Instructions for Forgetting

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Tim Etchells is currently a Creative Fellow in the Department of Theatre Studies at Lancaster University. Best known for his work as director of the U.K. performance ensemble Forced Entertainment, he has also collaborated with a wide range of other artists on works in diverse media and contexts. Published work includes Certain Fragments (Routledge, 1999) and The Dream Dictionary for the Modern Dreamer (Duckworths, 2001). Recent Forced Entertainment performances include the deconstructed ironic rock spectacle, Bloody Mess (2004), and Exquisite Pain (2005), based on a text by the French Conceptual artist Sophie Calle. The group’s latest piece is The World in Pictures and premieres in 2006.
Some Notes on Forced Entertainment's Documentary Projects

Based in Sheffield, U.K., Forced Entertainment comprises a long-standing core group of six artists: Richard Lowdon, Cathy Naden, Claire Marshall, Terry O’Connor, Robin Arthur, and myself as artist director. We have been working collaboratively together for over 20 years on projects in theatre and performance, with occasional diversions into other media. This core group (supported at the time of writing by a management team of three) is augmented when necessary for particular projects. For example, for the recent theatre work, Bloody Mess (2004), the core six were joined by five others: regular collaborators John Rowley and Jerry Killick, and newcomers to the company—Wendy Houston, Davis Freeman, and Bruno Roubicek.

The company’s output to date can be divided roughly into four areas—a core of original devised theatre projects, a side-strand of essentially rule-based performance works of long duration, a second side-strand of (quasi-)documentary performance projects, and a final area that includes works ranging from new media and installation to print and photographic collaborations. These works have been presented widely in the U.K. and in mainland Europe as well as further afield on a more sporadic basis.

Instructions for Forgetting (2001) is one of the group’s intimate, fragmented, and at times semiotic documentary performance works. Perhaps the start of this approach was a project titled A Decade of Forced Entertainment (1994), which we created to mark the company’s 10th anniversary. At that time, in trying to make a performance that would map our own history, work, and process, we were drawn to parallel explorations of the political, social, and cultural landscapes that had given rise to our work. Decade occupied a resolutely different formal space than the majority of our theatrical projects: we dropped our “usual” preoccupations with representation and with theatre—concerns that had been central to our previous projects. We stripped down our aesthetic and approach in favor of a more straightforward presence, eschewing our array of preposterous costumes from pantomime, strip clubs, amateur dramatics, and elsewhere. In Decade—as in the later works, Instructions for Forgetting and The Travels (2002)—the performers are more or less present as themselves, sharing time and space with those watching—telling, recounting, reading, and constructing the performance from evidence gathered elsewhere.

As work on Decade developed, the autobiographical “we” employed in the text to describe ourselves gradually gave way in many places to a semi-fictitious alter ego, “they.” This device—talking about ourselves in the third person—allowed us some distance from the narrative and opened up the possibilities of fiction within the essentially documentary form.

They drew a map of the country and marked on it the events of the last ten years—the sites of political and industrial conflict, the ecological disasters, the showbiz marriages and celebrity divorces. On the same map they marked the events of their own lives—the performances they’d given, the towns and cities where they’d stayed, the sites of injuries and falling in or out of love.

They drew a map of the country and marked on it the events of the previous three, then four, then five hundred years. They kept on going until the beginnings of geological time. Until the map was scribbled over a thousand times—utterly black.
While *Decade* interwove Forced Entertainment’s history and quotations from earlier performances with memories of the wider social history of its time (the decade of Thatcherism, the first Gulf War, the rise of Sega and Nintendo), our next quasi-documentary project, *Nights in this City* (1995), used a playful and often absurdly incorrect text about Sheffield, where we had lived and worked for more than 10 years, set against its actual landscape. *Nights in this City* took the form of a mischievous bus tour, offering a commentary that reinvented what the audience could see from the windows of a bus as it traversed the streets of Sheffield, and in a later version of the same work, Rotterdam. Despite its very different form, *Nights in this City* linked to *Decade* in that it developed our interest in discussing or representing the immediate urban context of our work and in exploring landscape as both a repository for real narratives and as a kind of screen for imagined ones. Common to both projects was a guiding principle that the truth of a place or a time might best be shown through a mix or collision of different kinds of materials. Fact and fiction, fragmentary autobiography and broader collective memory, the stories located in the work itself and the stories brought to it by the audience members would combine and contradict each other to create multiple and varied narratives. Indeed, perhaps what gripped us with increasing strength was the realization that the particularities of the times we lived in—the landscapes we passed through, the stories we experienced, heard, overheard, or recalled—were too complex to be left to what we might call straightforward realists. As we’ve developed an interest in documentary, it has always been with some modifier attached—intimate documentary, hybrid documentary, fictional documentary, mutant documentary—as if to signal that our goal lies beneath, to the side of, or in some way beyond that of strictly factual documentary.

