CHAPTER 15

EXPLORING AUTOTOPOGRAPHY: METHODS

By Rosa Postlethwaite

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will describe the artistic process, research methodology and methods I used during my PaR MA at the University of Cape Town (2013 - 2014). My thesis *Exploring the field of autotopography through live art practice: The Frieze, The Anatomy Lecture Theatre and The Security Hut*, involved creating three autobiographical performances in response to different sites within the university campus. I will describe how the methods unfolded in the first project of the MA, *The Frieze*. These methods were: free-writing, returning to the site, reading texts in relation to the site and reflective writing about the process in discussion with the following authors' conceptualisations of autotopography: González (1995), Heddon (2002), Bal (2002) and Arlander (2012).

POSITIONALITY

Since returning to academia in 2021 to study for a PhD, I have been developing a practice of starting texts, workshops, talks or presentations with a description of my positionality. Considering one's positionality in relation to a research subject is of course widely considered to be important to ethical research. Whilst not achieving accountability or redistribution of privileges, it is a practice that hopes to inform how to act in an unjust world (Duarte, 2017:135).

At the time of writing I identify as being a white, British, middle-class person. I am currently receiving a stipend for a UK PhD from Coventry University and I am supported by savings from my family. I am a fluid/ queer person. I use she/ they pronouns. I have a long-term mental illness. During my master's study in 2013-2014 I identified as being a white, British, middle-class woman with a mental illness, and acknowledging that I was working from this positionality as well as exploring the positioning of myself through performance became key to live art making.

I am a performance artist, dramaturg and facilitator. I work across live art, theatre, dance, club/cabaret performance and socially engaged art. My background as an artist and a scholar has been very closely entangled. To outline the relationship between each of these roles, I have broken down my experience into five chronological periods:

- My development as an artist was initially through scholarship. I studied Drama at Queen Mary University of London, UK (2009-2012). Professor Lois Weaver's course, Performance Composition, laid the groundwork for my live art practice and introduced free-writing as a method for autobiographical performance

composition. Courses on South African Theatre and Performance Studies and Interdisciplinarity led by Dr Nadia Davids, as well as her research into performance, place and historiographic practices in Cape Town, developed my ongoing practice and research interests. The live art performances I encountered during my undergraduate studies in London experimented at the borders of art disciplines, and provoked a desire to explore the edges of disciplines, forms and conventions that has been sustained throughout my career so far;

• I completed my MA in Theatre and Performance practice at UCT (2013-2014). I will not go into too much detail about the MA now as this is the subject of this chapter. However, I will note that I was greatly inspired by my supervisor Professor Jay Pather's practices as a choreographer and curator of live art. The PaR MA honed my strategies for performance-making, which spilled out into art and facilitation projects, including collaborations with The Mothertongue Project[39] and the Scalabrini Centre;[40]

• After the MA I spent eight years working as an artist, dramaturg, producer and facilitator in the UK, mostly in North East England. I adapted my practice of autotopography to form an institutional critique of British Arts organisations in my show *Composed* (2018-2019). I produced and co-hosted a performance club night for queer, interdisciplinary and community-driven work called PUG in the North East (2016-2020);

• I am currently a PhD researcher within the Cotutelle Programme, Mobilising Dramaturgy at Coventry University and Aarhus University (2021-2025). My practice research is in "dramaturgy with other-than-human species". Currently my research supports my practice through developing workshop content. From the other angle, my practice is grounding my research; it's an opportunity to rehearse methods and to remind myself of my experiences and ways of knowing as an artist.

THE PROJECT: 'EXPLORING AUTOTOPOGRAPHY'

I will now discuss my MA research project at UCT, titled *Exploring the field of autotopography through live art practice: The Frieze, The Anatomy Lecture Theatre and The Security Hut* (2013-2014). This PaR project explored strategies of making autotopographical performance.

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39 I was involved with The Mothertongue Project through the organisation's production, *Walk: South Africa*, a performance piece made by a group of South Africa artists in response to Maya Krishna Rao's Walk. Rao created *Walk* as a response to the gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Pandey. *Walk: South Africa* was a response to the gang-rape and murder of Anene Booysen. In 2013 the artists involved were Sara Matchett, Koleka Putuma, Siphumeze Kundayi, Genna Gardini and myself. The 'line-up' of artists changed in later iterations.

40 I was involved with the Scalabrini Centre for Immigrants and Refugees as a facilitator on their drama workshops for one year. These workshops led to the creation of a performance work called, *Centre*, a collaboration between the Scalabrini Drama Group and myself. Centre was performed at Infecting the City Public Arts Festival 2014 and at Sydelle Willow Smith's exhibition *Soft Walls* (2014) at AVA Gallery, Cape Town.

The outcome of the research was three performances that presented the strategies and a written explication of the strategies in relation to theories of autotopography, site, memory and history.

