‘oneself to become the forest or desert’ and ‘reminding us of these inner, intimate apparitions’. These formulations suggest a more interconnected relationship between humans and landscapes, and challenge the binary between the inside and the outside. While an in-depth consideration of what the ‘landscape state’ might mean for feminism and theatre studies lies outside of the scope of this thesis, I believe it merits further research. (Hélène Cixous, ‘Ayai! The Shout of Literature’. Centre for Creative and Critical Thought, University of Sussex. 13 May 2013. Research seminar.)

<sup>86</sup> The fact that the call for abstracts of the American Society for Theatre Research for their conference in November 2014 explicitly invites papers on the ‘performative and historical agency of things’ and performances in which ‘the “stars” are things, places or non-human entities’ indicates that the study of thingness is a growing field in theatre studies. (‘ASTR/TLA 2014 Call for Proposals’, American Society for Theatre Research Homepage, [http://www.astr.org/?page=14\\_Call](http://www.astr.org/?page=14_Call), Accessed: 3 Mar 2014.

different form of co-existence, is key to theorising the political efficacy of postdramatic theatre and its relation to feminism.<sup>87</sup> It does not necessarily enact or embody a utopian space in which a feminine epistemology and feminine libidinal economy are manifested. Instead, in undoing the law, it creates an ‘experience of potentiality’, that gestures beyond the current phallogentric system.<sup>88</sup> By undoing the categories of the political, it creates a space in which there is a potential for a new, feminine politics but this does not mean that it is always realised.

When postdramatic theatre succeeds in envisioning non-objectifying relations, in which difference is maintained and the other is not appropriated while undoing the hierarchy between different types of being, it puts a feminine libidinality into circulation. By spotlighting the question of libidinal education I do not intend to advocate a return to what Jacques Rancière describes as ‘the pedagogical model of art’, premised on the notion that we learn moral behaviour from seeing it.<sup>89</sup> Rather, libidinal education has to do with affect and is closer to Rancière’s idea of ‘aesthetic efficacy’ of art.<sup>90</sup> In this model, which Rancière prefers, art’s political efficacy is figured as its potential for creating ‘new passions’.<sup>91</sup> Rancière suggests that political art enacts a kind of emotional and affective tutelage that is able to alter the horizon of the common, instating new bodily practices and emotional relationships. In presenting the non-human alongside human bodies, and allowing us to envision the worlding attributes of all others, postdramatic theatre takes part in the redistribution of the sensible towards a feminine economy of libidinal relations.

In this way, postdramatic theatre is not feminist in an overt manner through representing women, their struggles and their lives, for instance, but through putting femininity into circulation. The consequences of a feminine libidinal education go beyond feminist concerns understood narrowly as bettering the lives of women, towards a reformulation of our relationship with all differences. Although this runs the risk of losing political specificity, I agree with Elizabeth Grosz’s assertion that feminism can move beyond the study of women towards envisioning entirely new structures of relating and being. She writes:

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<sup>87</sup> Lehmann, 2006: p. 81.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*: p. 163.

<sup>89</sup> Rancière, 2010: p. 135.

<sup>90</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 63.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*: p. 72.

This [...] is the task of feminist politics and feminist knowledges: to give being to that which may become, to explore openly that which we do not yet know, to expand on that which we might come to know and on our ways of knowing. This expansion of feminist theory — beyond feminism's common focus on dealing with empirical women as its objects and beyond its analysis of (the repression or expression of) femininity and its representations within the patriarchal order to raise new questions about materiality, cosmology, the natural order, about how we know and what are the limits, costs, and underside of our knowledge – is necessary in order to develop new ideals, new forms of representation, new types of knowledge, and new epistemological criteria.<sup>92</sup>

Arts practices might accompany this expansion of feminist theory by nurturing new affects and sensations beyond the phallogentric order and desire premised on absence and, in doing so, join political efficacy and aesthetic experiences. When postdramatic theatre expresses feminine, haptic knowledge and cultivates a feminine relationship to the other, it does precisely this.

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<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005): p. 129.

