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# PART 3

Moving House: An autoscenographic practice review

Susannah Henry  
Oct 2020 – Dec 2021

The process of packing the Practice Review now shifts into the reality of

# MOVING HOUSE

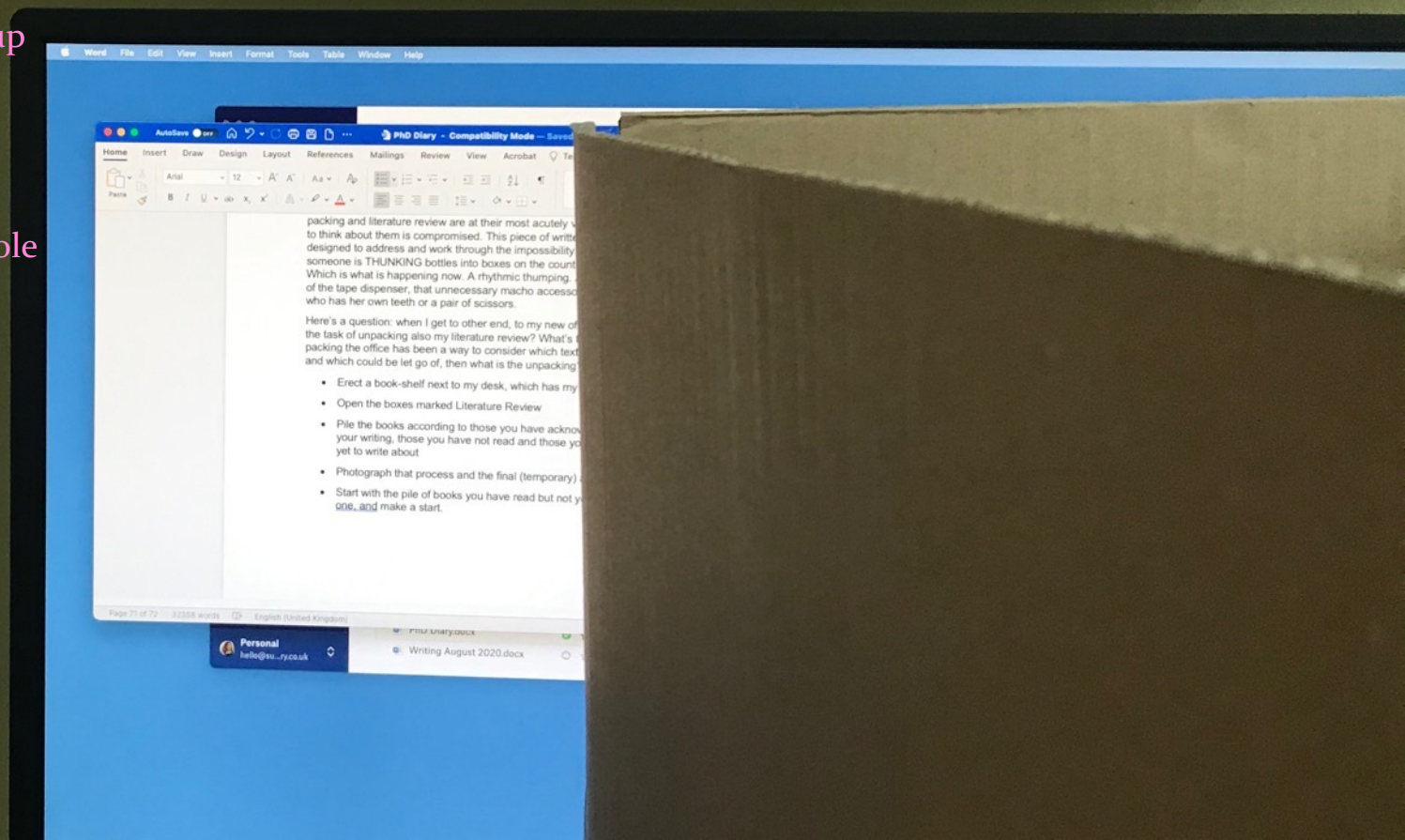
Even though the process of Practice Review is not completed, I must pack up my office.