*Decade* and *Nights*—and indeed my later solo performance *Instructions*—were each decidedly incomplete kinds of maps: maps of a moment in time, a world, a place, or a state of mind. The approaches we developed in these projects were born of a play between predetermined formal frames for gathering and creating material (a journey, a specific period of time, or the geography of the city) on the one hand, and an openness to chance (encounter, association, or intervention) on the other. The way that *Nights* could negotiate the limits of the city—its physical architecture, its traffic systems, the structure of neighborhoods, etc.—and at the same time open itself to the stream of unpredictable events, meetings, and memories that the city provided was an influential force. We followed up on *Nights in this City* not by making more guided tours or
Projects on buses, but by continuing to employ devising and gathering methods that would leave the work open to chance and to unforeseen events occurring outside the rehearsal studio.

It was with some of these thoughts in mind that we developed the later projects, Instructions for Forgetting and The Travels. Common to each of them was a simple initial rule, which we adopted to regulate the gathering of documentary material. For The Travels it was a series of journeys in the U.K., undertaken by the project’s six performers, that formed the research phase of the work whose eventual form was a set of fragmentary narratives told directly to the audience. Meanwhile, for Instructions, I gathered material by inviting friends to send me stories and videotapes, again presenting the results to audiences in a simple and direct way.

In The Travels, the destinations for the performers’ playfully envisioned research journeys were chosen purely on the basis of street names taken from maps and online city guides. Acting under this rule, each performer set off alone to visit places throughout the U.K. with names such as Hope Street in Liverpool, Dead Man’s Lane in Essex, Story Street in London, and England Avenue in Blackpool—among many others—in order to see what they could find there and report back on it. The final performance was a combination and juxtaposition of narratives and observations gathered on their summer-long journeys. Such a process inevitably produced encounters with landscapes, people, and narratives that for the most part could not be anticipated. Similarly, my request to friends and acquaintances to donate “true stories” and “five minutes of video material” for Instructions for Forgetting produced a mélangé of letters, emails, and video clips predictable only in its variety.

These playful and somewhat arbitrary mechanisms for collecting became an explicit and significant part of the performances themselves. Through this process, our works were opened to the whims or desires of individuals other than my Forced Entertainment colleagues and me; a variety of strangers in the street, other artists, friends, and acquaintances contributed in diverse ways. At another level, works like Instructions, The Travels, and the earlier Nights In this City and Decade seem to work as virtual invitations to the audience, who often imagine the kinds of material that they might have contributed had they been asked, or the unusually named places they might have visited, or the private names or personal memories they might have for particular parts of a city, and so on.

The frequent references to the process, mechanism, and driving rules for creating both Instructions and The Travels remind spectators that the artists have less than total control. Indeed, bound by their own initial rules, the performers, much like the spectators, often appear “at the mercy” of the material that comes their way. The initial rules create a situation—an empty frame—while the process of how this frame gets filled and what fills it become one level of the drama and the narrative drive of the work. In this sense, the “story” presented by these projects is the story of their own making. The resultant work does not claim to be an objective representation, but is rather a highly personal and contingent set of notes developed on or around a topic. Sitting at the center of Instructions for Forgetting during
a performance, I often have the feeling—just as I did throughout the process—that I’m trying to ride the wave of the material, figuring out ways, as an artist and as a witness, to make connections between disparate things; to find ways to listen to, or simply be with, the material that is there.

Introduction to Instructions for Forgetting

At the core of Instructions for Forgetting are the true stories told and the videos sent to me by a range of friends, artists, and family members, who responded to my call for material to help me make a performance. There is a weight to all of this material, not in the sense that every one “bared all” but in that each text or image I received was an act of self-exposure gifted to me for a performance not yet made, whose direction would only later become clear. To give any material at all meant taking a risk and trusting me—in however small or banal a way.