DEFINING 'AUTOTOPOGRAPHY'

'Autotopography' first appears as a concept in contemporary art professor and writer, Jennifer González's chapter "Autotopographies" in the volume *Prosthetic territories, politics and hypertechnologies* (1995). González uses the term to describe personal objects, like trophies, clothing and furniture, presented in visual art that "form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity" (1995:133). Also engaging with art objects, Mieke Bal defines 'autotopography' as a "spatial, local, and situational 'writing' of the self's life in visual art" (2002:180). In "Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as builder", Bal uses the concept to argue against criticism of Bourgeois' work that offers biographical narratives and thus ignores the work's spatial forms (180). Deidre Heddon's use of the term is within the field of autobiographical performance, and more closely relates to the activities I undertook during the MA. Heddon uses 'autotopography' to refer to the study of "the location of a particular individual in actual space, a locatedness that has implications for both subject and place" (2002:4). Annette Arlander also uses the concept in order to analyse a site-based performance project with the private aim of re-engaging with a personally meaningful place (2012:252-253). She modifies the term to "describe practices related to topobiographically meaningful places" (Arlander, 2012:251).

AUTOTOPOGRAPHY

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González's, Bal's, Heddon's and Arlander's definitions of autotopography, and the wider principles they draw on, opened up ways of analysing the making strategies I was developing. These strategies were autobiographical and site-responsive. In performances, rather than presenting personal objects, I installed objects that represented something about my personal experience. The sites that I worked with became topobiographical through the research process, rather than being personally significant before the project. I focused on the intersections between narratives of my life (including the life during the project) and narratives of the site.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

My early experience of trying to assemble a research question for the MA was frantic and confused. When I arrived at UCT I felt estranged from the question I had applied with. I tried to quickly coax an idea from my practice, which was still very young. The two-year course was structured by three main opportunities to present practice within the department (in addition to this we delivered two seminars, and an independent project/ solo performance), these were named: minor project, medium project and research project (the research project included a written explication and viva, alongside the performance). It wasn't until the second year, after completing the minor project, that I could envisage the research design. These feelings of insecurity shaped my methodological approach, which was iterative (supported by the programme structure), and guided by Tim Ingold's description of "wayfaring" (2011) and Walter Benjamin's description of "deviation" in *The arcades project*, a collection of texts written from 1892-1940 (1999).

The methodological approach I took was PaR, following the course convenor Professor Mark Fleishman's observation that, at the broadest definition, PaR is "research that is carried out through or by means of performance; using methodologies and specific methods familiar to performance practitioners; and where the output is at least in part, if not entirely presented through performance" (2012:33). Again, following Fleishman's observations on PaR, I characterised my methodological approach as like 'wayfaring' in the field of autotopography. In our initial workshops on the course, and in the text, "'Routes of inheritance' in performance as research" (2014), Fleishman introduced Ingold's description of "wayfaring" to us (2011). Wayfaring, Ingold argues, is how humans grow into knowledge (2011:162-163). It is by moving through the world that humans know, rather than through the transporting of a discrete amount of knowledge from A to B (Ingold, 2011:162-163). Inspired by this, when starting a research project, I didn't envisage a specific end goal of what knowledge I wanted to hold but rather identified a rough, shifting field to move within. I engaged in a different artistic process for the minor, medium and research project, switching directions, driven by curiosity, through this expansive field of practice.

Another way I thought about how I would come to know about the field of autotopography was through Benjamin's description of deviations. In *The arcades project* he describes how a voyager is knocked off course by the magnetic field of the North Pole (Benjamin, 1892-1940:456). Through this experience the voyager knows *this* North Pole. "What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course" (Benjamin, 1892-1940:456). I sensed that, through wayfaring, I could not directly crash into autotopography – conceived as a clear, static land – but that I could know autotopography through my failure to succeed at it and my shifting positions in relation to it.

METHODS

Free-writing: Free-association was explored in the DADA movement, to introduce hazards into an artwork to demonstrate "the absurdity of binaries such as chaos and order, agency and autonomy" (Hopkins, 2016:256). Free-writing (also known as 'automatic writing') is guided by four rules: 1) to write for a discrete amount of time (e.g. five minutes,

15 minutes) – I use my phone to set an alarm for this length; 2) to not edit yourself; 3) to not pause writing, even if you are writing "blah blah blah"; 4) you might want to start with a theme, or a first sentence and if so, before you start the clock write this at the top of your page. I am not sure if I have adapted this method, or if I am following Professor Weaver's practice exactly, because it was taught in the studio and I have no written record. Free-writing does not need to be a way to draw on personal memories, however, I used it as a method for writing an explicitly autobiographical text.

Returning to the site: I worked in three different sites inside the university campus – one for each of the three performances. When working in one of the sites I would book regular times to spend there. Rather than taking a 'capture' of a site, and then basing my performance on this, I built a physical relationship with it across several weeks. Furthermore my journey to the site (both the journey from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, to Cape Town, South Africa, and the journey from Observatory to the Cape Town central business district) became part of understanding the site and my identity. I explored the mutually constructive and shifting relationship between identity and place. My memories of these journeys were represented in the performance through installed objects, actions and texts. The memories of these journeys also informed which topics to read in relation to the project.