Anne Lamont:  
"In Texas to give a talk on writing, it's a 3-step waltz: 1) Stop NOT writing, schedule time to stop not writing. Sit down and keep your big butt in the chair. Scribble down some knarly garbagey stuff and then try to make it better, maybe cut 1/4 of it, then write first draft. Victory!"  
Twitter 14/11/2017, 14:52

Below is an extract from my PhD diary, written while packing my Practice Review in our old house in Walthamstow. It's a reflection on the business of tackling the Practice Review for the project in this way.

I'm surrounded by cardboard boxes, having methodically packed across the last month or so, but there's still a pile up of work deadlines and stuff I have to get out the door alongside making space to pack my office.

I have been so irritated by all the obstacles blocking my path to my Practice Review. This afternoon – well, the whole day actually – was supposed to be me going back to my Practice Review for the last time before we move. I have deliberately framed the Practice Review as parallel to my packing to move house. So far, so much *autoscenography*.



# LITERATURE [PRACTICE] REVIEW

GOLDEN  
DOOM

[Continued...] But the reality today is that the real-life circumstances are impeding my moving house themed Practice Review.

My partner has decided to pack up the bottles in the drinks cabinet into fresh cardboard boxes. He's right - this needs doing. But he's doing it right next to the room where I am trying to take the time I allocated to my PhD today. The problem is that what I'm doing LOOKS like just another packing task, but it is precious thinking and doing time.

My autoscenographic practice has been to pack and write in parallel to each other, thoughts occurring as I go. I'm trying to remain calm. We've had so many conversations about my inability to focus when he's doing stuff in the kitchen. The problem is that it's not clear to him - or to me? - how far my packing belongings into boxes is also my PhD. I have made this problem for myself. And given this, should I not try to hear the underscore of taping and box-assembling in the next room as part of the packing soundscape? If my Practice Review is partly a packing performance, then isn't it right that it should have a soundtrack that helps to render the world of the house move more vivid?



My work room on moving day. The process of packing and sorting might have been complete in terms of the real-life house move, but the reality of the Practice Review is that the process continued for a further eight months.

We moved house.

My Practice Review is quietly nestling inside cardboard boxes, inside a lorry.

It is carried into a house.

It sits in the box for three days until Monday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2021, when I get it out again.



My selected  
Practice Review  
texts unpacked  
into temporary  
accommodation.



References  
considered and  
rejected stayed in  
boxes.