In the completed work, these donated fragments (in many cases rewritten or edited by me) take their place alongside material written or shot on video by me or my colleagues. In making Instructions, I worked closely with my friends and long-term collaborators, the Forced Entertainment performer and designer Richard Lowdon and the photographer/filmmaker Hugo Glendinning. Working on design and video respectively, they helped shape the performance and the text in substantial ways, experimenting with various combinations of text and video images, with design/spatial configurations, and with the different sequences and juxtapositions of material that would form the architecture of the piece. The making of the piece probably spanned a period of about four months, but was heavily concentrated in the last of these, as the constituency that donated the material and what one could do with it became more clearly defined.

The process we went through was in some ways similar to that for other devised works I have created with Forced Entertainment. As material arrived, in this case from other people, we looked at it and talked about it, identifying sections of video or stories that we thought we could work with in different ways. Some items we selected because they were interesting, others because they were funny, or touching, or whatever. Others we were less sure about. At the same time, we identified stuff that was weak—too “artsy,” too short, or just uninteresting. In this phase, as is often true of Forced Entertainment’s process, we were not pursuing a theme but rather waiting for one to emerge. In the end we probably used about half or two-thirds of the material we were sent; a sizeable portion of the text especially proved unusable. Often we rejected material not because it was “bad” in our view but rather because it didn’t chime with other narratives or images we had been sent. In some cases I would write to people who had sent things and ask directly for more detail on some aspect of a story, or for more video footage of a certain kind.

Throughout the process, there was a sense that in order to survive in the emerging structure, a narrative needed to find echoes or allegiances in other narratives or strong connections to video material. In a landscape of diverse content, we highly valued the growing web of glancing connections; linked sequences of stories, and combinations of image and narrative were more important to us than any single fragment of material, in the search to find an architecture that we were happy with.

In rehearsals we also chanced upon the strategy of using new text to frame and comment on the narratives and tapes that people sent, explaining the source of donated material or the circumstances of its arrival. This strategy provided a way to let audiences in on the “game” aspect of the piece while allowing us to gently mock the rather preposterous rules and circumstances under which the piece was being made. As work went on, we often altered the balance of the piece, either by creating more of this “framing material” or else cutting it back to let the contributions from other people stand out individually.

One of the final factors in the process was related to my role in the performance. While an initial not-really-thought-through “fantasy” was that I’d simply be there to read narratives and show videos donated by other people, even early rehearsals cast doubts on the viability of this approach. Watching provisional “run-throughs” of blocks of material, Richard and Hugo felt my role and presence on the stage
as more and more of a question requiring an answer—and we all felt that there needed to be material directly related to and indeed coming from me as narrator and organizer of the performance. Being a reporter of other people’s stories and images somehow wasn’t enough. The response to this discovery, eventually, was the generation of most of the material that appears in the second part of *Instructions*, which includes two “home videos” that I had made with my children, and narrative material that circles around these videos and spirals away from them in different ways. This second section isn’t necessarily the core of the performance, but it does in some ways provide a ground from which to proceed, and creates an opportunity for me to establish some ideas and a voice for myself—a persona—that I can use to make connections to other material later on in the piece.

The text as reproduced here differs from the one used in the performance in the significant sense that it is missing the 600-word letter from a friend that is used anonymously to conclude the live work. Its absence in the print version—at the author’s request—serves perhaps to mark the difference between the decidedly transitory, ephemeral context of performance and the more solid or fixed arena of publication. There are things, this absence insists, that can be ventured in a live context, mediated by presence and in the shelter of the temporary community that performance brings, but which should not be committed to print—things we might not want, need, or desire to see in “black-and-white.”

The performance setting for *Instructions for Forgetting* is simple, comprised of a central table behind which I’m sitting to deliver the text, flanked by three video monitors (one just behind me, one to my left, and the other to my right), each of them raised up on monitor boxes of varying heights. Toward the back of the space, on my left, there is a table at which an onstage technician, who operates the sound and video equipment throughout the performance, is seated. This is usually Richard Lowdon, though from time to time Johnny Goodwin and Vlatka Horvat have taken on this role. Video plays more or less constantly on the three screens—usually silently, often in slow motion, its content either supporting or contradicting the text, but rarely, if ever, illustrating it directly. No attempt has been made to account for this material in detail; but there are indications of what’s used, and key segments are represented by a short description.