Reading texts in relation to the project: The artworks were also research-informed in that reading secondary texts informed the performance. As 'I' was the one reading the texts this also became part of the *auto*topography. Some texts were explicitly linked, e.g. the site for the final project *The Security Hut* was The Little Theatre and so I read *Forty little years* by Donald Inskip, director of the Little Theatre (1933-1971). Some links were personal and only made apparent through the performance, for example, between the rehearsal room in Hiddingh Hall and art history books about Gustav Klimt's wall-painting, the *Beethoven Frieze*. Reading secondary texts served to create a different kind of relationship than 'returning to' did, however this was still an embodied exercise, a means of jogging memory to activate doing in terms of positioning, writing, installing and doing actions.

Reflective writing about the process: I wrote reflectively about the process in discussion with secondary research into autotopography, site, memory and history. Some of this writing took place within the project and became part of the performance text. Some took place between the projects, and informed the next artistic process. The writing attempted to describe what happened during the artistic process and compare these actions to other practitioners' or theorists' experiences. Furthermore I attempted to consistently write down my understanding of key concepts, in order to track how I was attaining a different understanding through the process and thus, developing (lateral) knowledge through practice.

THE DIFFERENCE IN METHODS FOR PaR

Through the process of PaR I adapted my established practice methods. Due to the reflexive nature of PaR, which involves constantly asking 'what am I doing?', and 'what

implications does this have?' I perceived the methods differently, and therefore could adapt them along the way. For example, I could see that free-writing also involved site-writing, and this opened up a new field of concepts within feminist geography that presented ways of understanding the method differently. While I am a reflexive practitioner outside of academic spaces, I am not always deviating from habitual methods or aware of my knowing them differently.

THE FRIEZE *ARTISTIC PROCESS*

The following is a description of the artistic process on the minor project, the first project on the MA, which led to the creation of a live art performance *The Frieze*. I started this project without a clearly identified research question or area. It was through this process that I began to work in autotopography. In this section I will describe the relationship between the unfolding artistic process (in black), methods (in purple) and methodology (in blue).

The starting point for making *The Frieze* was a conversation with my supervisor Professor Jay Pather, during which I identified 'autobiography, durational and participatory performance' as a broad field that I wanted to explore. A chosen presentation day for the minor project, gave me a deadline for an artistic output to begin working towards.

I booked out a rehearsal room above the Hiddingh Hall library on campus for regular times across two months. Inside the room I began free-writing. Each time I returned to the site, I free-wrote. The text listed associations made about the white walls of the room. This autobiographical text (what I would come to understand as autotopographical) became a key material and locus for the project.

Deviation 1

From one visit to the next the same memories refused to rise up. I had a sense of the past that was not static. And thus autobiography as a means of telling a true, stable, story of a life, felt impossible. Acknowledging this short-coming of autobiography to give a window to a stable past, shaped my text composition. I deviated from writing a continuous narrative and arranged the free-writing in a fragmentary list.

Deviation 2

The free-writing was responding to the site. This led me to the second limit I noticed with the concept of 'autobiography' to describe what I was doing – it did not acknowledge the action of returning to a specific site and responding to it through writing. By reading into autobiographical *and* site-responsive performance practice, I came to Heddon's definition of 'autotopography.'

Deviation 3

I started to compose and rehearse a performance which would become part one of *The Frieze*. This involved reciting the text and stacking the crockery bowls that would inevitably collapse.

I engaged in reflective writing on the experience. This 15-minute talk would become

part two of *The Frieze*. It formed another kind of autobiographical text. When performing this reflective autobiography, I was aware of the limits of autobiography to reflect on the performance I was actually doing – in the present. I understood, through performance, what I was reading about in Judith Butler's *Giving an account of oneself* – "I always arrive too late for myself" (2005:79).

Deviation 4

In the final performance of *The Frieze*, during part one, the audience members could enter the room and leave at will. They were invited to paint crockery at a table while I performed near them. Through this I aimed to explore an unfamiliar form of audience participation. I also aimed to explore duration by performing the looping action for four hours.

After the performance, I could see this project was like 'throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks'. By this I mean, I tried out different elements of performance: autobiographical, durational and participatory, and reflected on what these offered, in terms of gaps in research and personal intrigue. I found that the field of autobiography had been the most generative starting point. In the next project, I focused on autotopography, letting go of participation and duration as subjects for the research.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON METHODS

In summary, the method of reflective writing in relation to secondary research enabled me to track my different understandings of 'autotopography'. This meant that I could return to analyse the project with key points of deviation in mind. And this supported the aim of showing how the PaR was developing (lateral) knowledge in the field. Moving on from *The Frieze,* the method of reflective writing became reflexive writing as I considered the implications of my PaR in relation to legacies of British colonialism and postcolonial realities in Cape Town.

The iterative structure of the programme allowed for a start that felt like 'throwing everything at the wall and seeing what sticks' which activated my practice, and didn't hem me in. In hindsight this was a very useful start as it was clear through the process that the areas of my practice that I was most curious about were the autobiographical urge, and the possibilities of autotopography. During PaR, in contrast to my artistic practice outside of academia, I am consistently engaging with questions in the field. This action of slowly identifying useful concepts along the way enabled me to push the PaR along, deviating from habitual ways of practicing and perceiving practice.

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