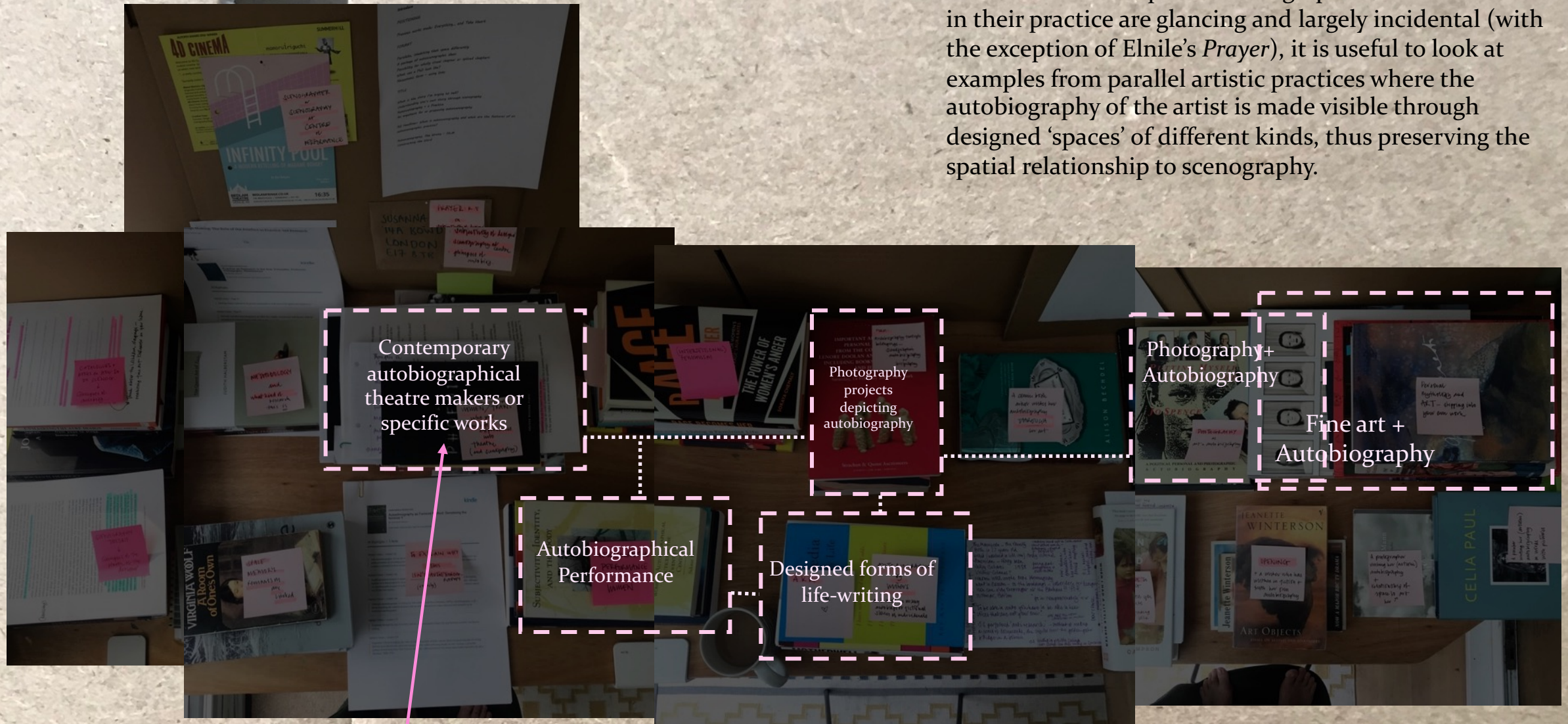


Having moved my boxes into my new office and broadly assembled the references refined at the old house, I move everything into the middle of the room to paint the terracotta walls pink, in the hope this will allow me to mark my formally