I have a text for the entire performance on the table in front of me, and I read from it a good deal of the time. I’ve never memorized the text, though I’m very familiar with it. I do tend to make a show of “reading” when it comes to the various letters and try to make it seem more like I am working from notes when I perform the linking material.

**Production Credits**

*Instructions for Forgetting* is a Forced Entertainment project by Tim Etchells in collaboration with Richard Lowdon and Hugo Glendinning. It was commissioned by Hortensia Volkers and Katrin Klingan as part of the program Du Bist Die Welt at Wiener Festwochen and first performed in Vienna on 31 May 2001.

Concept, text, and performance: Tim Etchells
Developed and created by Tim Etchells, Richard Lowdon, and Hugo Glendinning
Design and lighting: Richard Lowdon
Video: Hugo Glendinning
Additional video material: Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning
Onstage technician: Richard Lowdon/Johnny Goodwin/Vlatka Horvat

With thanks to the following people who sent me material for the performance: Michael Atavar, Franko B, Sara Jane Bailles, Gary Carter, Simon Casson, Nick Crowe, Mark Etchells, Pascale Feghali, Matthew Goulish, Rinne Groff, Eva Hartmann, Steve Hawley, Vlatka Horvat, Wendy Houston, Elias Khoury, Mary Agnes Krell, Tobias Lange, Emma Leslie, Jo and Christine Lawlor, Elizabeth MacGill, Russel Malliphant, Sophia New, Graham Parker, Mike Pearson, Pipillotti Rist, Tony Shakan, Elyce Semenec, Astrid Sommer, Fiona Templeton, Lisa Wesley and Tony White, Jacob Wren

For more information:
<http://www.forcedentertainment.com>
I ask my friends to send stories and videotapes. For the stories I ask for things that are true. The topic can be anything. I ask for short reports on things that have happened in the world. For the tapes I say, “Don’t make me something special—send what you have.” I say, “I’m sure that whatever you choose is bound to be right.”

I get a phone call from Franko. He says he has got a tape for me. All I have to do is meet him at his studio and he will hand it over.

So I meet Franko and he takes me down to the studio. Which turns out to be this Aladdin’s Cave of half-constructed art objects, mutilated pinball machines, collages, pornographic Polaroids.

Franko has a TV and a VCR which he has somehow managed to set up inside a green metal filing cabinet. To watch the tape we have to peer in through this cross-shaped aperture that he has cut into the side of the metal cabinet using a blowtorch.

Franko reaches inside and hits play. The tape is a collage. Many images fly by. I can make out some scenes from Franko’s performances: he’s lying bleeding on a concrete floor, he is walking a catwalk and dripping blood to the ground as he walks along it. There’s other stuff too: city lights, fashion models taking applause at the end of a runway show.

Mostly though the tape shows Franko in some serious hardcore sex action with three shaven-headed lesbians in leather gear and a set of grotesque sculptures by the Chapman brothers. In particular Franko is getting fucked up the arse by the girls, who are using a decapitated head by the Chapmans, a decapitated head that has a huge penis instead of a nose. “That hurt quite a bit actually,” says Franko, “coz he’s not like a normal dildo. He has not got no flexibility…”

I am watching the tape and wondering how on earth this can be used in the performance.


I take the tape. I take it home. I play the tape to my colleagues. We watch it together. We have to watch it quite a lot. And after a while we decide there’s one thing that maybe we could use, a fragment, a glimpse of something that could be useful. A scene which seems to be in an American apartment. And in it dogs with luminous electric green eyes.

I decide to break what is probably the only rule of the project and I call Franko and I say, “Listen, do you have any more of the dogs? We’d like more of those dogs…” And he says, “I see what I can do.”

Two days later, in the post comes a second tape from Franko. On the label it says: “FRANKO. NEW YORK. DOGS FOR TIM. 2 mins.”

All three monitors show Franko’s tape. Franko (from behind the camera) is talking with a woman in the kitchen of an apartment. There is loud dance music in the background. The camera is all over
the place—filming the floor and the woman, who looks like she might be cooking—and two dogs that are running around. The woman tells Franko that sometimes she leaves a camera running when she goes out—to film the dogs in her absence. Franko is laughing, wondering what the dogs get up to. Later there’s a jump in the tape and the camera has evidently been switched into night vision mode as the image is grainy and green. The dogs’ eyes look huge—vibrant light green—staring at the camera. The tape ends as the woman says “I like this ‘night’ thing. Oh god it’s amazing. Wait, wait, I’m filming too much…”

Center monitor: A full moon against a black sky.