# Conclusion

My series of practice-as-research performances explored methods for realising Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* in theatre. Throughout the second part of my thesis I have sought to draw attention to the specific potentialities that theatre brings to *écriture féminine* and to discuss how the outcomes of my practice-led research resonate with postdramatic aesthetics. By pinpointing nodal points at which postdramatic practices and *écriture féminine* intersect – the use of vibrating, material and synaesthetic signifiers, a compositional form based on poetic improvisation and the expression of feminine knowledge – I have tried to show that there is an analogous relationship between the two. Kathleen Gough defines working by analogies as way of determining a form of kinship that 'does not elide difference', while at the same time does 'not [curtail] the possibility of seeking the 'both/and' in place of "either/or"'.<sup>1</sup> In navigating this tension, I have necessarily focussed on points of overlap – the both/and – at the expense of moments of division between the two. Amongst the latter I would, for example, count the tendency of some postdramatic practices to cite pop culture and 'coolness', a dimension of contemporary reality that is wholly absent from Cixous's writing.<sup>2</sup> However, where pop culture is ironised and ventriloquized – for example in the work of as Stefan Puchner and Gob Squad – rather than simply reproduced, the aesthetics of postdramatic 'pop theatre' makers may be seen to resemble Cixous's playful intertextuality and ironic subversion of familiar literary genres.<sup>3</sup> It might, then, be the case that these theatre makers are starting from a different set of reference points while employing strategies comparable to Cixous.

While my thesis argues that there is a structural analogy between Cixous's *écriture féminine* and postdramatic theatre, I think it is important to caution against concluding that all postdramatic theatre is feminine. Deirdre Heddon's reflections on the politics of live art apply here. Contesting the idea that there is something 'essentially political to live art practices', she argues that the politics of live art needs to be understood as a potential.<sup>4</sup> This potential is only ever realised 'in singular acts of live art'.<sup>5</sup> Equally, I believe that,

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Gough, *Haptic Allegories: Kinship and Performance in the Black and Green Atlantic* (London: Routledge, 2013): p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lehmann, 2006: pp. 118 – 121.

<sup>3</sup> Morag Shiach for instance points out that the 'eleven different styles of writing' in Cixous's novel *La* (1976) – she takes this number from an article by Christiane Markward – '[provoke] a consideration of the role of irony and parody'. See: Shiach. 1991: p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre Heddon, 'The Politics of Live Art', in *Histories and Practices of Live Art* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

whilst postdramatic theatre practices have the potential to produce femininity in particular ways, not every postdramatic performance realises this potential, especially because the spectator has to be taken into account in any such realisation. The aesthetic methods that I determined during my practical research propose ways that aim to realise this potential.

These are:

- ♦ Making signifiers vibrate by repeating them across different contexts and in doing this, allowing their meaning to shift and transform. In consequence the meaning of signifiers is rendered undecidable.
- ♦ Emphasising the materiality of the signifier to create affective impact, rather than semantic meaning and exploiting the synaesthesia of theatrical signs to make meaning proliferate.
- ♦ Employing an oceanic dramaturgy by using duration and repetition to create an unbounded, improvisational structure. This figures the work as a poetic work-in-progress, reaching towards the yet-unknown.
- ♦ Using haptic forms of perception to explore and communicate phenomenological, feminine knowledge rooted in a feminine libidinal economy that avoids appropriating strangeness.

These formal strategies are not intended as a set of proscriptive traits for creating *écriture féminine* in theatre or a feminist postdramatic aesthetic. Rather, they represent a collection of suggestions developed in a subjective, experimental and emergent process. While Cixous's *écriture féminine* in prose prompted my theatre practice and aided me as an example and a method in this research project, I believe they can be applied to theatre independently of her writing. As such, I hope my findings might be used by theatre-makers seeking a feminist method in postdramatic theatre as a starting point for their creative work.

## Postdramatic Theatre and Feminist Politics

Although the practical outcomes of my research are particular to the collaborators, texts and practical circumstances in which the practice took place, I believe that the results of my experimentation can be illuminating for scholars of postdramatic theatre and feminism, as well as for practitioners. Throughout the written reflection on my practice, I have aimed to connect my findings to discourses on the politics of postdramatic theatre. In doing so, I identified a problem common to the politics of both postdramatic theatre and *écriture féminine*: the tension between destructive strategies that seek to momentarily interrupt the law and the possibility of shaping new affects beyond phallogentrism. I have expressed my

reservations towards a politics that only aims to interrupt the law. Framing it through feminist discourse, I have termed this a hysteric politic since it, like the historical hysterics, rebels against extant power relations but offers no method for changing them or imagining alternatives.

