

Heather McCalden 28 February

Easy Listening

text by **Guy Robertson**

I first came across McCalden's work when she was awarded the 2021 Fitzcarraldo Editions and Mahler & LeWitt Studios Essay Prize. Her book, *The Observable Universe* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, Hogarth Books, Editorial Sigilo, all 2024) explores many of the same issues as *Easy Listening*, taking the body and its entanglement with technology as a central motif. The book centres on the loss of McCalden's parents to AIDS in the early 90s and is described by the publishers as, "a prismatic account of grief conveyed through images, anecdotes and Wikipedia-like entries. ... *The Observable Universe* questions what it means to 'go viral' in an era of explosive biochemical and virtual contagion."

McCalden worked on the manuscript of her book at the Mahler & LeWitt Studios in Spoleto, a residency program which makes use of the former studios of Anna Mahler and Sol LeWitt. Her writing was punctuated by daily walks into the mountains surrounding the medieval Umbrian town. There she found sites to explore movement – in particular, a clearing in the sacred wood of Monteluco and, within the forest, tiny grottoes used by monks as retreats for spiritual reflection. The resulting performance, *Liquid Time*, began with McCalden, framed tight by a doorway, lighting the darkened space with a single match

and, transitioning through trance music and projections of star-like dust particles, concluded with layered visuals of mountains and a rising sun. The movement from an inner world, at once protective and confining, to an outer world, here more liberating than fracturing, recurs again.

For McCalden, it is the immediacy of performance (both the attendant vulnerability of the performer and the sense that something *live* is at stake) and its ability to convey atmosphere, which are among its defining attributes and strengths. She also values its capacity to disrupt and confront. She concludes, "I've always felt that dance has the power to transform, destabilise, diffuse, inspire, or evolve any situation. It can do this because its ingredients are space and time, which are the building blocks of the universe."

Agnes Questionmark 01 March

Attempt II

text by **Ginevra de Blasio**

The recent development of CRISPR-Cas9, a gene editing technology that allows DNA to become malleable, and the advancements in the study of CHM13, a cell able to build a complete picture of the human genome, are opening up the possibility of creating alternative evolutionary pathways controlled by technology and our own will. Reflecting on these innovations, in *Attempt II*, Agnes Questionmark constructs a scenario

succeeding a human-induced genetic experiment to create a new species. Positioned on the floor, twelve experimental subjects are contained in cadaver bags due to their foretold death.

The title indicates that the performance is the second of a series that began with Attempt I, where the possibility of a genetic evolution was implied through the birthing of an unidentifiable creature. However, such experiments are bound to fail because humanness still cannot be fully transcended. The narrative reflects the artist's transgendering journey, envisioned as an attempt to overcome the failure of her birth-gender assignment. The creature's inability to survive on earth's conditions mirrors Questionmark's struggles to define herself in a binary society suggesting that although humans can requisition their identity, their physical bodies cannot be fully transformed yet.

By intervening with her biological anatomy and artificially feminizing her body, Questionmark proves to be the artifact of herself and her own real fiction. "Fiction can pull us into the world of the possible, the thinkable, and the speculative" (Wyant, 2019), as such, fiction becomes the malleable medium to create alternative realities. By deconstructing and elaborating on scientific knowledge, Questionmark blurs the line between fact and fiction to reorientate our understanding of the world while proposing a deliquesced way of being.

Tianyi Sun + Fiel Guhit 02 March

VISIBLE_DEVICES

text by **Alex Meurice**

VISIBLE_DEVICES haunts the performance space with a multiplicity of sounds and

voices, sonic fragments flowing through an interlocking system of human and electronic

receivers and emitters that tease our desire to make sense of a whole from its parts; an

electronic ekphrasis testing the capacity of language to trace the contours of the material world, of bodies and objects.

Matter, space and persons are compressed into an image, an immaterial list of words, a matrix of probabilities. This information is simultaneously extrapolated and re-emitted as a synthetic electronic voice, vibrating particles in the air, provoking bodily movement and human utterances in a reflexive and repetitive flow without origin or destination.

The meaning of words alters with the material substrate which carries them, be it paper, screen, silicon, mouth or magnetic speaker. *VISIBLE_DEVICES* is a dynamic assemblage that modulates the texture, the materiality and the temporality of the voices that flow through it. This 'somatic semantics' dissolves totalizing notions of a singular, disembodied or eternal voice, and challenges stable and isolated subjectivities.