My brother Mark spent some time in West Africa. A couple of years. He said that when the famine came people started eating at night. Local tradition meant that if you were eating and guests arrived, you offered them a place at your table and shared whatever food you had. He said that in the famine no one could afford to take that chance. So the village began to live at night, eating in darkness, hurriedly, in silence. He said the whole village became nocturnal, inward looking, strange.

Jumpcut.

Left monitor: A plane slowly leaves a vapor trail across a blue sky.

C. said that her father was a pilot. He flew all over the world and when he returned he always used to bring them back delicacies—strange looking food that she’d never seen before—delicacies in jars and exotic packages that C. and her mother did not eat but rather collected as ornaments, which they arranged all around the apartment.

During the long war, food in the city was often very short. In the apartment blocks where they lived, C., her family, and their neighbors were often close to starving. One winter things were very bad. The bombing was continuous and there seemed to be no food in the city at all. People were scavenging, living off scraps, eating dogs.

Only then did C.’s mother decide that they could eat the delicacies that they had collected over the years. So, while the bombing continued outside, they threw a small party and invited the neighbors. There was a power cut and so it was in darkness that a group of 20 people or more gathered in the kitchen by candlelight and ate the most unusual food of their lives, in the strangest combinations. C.’s father opened the jars, C. unwrapped the packages. There were dates, caviar, and biscuits from France; there were pickles, candies, truffles, and chocolates. There were new smells, tastes, and textures that she’d never experienced before. C. was 13.

Jumpcut.

Right monitor: Small waves hit the beach at an ocean.

This is how my mother’s friend Anne met her husband.

When she was little she went on holiday with her brother and her sister and her parents and they went to the seaside and on the last day of the holiday they went to the beach—to the beach where this video was shot—and at the beach they played a game where each of them wrote their name and address on a slip of paper and then placed the paper in a bottle, sealed it, and threw the bottle out to sea.

Four months later Anne got a reply. From a boy. Living far away. He wrote to her.
He’d found the bottle. On the other side of the world.

They wrote to each other. They were pen pals. She was eight, he was nine. They kept writing. They wrote for years and they never met. And then they did meet, in their twenties and that was nice but nothing more and they went their separate ways. And they carried on writing and she met someone else and they got married and her pen pal got married too and still they kept writing and then ten years passed and still more letters went back and forth and the pen pal guy got divorced and remarried and years passed and they must’ve met up a couple more times in this period and then Anne’s husband died and she started seeing someone else and that didn’t really work out and the pen pal guy’s second wife died and then sometime around ‘86 Anne and her pen pal guy met up again. And some time passed and then they got married. They were in their sixties.
Part One: UNRAVELLED

I ask my friends to send stories and videotapes. For the tapes I say, “Don’t make me something special—send what you have.” I say, “I’m sure that whatever you choose is bound to be right.” For the stories I ask for things that are true. The topic can be anything. I ask for short reports on things that have happened in the world.

Tapes start to drift in. From Glasgow. From Spain. From Paris.

The first mail I get back is from Gary. The title, in the subject line, is UNRAVELLED.

Center monitor shows the image of bright sunshine reflecting and undulating in the water of a swimming pool. Left and right monitors show the image of a toy caravan falling slowly through water to a bed of coral.

Dear Tim,

I went to work for a time in Los Angeles. The company that employed me provided a big white house looking down on the city. The house was on Mulholland Drive, and in the living room was a large reproduction of the painting of the same name, by David Hockney. And what was most amazing to me was that the painting and the view from my windows were demonstrably the same. Until this point, I had always thought Hockney’s paintings were exaggerations, and now I knew they were not.

I lived in this big white house, with a pool, and everything in it was white, and the house itself was white, and the sky above it was a still seamless blue and every morning I would stand looking down at the pool and the garden from the dining room, and these dainty, cautious deer would step out of the mist onto the perfect lawn.

Dear Tim,

The nothingness and inertia of my time in that house was amazing.