Such a hysteric politic runs the risk of folding back on itself and supporting the law it seeks to challenge, similar to the process that Guy Debord terms ‘recuperation’.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, permanent interruptions or suspensions of common law can also be used by those in power to instate a ‘state of exception’, which Giorgio Agamben asserts is rapidly becoming ‘the dominant political paradigm of government in contemporary politics’.<sup>7</sup> Agamben argues that the state of exception is characterised by an ‘emptiness of law’.<sup>8</sup> As such postdramatic theatre, which Lehmann claims ‘depos[es] of [the categories of the political] instead of betting on new laws’ might be seen to be aiding and abetting the contemporary organisation of power.<sup>9</sup> Lawlessness runs the risk of being co-opted into the dominant paradigm of power making it problematic for feminists.

However, in Chapters 5 and 6 I considered how approaching postdramatic theatre through Cixous’s *écriture féminine* offers another way of thinking about its politics and relationship to the law. Cixous’s ideas after her encounter with Clarice Lispector’s writing suggest ways in which art can take part in creating visions of reality beyond phallocentrism and the Name-of-the-Father that instates lawfulness. Taking off from a deconstructive analysis, her *écriture féminine* proposes: firstly, a way of employing a poetic method to move towards the unknown, creating ever-evolving, new constellations of being and expression; and, secondly, by creating a space in strangeness and difference are not appropriated and that nurtures affective relationships beyond the binarism of phallogentric structures. I found that postdramatic aesthetics also contain the potential for realising these two aspects of *écriture féminine*. This suggests that the politics of postdramatic theatre can go beyond interrupting the law, instead creating visions of a differently organised and experienced reality.

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord warns that revolutionary activity and avant-garde artistic innovations are frequently assimilated into the prevailing order and are recouped in order to strengthen it. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995): pp. 136 – 137.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005): p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*: 18.

<sup>9</sup> Lehmann, 2006: 179.

I propose that, because postdramatic theatre has a potential for such a creative politics, based on affects and percepts, it might be valuable for contemporary feminism. By generating new sensations that lie outside the dominant phallogocentric paradigm, it has the potential to intervene in, and renegotiate the relationship between, ideology, desire and knowledge. Rather than presenting a political thesis or message, postdramatic theatre cultivates affects. If art, as Cixous implies in ‘Sorties’, is an ideological state apparatus that shapes our imaginary relations and desires, then art practices that create alternatives to phallogocentric imaginary structures are a vital ingredient for social change.<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière describes this as the ‘aesthetic efficacy’ of art, its ability to make seen, heard and felt who and what is expelled from the domain of the sensible.<sup>11</sup> By redrawing the frontiers of the sensible, art can uncover what is expelled from the law. While this type of political efficacy might not immediately suggest a new social, collective organisation, it nonetheless supports social change by working on the individual and collective Imaginary. As Cixous explains:

the political [...] does not stem simply from the political scene, [...] it begins obviously by the discourse of the speaking subject on him- or herself, which is to say that all that makes the political scene – relations of power, of oppression, enslaving, exploitation – all of this begins within me.<sup>12</sup>

When postdramatic theatre makes the world seen, heard and felt in a way that does not inscribe a masculine but a feminine libidinal economy – by reframing binary oppositions as multiple differences and communicating feminine, phenomenological knowledge, for example – it contains a feminist politics. I hope that my findings will be used by scholars of feminist and postdramatic theatre to uncover instances in which the potential for femininity in postdramatic practices is realised, thus opening up the landscape of postdramatic theatre to further feminist scrutiny.

Further, my thesis, like Plana and Waychoff’s work, aims to reintroduce *écriture féminine* into the contemporary debate on feminist aesthetics in theatre and demonstrate its usefulness for thinking about the politics of postdramatic practices. It is my contention that Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, specifically, is revitalised as a source for feminist theatre studies in light of the emergence of postdramatic theatre and I have sought to identify how her *écriture féminine* might inform our understanding of postdramatic theatre throughout

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<sup>10</sup> Cixous and Clément: p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Rancière, 2009: p. 63

<sup>12</sup> Cixous, 2008: p. 83.