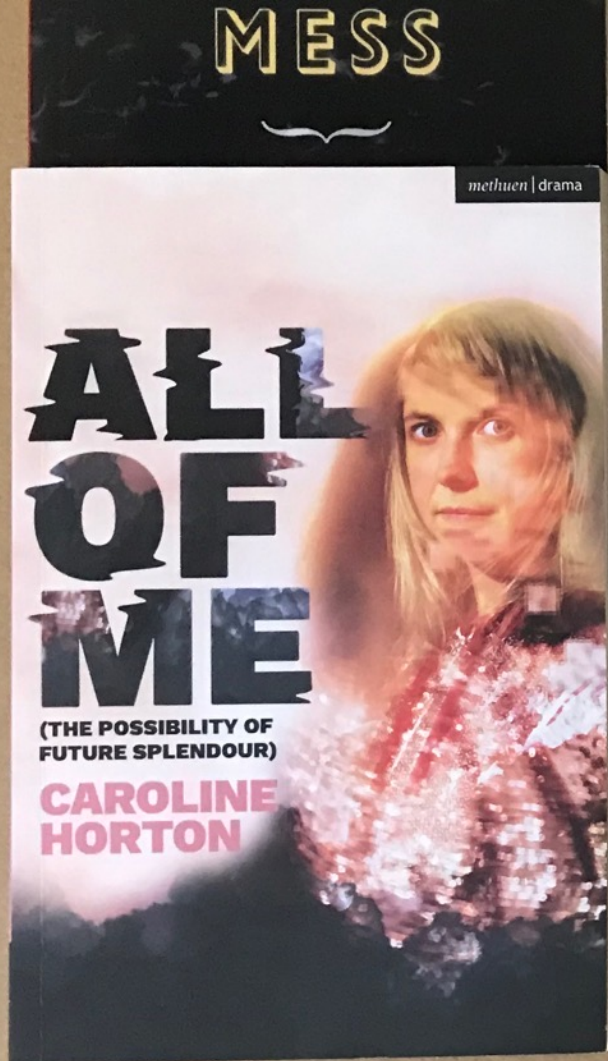
# RESUMING THE PROCESS



Since current examples of scenographers' stories situated in their practice are glancing and largely incidental (with the exception of Elnile's *Prayer*), it is useful to look at examples from parallel artistic practices where the autobiography of the artist is made visible through designed 'spaces' of different kinds, thus preserving the spatial relationship to scenography.

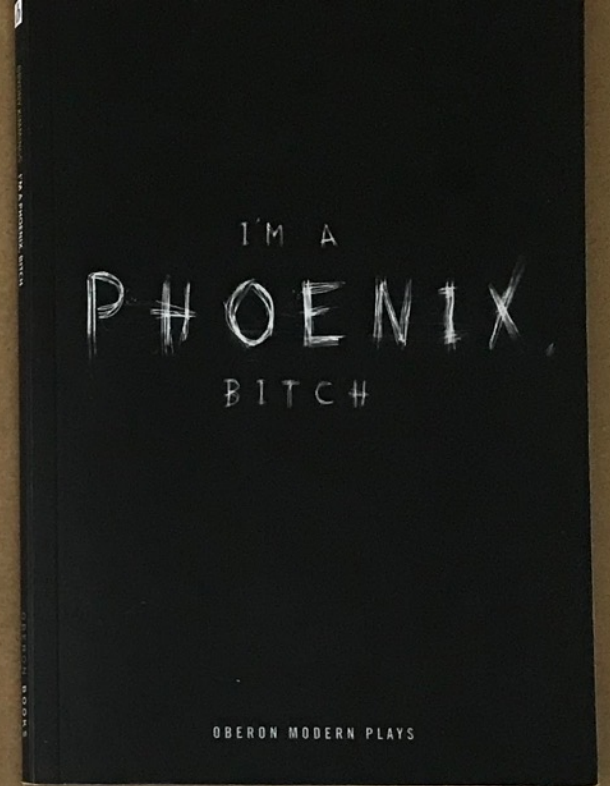
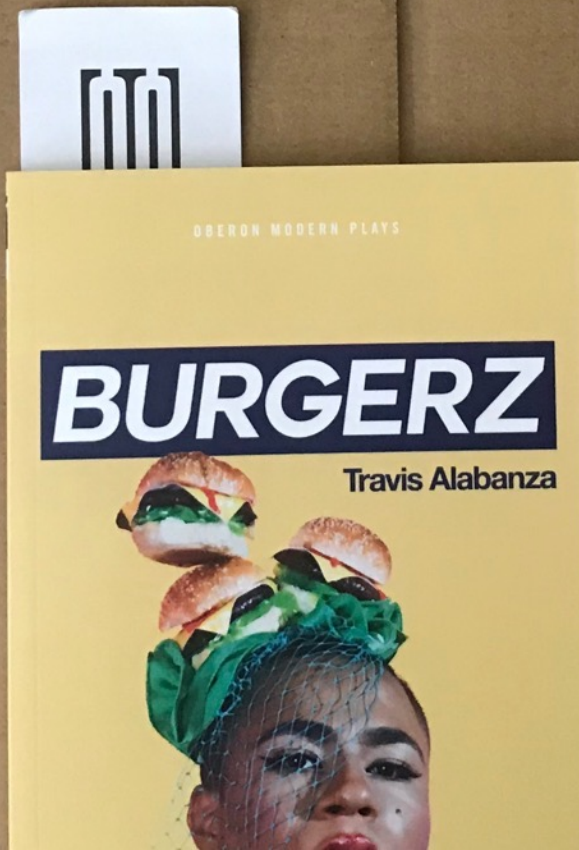


I'm going to offer three contemporary autobiographical performance artists, who are situated here.