Occasionally I would spend whole days sitting anxiously next to the pool, drinking orange juice, and nobody would call, and I would see nobody, and I would speak to nobody. I would pad about the large kitchen, which looked onto the forecourt, which nestled under two huge palm trees. I would make myself lunch and then wash up. I would go and sit outside for a while and then come in and fix myself a bowl of ice cream. And nobody would call, and I would see nobody, and I would speak to nobody. When darkness came I would watch television, flicking through the chat shows and the sound bites. I would stay up later than I once used to, lying sprawled on the large white sofa, in front of the large, flat television, watching endless pseudo-documentaries replaying the same themes about this or that rock star or movie icon.—She Was Beautiful But Doomed. He Was Poor But Wanted To Make It. They Loved But It Could Not Last.—In the end I graduated to buying gay porn on Santa Monica and watching it till the early hours of the morning, flickering flesh tones bouncing off the white walls and the white drapes and the white rugs.

Dear Tim,

It was amazing how quickly I became unravelled.

A friend of mine from England came to see me. She settled into a chair at the blue pool’s edge and starting drinking white wine and making long-distance phone calls and I went to work. Later, when I returned, she looked at me with exaggerated gravity, like she was a 1950s starlet playing serious, and she said:

Listen, Gary, we think it’s time you came home now.

This is not going to work for you.

This is not going to work.

And I looked at her and she looked back over the edge of her glass and she said, “Remember what Orson Welles once told a journalist about Los Angeles: ‘I came to this city when I was a young man. And they sat me down in a big black leather chair and gave me a long fat cigar to smoke and when I was finished I was old.’”

Dear Tim,

In the end, I moved out of the house: it was too big and I was too lonely, in spite of the deer, and the mist and the palm trees and the pool.

Is that story too much, Tim? Or too sad?

I’m happy to try writing again if you’d like something else.
Sending love to you,
Gary

My friend Lisa sends a tape. It starts with a wicker chair. A kind of '70s-style peacock wicker chair that has no one sitting on it. And nothing at all happens for a while.

All three monitors show a '70s-style peacock wicker chair.

The chair stays empty for a pretty long time. Lisa says the tape dates from Dec ’96 when she was working in a so-called glamour photographic studio in Worksop or maybe Doncaster in the north of England, a place where amateur cameramen would come to take pictures of young women. The rates of pay were: Glamour £13 per hour, Topless £15 per hour, Figure £20 per hour. Glamour meant suggestive and dressed up in stupid outfits but you could keep your top on. Topless meant topless. Figure meant naked.

After a while, on the tape, a woman (in fact a friend of Lisa’s who worked at the same studio) arrives and starts to take off her clothes in this devastatingly bored and perfunctory “erotic” way. At first she is dressed in black PVC; when she has stripped out of the black PVC she departs, leaves the shot empty, then comes back with a white lacy dress on—Lisa’s friend enters the picture on all three monitors, wearing different outfits, and begins to undress, in slow motion.

—she strips out of the dress and the underwear below it, then departs, and after the white dress comes the blue swimsuit and after the blue swimsuit comes the red lycra dress... and after the red lycra comes the nurse’s outfit and after the nurse’s outfit comes the librarian-with-glasses look and so on, etc. The tape is mind-numbing in its emptiness. Joyless. And uncomfortable to watch. And hard not to watch too, in the strange way that, somehow, naked bodies are always something to look at, something that draws the eye. Anyway. There is a kind of compelling awfulness to the tape.

To go with it Lisa sends a story about work. First of all it isn’t really a story. It’s just a list of the various things that Lisa has ever done to make money. The amateur glamour modeling is there on the list. So too are the times that she took over from her boyfriend to perform a series of badly paid dj-ing gigs in a well-known chain of shops selling gardening equipment. So are a variety of cleaning jobs in houses that Lisa rates for me on a scale from quite posh to posh to very posh. At the end of the list, though, is a description of a job that she said was worse than all of them, although she had to admit that on an hour-by-hour rate it paid pretty well:

Tim. 1995. A friend told me that the research departments of hospitals were always on the lookout for vulnerable people to help with experiments. I inquired and cheerfully signed up for two research experiments whose details I didn’t know in advance.

After an initial questionnaire regarding the firmness of my shit, the first experiment (at the Northern General Hospital in Sheffield) involved a plastic tube with a deflated balloon attached on the end (pretty sure the balloon was yellow) being inserted up my backside. The other end of the tube was attached to some sort of machine.