this thesis. Because *écriture féminine*, as conceptualised and practiced by Cixous, manifests primarily as a poetic practice, it can be transformed and reinvented over time as I have tried to do in my practice-led research. This challenges Geraldine Harris' suggestion that *écriture féminine* is bound to a specific time and place that is now historical.<sup>13</sup> Similarly to the studies by Plana, Waychoff and my own, that seek to make a case for the continuing relevance of *écriture féminine* to the study of contemporary theatre, Cixous is also being re-examined in other fields. The first translation of 'The Laugh of the Medusa' into German was published in 2013. It is accompanied by a set of critical and poetic essays that not only address its historical importance but also examine it for its contemporary appeal.<sup>14</sup> Further, Martin McQuillan, has recently called for a re-assessment of Cixous outside the paradigms in which she was received in the late 1980s and 1990s: 'between "essentialism" and the characterisation as "Lacanian"'.<sup>15</sup> He makes a case for reading Cixous on her own terms which '[call] for a way of reading as yet unformulated'.<sup>16</sup> I would suggest that one method for 'reading' Cixous's 'inexhaustible, unfolding text' is to explore it in and through practice as I have done in this thesis,<sup>17</sup> since this allows for a continuation and transformation of her ideas, making them relevant for the present moment.

## Future Practice and Research

Creating *Rings* led me away from working on signs and composition and towards considering objects and non-human materials in theatre. The result of devising the solo performances through exploring materials haptically, and then trying to present them to the spectators in a similarly haptic fashion, was that the hierarchy between the human and the non-human began to dissolve. The haptic performance style I developed merged the human and the non-human into one in the *mise en scène*, as the pictures below demonstrate. (See: 'Non-human Example' on DVD.)

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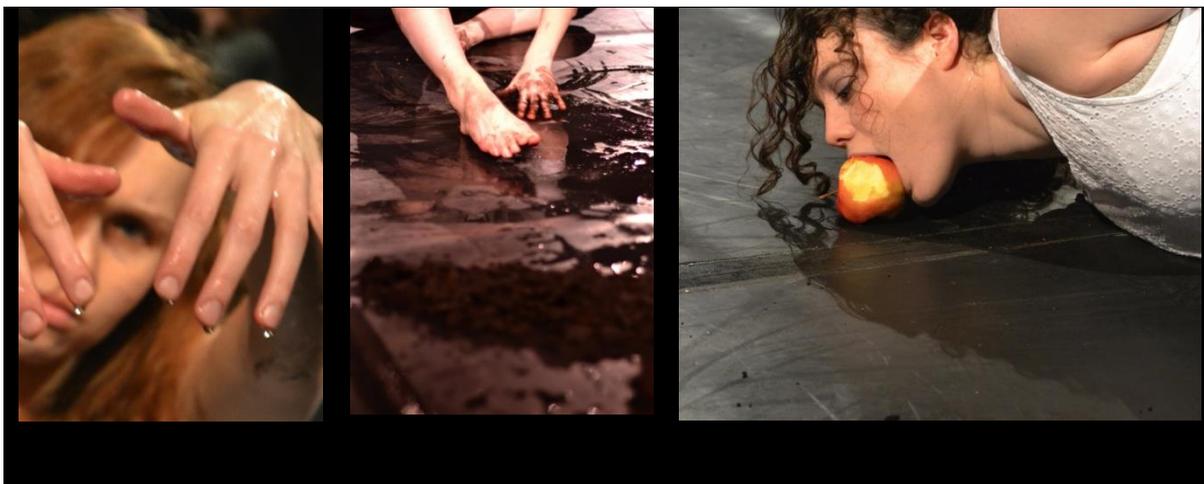
<sup>13</sup> Harris, 2011: p. 233.

<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Das Lachen Der Medusa Zusammen Mit Aktuellen Beiträgen*, ed. Esther Hutfless, Gertrude Postl, and Elisabeth Schäfer (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction Without Derrida* (London, New York: Continuum, 2012): p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*: p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.



These pictures are cropped in order to demonstrate my own experience of watching *Rings*. They, and the video, exemplify how the ‘zooming in’ that *Rings* prompted, fragmented the human body in the perceptive field of the spectator and joined it with non-human materials: a finger merges with water, a foot with mud, or an apple is consumed and enters a performer’s body. *Rings*’ tendency to foreground the non-human is consistent with a shift in Cixous’s political thought after her encounter with Lispector’s writing. While, as Abigail Bray points out, Cixous’s work on thingness and the non-human represents a change in emphasis from sexual difference to ‘a broader contemplation of the multiple differences of materiality’, it is still imbued with feminist politics.<sup>18</sup> Exploring how to revoke violence and mastery is a fundamental part of her overall project that seeks to adapt binary oppositions into multiple differences.