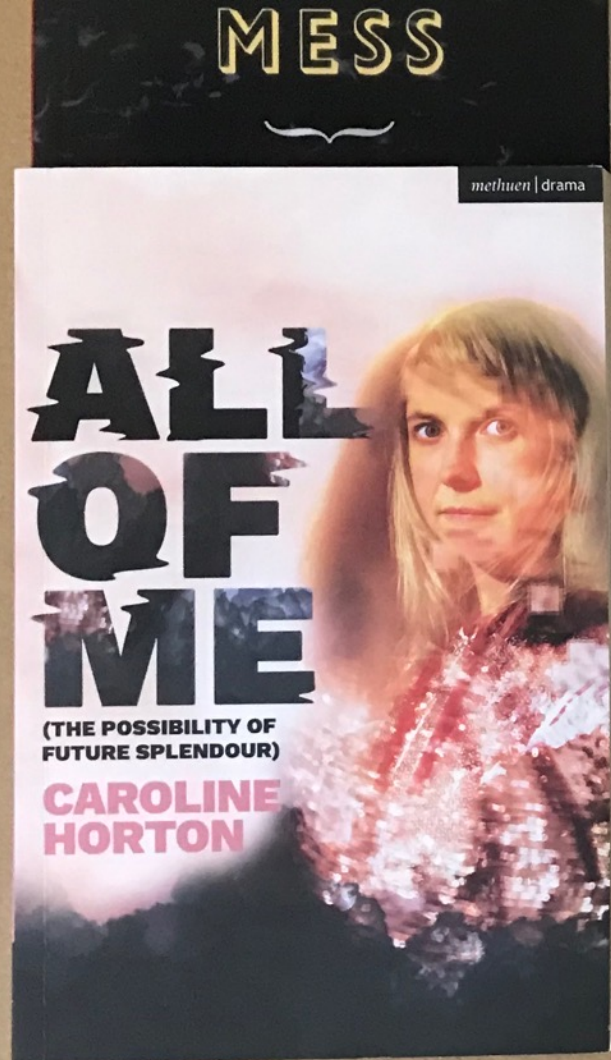


Caroline Horton, a playwright and performer produces work under the company name China Plate. Horton's pieces *Mess* (2012) and *All of Me* (2019) explore episodes of bulimia and depression experienced by Horton, and these are presented in environments which are designed to reflect the psychological condition of the performer within the narrative.

Travis Alabanza's autobiographical piece *Burgerz* (2018) takes a transphobic assault on Alabanza as it's starting point. The scenography for *Burgerz* is a fast-food style van which opens out into a welcoming kitchen, through which Alabanza prepares food, educates and entertains their audience, and re-stages the assault.



Bryony Kimmings declares herself, at the opening of *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* to be an autobiographical performance artist, which makes her identity and subjectivity explicit. The most recent of Kimmings' autobiographical performances, *I'm a Phoenix Bitch* (2018) tells the story of an episode of post-partum psychosis following the birth of her son Frank, alongside the end of her relationship with Frank's father, Tim – with whom Kimmings previously performed a piece about male depression called *Fake It Til You Make It*. The environment for *I'm a Phoenix Bitch* draws heavily on B-movie camp and like Horton's work, gives expression to the interior world of the performer-protagonist.