Throughout the experiment (which lasted half an hour) a doctor held a piece of A3 card in front of me. On the card there was writing in thick black marker that said: 1 / I FEEL SLIGHT PRESSURE, 2 / I FEEL THE NEED TO BREAK WIND, 3 / I HAVE A DESIRE TO DEFCATE, 4 / I HAVE AN EXTREME DESIRE TO DEFCATE, 5 / I HAVE TO GO TO THE TOILET NOW.

Meanwhile, as I lay there, a second, presumably much more important doctor, fiddled with various knobs on the machine that inflated the balloon inside me to various degrees, thus putting pressure on my bowel; I had to tell the doctor with the sign which number corresponded with the amount of pressure I felt. I have to say, Tim, that 4 and 5 were extremely unpleasant. I was paid £15.

The second experiment at the Hallamshire Hospital, also in Sheffield, involved some other sort of a device going up my arse. It certainly felt and sounded like a huge corkscrew drilling into the neck of a bottle but I wasn’t able to get a really good look at the machinery because a nurse held my hand and forced my head
away toward the wall with her other. Tim—I think they were worried that I might faint. As I was leaving I did get a good look at a piece of my bowel which was being prepared on a glass slide. I was paid £35. (I rang up and complained when the cheque came through—I’d been told I’d get £50—the man at the other end was very rude—he told me that I’d simply been misinformed.)

After these unpleasant experiences I didn’t volunteer for any more jobs in experiments at the hospital and I went on with the amateur glamour modeling instead.

A friend said to me, “Lisa, those people probably weren’t doctors at all…”

I ask my friends to send stories and videotapes. For the stories I ask for things that are true. The topic can be anything—short reports on things that have happened in the world. For the tapes I say, “Don’t make me something special—send me what you have.” I say, “I’m sure that whatever you choose is bound to be right.”

All three monitors begin to play the stripping tape in fast-forward. Very soon the footage of Lisa’s friend runs out and in its place each monitor features a miscellany of short video fragments that people donated to the project, some of which are referred to in the subsequent text, others which go unmentioned.

Mary sends a view from a window. Astrid sends a fairground. Nick sends his daughter, writing letters on a wall. Fred sends men skating. Andy sends lights from a car window. Kent sends the wind, as it blows in the branches of trees. Olivia sends people dancing at a birthday party. John sends a tape which he made for insurance purposes when water came in through the ceiling of his house. Tobias sends an ex-girlfriend getting out of bed. Paul sends a tape of a ticker tape parade. Vlatka sends cartoons. Pete sends some stuff he shot at New Year—drunks causing trouble in the street. Martin sends some buildings being blown up. Manja sends a car ride from London to Brighton. John sends a spider crawling on the glass of a window. Tony sends a guy working fruit machines in a Soho games arcade. Wendy sends a child being carried through the air. Gavin sends the moon.

By the time Lisa’s mail about her unpleasant experiences in the hospital reaches me I am in Vienna. I tape the ballet school from the hotel window. Bodies framed in the rectangles of windows, mirrors, doors. Geometry. Pure voyeurism. A series of movements executed at a distance, movements for which I do not have names.

Later I lie on the bed in the darkness and film the porn channel, scrambled. As the image distorts and flickers, the scrambled people on screen are mixing and merging, their bodies a collage of pain and arousal, cut and pasted in the storm of an electronic sea. These screen ghosts flicker, rocking, thrusting, yelling. And then they disappear.

At midnight I check mail and there is something new which comes from my brother.

All three monitors show close-up images of a human eye, blinking and looking around in slow-motion.

He writes:

Dear Tim,

As you know I was once mistaken for a ghost. I don’t know if you can use this kind of story in the performance or not. But you are welcome to use it if you can.

These events happened in Ghana, West Africa, two days after Natasha had been killed in a car crash on the main road just west of Winneba. I hadn’t been to sleep or sober since I heard the news. I kept saying “Jesus Fucking Christ” whenever I even thought about it, imagine that? Jesus Fucking Christ Jesus Fucking Christ. In the midst of all this I went to Labadi Beach with a few friends. At the beach we were all supposed to be chilling like old times but we were not chilling like old times at all because Natasha was dead and while we were drinking beer and akpoteshie she was gone. Jesus Fucking Christ Jesus Fucking Christ. I hadn’t slept for three days.