VISIBLE_DEVICES is a total information environment which gives the archive a body, voice, a life – a sentience to the sentence – by mirroring the reflexive structure of machine learning algorithms. The performance tests the limits of our capacity to generate possible futures in the shadow of monolithic archives and the

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relentless extrapolations of 'generative' algorithms.

VISIBLE_DEVICES will be restaged on April 1 at Artists Space for the Segue Reading Series.

- Alex Meurice and ChatGPT

Alexa West 03 March
Department of Aging
text by **Samantha Ozer**

A: They're going to make a lot of decisions on their own. They have phrases that they've learned and they can choose. It's up to them, they have freedom...

[pause]

B: well, I felt limited.

C: I felt disjointed. I don't have a relationship with them yet... I'm still getting to know them. When we add water, I can see them. I can breathe on them...

B: See, I didn't feel so aware of where you were. I was in my headspace a lot.

C: Is it true? Do you think our bodies are somewhat warm still?

B: I don't feel as creaky... but I'm not warm.

In "The Department of Aging," dancers Jade Manns and Gwendolyn Knapp perform choreographed phrases demonstrating miscalculated excessive effort in showmanship and futility. They oscillate between impressive high kicks and furious jumps to pathetic little shimmies and even at moments they recoil in the corner or hide their face in the wall. With movement references to

synchronized swimmers, military drills, and pop stars, they shift between the hubris of celebrity to the anxious vulnerability of a child. The phrases provide a structural framework for the piece and a grounding point between the two dancers, who at times move as if in a solo presentation, often engaging more with their surroundings than each other. While the dancers have much freedom for improvisation, it is through repetition and return of movement that they come together, and in moments of exploration and respite, find common touch.

Their striving for attention reaches a comedic note in the context of their surroundings, as the dancers are not the only players in the space. They share a landscape with three human scale filing cabinets. With the absurd proportionality of being a cartoonish body squisher, every interaction between the cabinets and dancers threatens to flatten out the latter and transform the cabinets into coffins. At moments, the dancers are like cartoon characters, performing exaggerated actions for an audience and then coyishly retreating, often in frenzied cat and mouse duet. Like many of Alexa West's performances which often explore networked systems of labor and human behavior, "The Department of Aging" relies on public services as the cabinets are sourced from a surplus auction from the city's Department for the Aging. Much like the city department addresses issues of care for aging citizens, West's performance considers the threshold of productivity and what we deem a useful body.

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Louis Osmosis 04 March

“Balconisms: A Small Filibuster on Busting the Fill”

text by **Jacob Hyman**

What's he saying? Who is artist? Where is artist?

Someone, some people, are at some distance. They engage in dialogue. Where's Louis? He's not here right now. But listen...

All we hear are voices. Voices that bicker, back and forth, powered by a schizoid frenzy of loose observations and obtuse speculations. An exercise of exorcized virtual ventriloquism - voices are thrown through a walkie-talkie mounted on a podium, fastened to a hand truck.

The hand truck gives the object the ability of walkie-ing while the podium suggests talkie-ing.

They're talking about...outside?

These remarks don't reflect made up fantasies of what's happening in here, instead they reveal what is actually happening out there. Louis remits the public goings and meanderings of the outside to a private crowd. A display of window watching, pedestrians are observed and the audience listens.

The voice becomes vision into another space outside the walls around us. We trust the voice to tell us the truth: that what he says is what he sees. But how can we be sure?

We can't.

Is this...nonsense?

Bickering and banter become the exhaustive (read both ways) mode of the work. Words fill up time; the filibuster serves as the cipher of endurance - they keep talking, and we keep listening. A tool for political obstruction is bastardized towards different ends.

Maybe.

Three voices weave in and out. A snobby Germanophilic culture critic? A prepubescent instigator? A bijoux man know-it-all, Dave Hickey? The typecasted panicked, authoritarian timbre of the walkie-talkie is confused by the alternating subpar vocal impersonations emitting seemingly endless mind chatter and brain spew.

He's talking about me? They're watching us...

Beckett's "Not-I" becomes a maybe-I. "The Stage," includes the walkie-talkie, a machine of transmission that broadcasts sound from Louis' non-present mouth - an organ of emission without intellect. Despite his absence, Louis points to us in the room. A kind of synchronized mash up, in real time, of Vito Acconci's 35 Approaches: "You, in the baggy parachute pants and VETEMENTS knock-off hoodie." Me? Maybe.

Louis comes to us LIVE from who knows where, reporting on the world in front, or below, him. The allegorical camera pans and he begins talking about those in the room, but how? A feedback loop begins to circle.