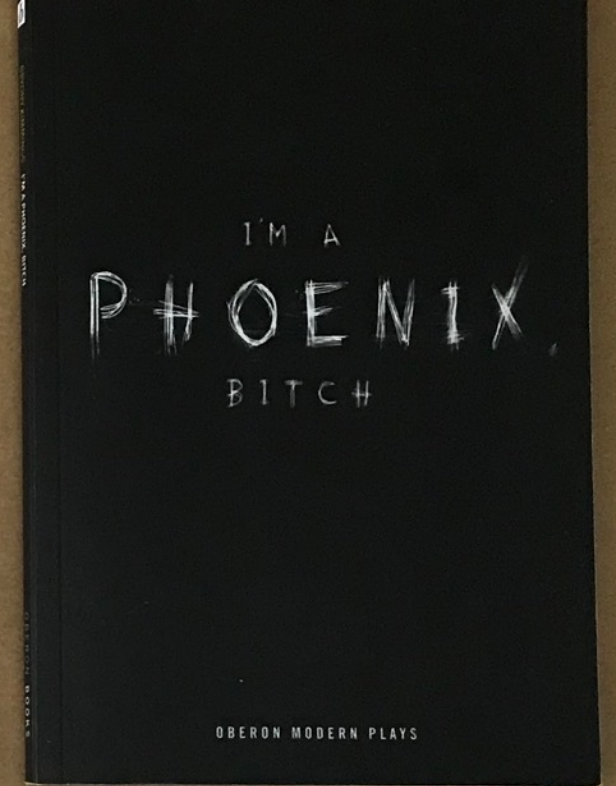
*All of Me* designed by Eleanor Field

While all of these artists are making work from their own life events, all of them work with stage designers to create the environments for these stories.

Thus while you might describe these differently feminist pieces as containing autoscenographics i.e. demonstrating some of the hallmarks of a meeting between stage space and autobiography, they are less readily identified as *autoscenography*, which requires the autobiographical element to be *of* the scenographer.



*Burgerz* designed by Soutra Gilmour



*I'm a Phoenix Bitch* - art direction by David Curtis-Ring

From performance where the autobiographical performer is framed by an environment designed by another artist to represent their story, we might think of environments created by fine artists which are reflective of their story and which they either do, or do not, occupy. This means a shift towards

# FINE ART PRACTICE

and final discussion of the work of sculptor Louise Bourgeois, and how her work 'resonates' (Nelson 2013) with *autoscenography*.





Bourgeois' family history is a significant conceptual - and sometimes material - part of her art. While Bourgeois works across painting, sculpture and installation, it is her installation work and the readings of this as autobiographical or even *autopographic* which suggest a relationship to the proposed practice of *autoscenography*.

Front cover of my book about LB shows *Precious Liquids* (1992)

The scenographic quality of Bourgeois' installations can be seen in her 'cells' and other installations, which are largely static in-the-round spaces, but invite participation and movement in the viewer through detailed placement of 'props' and the use of mirrors. The theatricality of the experience of viewing a Bourgeois installation is noted by Mieke Bal, in her autotopographic reading of Bourgeois' cell structure:

They remain stories of the self (auto-) and they are visually written (-graphy). But they only exist, function *qua* stories, on the condition that the viewers, in the present not the past, activate them. This happens "on the spot", in the here and now of *topos*. (2002: 184)

The activation of stories through interaction 'in the here and now of *topos*' (place) is akin to an experience of place orientation through scenography. The 'happening' in place that Bal describes is analogous to the contemporary framing of scenography as an unfolding sequence of events which 'make us do things' (Lotker & Gough 2013) rather than a static environment in which other things happen. Seeing Bourgeois' cells through the lens of scenography enables a collapsing of the place/writing/viewer-activation conflux, positions an experience of viewing the work as one of place orientation (Hann 2018) and foregrounds the active staging dimension of Bourgeois' sculpture as something that unfolds in time and space.



*In and Out* (1995)

Tate Modern  
Gallery Guide  
(2008)



Postcard of *Child* (1994) - detail

*Passage Dangereux* (1997)

Bal's use of the term *autotopography* to define Bourgeois' work is subtly different to that framed by Dee Heddon in *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), in that the *place* through which memory is written is an arrangement of significant objects rather than a geographic, mappable location. In the reading deployed by Bal, the objects themselves form an autobiographical map. Autotopography in this sense was defined by contemporary art writer Jennifer A. Gonzalez:

In the creation of autotopography – which does not include all personal property but only those objects seen to signify an “individual identity” – the material world is called upon to present a physical map of memory, history and belief. (1995: 134)

Using Gonzalez' definition, Bourgeois use of personal objects and materials belonging to her family archive renders her installation autotopography as well as scenography – in this case an arrangement of objects of personal significance in environmental form. As with other examples cited here, this is not *autoscenography* because of its being situated in the discipline of fine art sculpture, but there is scope to describe a Bourgeois installation as bearing *autoscenographics* since it arguably enacts a staging of an ‘affective atmosphere’ (Hann 2018) through the ‘physical map’ Gonzalez describes.