Authors who aim to join feminist and ecopolitical concerns, like Verena Conley, have suggested that ‘phallogocratic culture is founded on the exclusion of nature and women’.<sup>19</sup> Such exclusions, Josephine Donovan notes, are ideologically founded upon an ‘ontology of domination’ that is ‘enabled by a binary epistemological mode and practice that reduces living beings to the status of objects, thereby [...] permitting their exploitation, abuse and destruction’.<sup>20</sup> An effort to revalue objects and energies then might be regarded as feminist. Since, as Hannah Arendt explains, ‘the worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its ‘“objective” reality’,<sup>21</sup> we cannot avoid being objectively other and othered. How we

<sup>18</sup> Bray: p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> Verena Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997): 106.

<sup>20</sup> Josephine Donovan, 'Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading the Orange,' *Hypatia* 11, no. 2 (1996): p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971): p. 19.

approach difference, whether we objectify the other or respect its thingness, is key. A feminine approach to the non-human, positioning people alongside things, represents an affirmation of multiple differences and world-creating forces that all demand respect and inviolable integrity, allowing liveliness to all things animate and inanimate, human and non-human.

*Rings*, left me wondering whether *écriture féminine* ultimately points towards the possibility of restructuring our Imaginary relations with our environment, breaking down hierarchies and approaching the non-human in a more generous and collaborative manner. Verena Conley proposes that Cixous's *écriture féminine* moves towards the creation of a different, feminine 'mental ecology'.<sup>22</sup> This has prompted me to wonder whether Cixous's writing suggests an ecofeminist theatre praxis: how a feminine mental ecology might be performed and how it might advance my work on *écriture féminine*. I am interested in how theories of ecology and Cixous's notion of sexual difference might echo each other and impact upon theatre making. Conjoining the two, I believe, might create the possibility for advancing ecofeminist concerns in theatre practice. Cixous's vision of feminine object-relations, for instance, strongly resembles what has become known as non-representational theory in human geography in which, as Rachel Colls explains, bodies are not reduced to 'meaning, values and signification' that contain the 'inherent danger of fixing and ranking bodies according to a prescribed set of differences'.<sup>23</sup> Non-representational theory hinges on a 'relational rather than representational understanding of the world' and promotes knowledge of, and developed from, encounters and interactions between different materialities, affective bodies and things.<sup>24</sup>

While some theorists of ecological issues, such as Verena Conley, acknowledge Cixous's work on the non-human and her contribution to ecological thought, mention of her work in theatre ecology is sparse.<sup>25</sup> This is surprising since it might be possible to derive methods for joining ecological and feminist thought in practice as well as theory from Cixous's writing. As such, I envision my research and practice developing in this direction in the future. *Écriture féminine* not only demands a new relationship to femininity but also to the

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<sup>22</sup> Conley, 1997: p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Rachel Colls, 'Feminism, Bodily Difference and Non-Representational Geographies,' *Transactions* 37, no. 3 (2011): p. 431.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*: p. 432.

<sup>25</sup> Baz Kershaw, for instance, acknowledges that Cixous, alongside Kristeva and Irigaray, 'cleared the ground' for positions that challenge the nature / culture divide but does not discuss Cixous's work in more detail. Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): p. 212.

thingness and it may be possible to devise from this a feminine, ecopolitical practice that can ‘remind us of the landscape state’.<sup>26</sup> This state, in which the human and non-human are no longer dichotomous, but interact in an erotic, respectful way, preoccupies Cixous’s recent thinking:

But look our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless. And we are ourselves, sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tide, swimmers, children, waves. More or less wavelly sea. Earth, sky, what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all. Heterogeneous, yes, for our joyous benefits she is erogenous, the erogeneity of the heterogeneous.<sup>27</sup>

Based on this current research, I believe that exploring such a state in practice might reveal further potentialities for creating *écriture féminine* in theatre, beyond those I have suggested in this thesis, and illuminate an aspect of Cixous’s thought that has not yet been fully explored in relation to what it might contribute to the discipline of theatre and the activity of worlding.

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<sup>26</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Ayaï! The Shout of Literature’. Centre for Creative and Critical Thought, University of Sussex. 13 May 2013. Research seminar.

<sup>27</sup> Transcribed from: ‘Hélène Cixous in Conversation with Alexandra Grant’. Nottingham University. Research Seminar. 10 Sep 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMPVbpNcDa4>>

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