# CONCLUSION

RESEARCHERS

For Thomson  
and Robert Kunkle

Routledge

ja Hilevaara and Emily Orley

Routledge

The *autoscenography* of this project is framed by arts practice across a range of disciplines - including performance, fine art and life-writing - which foreground autobiographical narratives and the production of spaces or environments in which these can be held. These spaces and environments may be places of performance, sited in galleries or housed in book formats.



Surveying contemporary research in scenography, we can understand *autoscenography* as stemming from an expanded field of practice where scenographers acknowledge themselves alongside the audience as subjective receivers of the experience of scenography and its processes as well as being its originators or architects. *Autoscenography* can be seen as part of a move to acknowledge the creative autonomy of the designer of performance and the contemporary understanding of scenography as having agency rather than operating as a backdrop to performance. The *autoscenographic* format of this practice review aims to embody a personal process of spatial re-orientation (Hann 2018) while building a form of autotopography (Heddon 2008, Gonsalez 2002) in books, boxes, other references, and the scenography of my workroom environments.

While there is no pre-existing defined literature on the intersection of the story of the scenographer with her practice, a key emergent example acknowledging the subjectivity of the designer – Elnile's *Prayer* (2020)- has been identified, and parallel models of the relationship between artist reflection on practice *through* practice have been identified (Conti 2012, Bechdel 2006/2012) alongside related concepts for being 'beside' one's practice (Sedgwick 2002), writing in different modes to encounter it (Hilevaara & Orley 2018) or bifurcation as a model for throwing one's autobiographical voice into a work of scenography.

SARA AHME  
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In terms of the history of feminist autobiographical practice, *autoscenography* can be seen as a manifestation of an acknowledged move towards visibility in the field of life-writing (Smith & Watson 2002). In reviewing the feminist underpinnings of this project *autoscenography* has revealed itself as a means of approaching or spatialising feminism in the name of individual creative practice and its development. As a practice, *autoscenography* draws on theories of Sensuous Knowledge (Salami 2020), feminist building (Ahmed 2017) and critical reflection as a means to live consciously (hooks 2001).

During this practice review, I have spatially re-orientated myself (as a parallel to and *through* the production of scenography) from a landscape of reading and reference spanning five years, to a frame for *autoscenography* which has been built through the actions, places and materials of moving house. This has yielded a series of 'affective atmospheres' on route to this conclusion, which I am writing residing in a new house, working in a new office and with a clear sense of the existing practice and research which grounds, contextualises or proposes the practice of *autoscenography*.



# FRAGILE

## HANDLE WITH CARE

In this way, I find myself moved to an enriched place of practice review, through exploration of lived experience within a crafting of scenography as place orientation. This process has been an *autoscenographic* experiment, finding ways of approaching the activity of 'literature review' from a practice research perspective. Reviewing a concern from my PhD diary (see right) that this was an empty endeavor, I feel the approach has embodied the feminist core of *autoscenography*, in that it has enabled me to acknowledge, grapple and design within the 'sensuous' (Salami 2020) mess of knowledge production and organisation in a way that feels truthful to - and congruent with - that process.

As I head into the new sorting exercise, I'm not filled with confidence. I wonder if this 'moving things around' is just a way of wasting time. Even while feeling confident in my position of 'thinking through doing', it is hard not to visualise a literature review as wholly written chapter - another form of 'desk thinking'.

I'm going to proceed despite my doubts.  
I want to see the results.

PhD Diary, November 2020



Are You My Mother?  
Alison Bechdel

Fun Home  
Alison Bechdel

Bobby Baker  
edited by Michelle Barrett | Bobby Baker



# Moving House: An *autoscenographic* practice review