Once we got to the beach me and Guillermo headed out to buy some dope from Saul and Thomas where they hung out in the mangrove bushes. It seemed like a good idea—I thought grass would be guaranteed
to obliterate whatever small parts of my brain were still functioning.

Ibrahim, Saul, and Thomas and the usual crew were back there in the mangroves, smoking and listening to dub. They all looked up and saw us but they only greeted Guillermo and they stared at me and after a while they began to point at me too and they were jabbering in Twi and Ewe and they looked really fucking scared. I was getting these big waves of insomniac paranoia mixed up with alcohol, confusion, and grief. Ibrahim was shaking and pointing at me still. My friend Guillermo started to ask what was wrong in broken English mixed with Ewe, but for myself I stayed mute. I was not hearing anything, not computing, you know, like nothing made sense. I was sliding to a bad place.

Before long all the rasta boys had really backed away from me and they were all shaking a little and Guillermo was panic-y too and he grabbed my arm and kept saying, “It’s OK, it’s OK,” and smiling and telling me to speak to everybody. But I could not speak. Somehow, amongst the chaos of words that were being exchanged, I heard the word “ghost.” Then I started to laugh.

It turned out that the story which had reached the beach was that I was dead too, that I had died with Natasha, that I had been sat next to her in the car crash that had killed her.

Dear Tim,

The rasta boys smoked a lot and they were used to seeing ghosts. That wasn’t the problem. They saw ghosts on the streets of Accra every day, ghosts following people. Ghosts wandering, ghosts in the distance flicking between the sun and the shade in the markets. So it wasn’t the presence of a ghost as such that scared them. What freaked them out was that I was a ghost who was prepared to come way, way too close, and more than that, a ghost prepared to act like everything was normal, like I was alive. That was all too much for them.

It took quite a while to sort things out and even then Saul and the others were continually touching me and smiling nervously and touching me again as if to reassure themselves that I was indeed real. For a few days I felt as though, in their eyes, I still kept a strange position, as a man who had been declared dead—in a rumor and a story at least—and then miraculously revived.

On all three monitors the image of the blinking eye cuts to white.

Part Two: SAVING TINKERBELL

A few years ago my eldest son Miles and I made a movie. Of course it’s a movie some other people had already made, you know, in different versions, but here it is.

All three monitors show my older son Miles (aged about five at the time of the recording) standing at a dining room table. Talking directly to the camera, he tells a very condensed version of the sinking of the Titanic, using a broken biscuit as a prop.

He concludes the story by saying “They said it would never sink…but something went wrong. They hit an iceberg…then of course it did sink…Blub blub blub…”

The final image of this tape—Miles staring at the camera—remains paused on all three screens.

The first time we took Miles to the cinema it was a Saturday afternoon and everything was fine. He liked the theatre of it—the crowd, the lights fading, and the slow mechanical opening of the curtains, but after that, for a while at least, seated in the fourth row in this screen three of a ten-screen multiplex, we were talking strictly anticlimax. “Oh,” he said as the titles sequence began, “It’s just a big television.”

The film we had chosen to see was James and the Giant Peach, based on the book by Roald Dahl—and I should say now that I’m not quite sure how the decision to see that particular film was made or who was responsible. The film is kind of scary, half live action, half computer animation, and the tone is pretty dark and if we’d thought about it properly we would have realized perhaps that this wasn’t such a good first film to take anyone to see… I think Miles was three or three and a half, and sometimes it’s hard to know just how scary things are going to be.

The start of the film, more or less, is the death of the little boy’s parents and after that I’m pretty hazy about the plot except to say that some cruel aunts are involved and a talking grasshopper and some fairly serious
overacting. Anyway. At a certain point in the film, James, the boy protagonist, bereft at the loss of his parents (apparently crushed by a rhinoceros) and fleeing the horrors of his aunts’ house, decides he has to escape—and to do so he enters the flesh of a giant peach that has grown by magic in the garden beyond his window. It’s that kind of story.

Center monitor shows a repeated slow-motion loop of an animated child-figure, falling into black. Outside monitors show the paused image of Miles in the Titanic video.

And as James enters the strange world inside the giant peach, he himself undergoes a transformation. He changes, in the movie, from this fresh faced kid to this computer animated thing, a stick figure, an emaciated bone doll which looked like something the Chapman brothers might have made if they were interested in making toys for children rather than grotesque art objects. The only thing remaining of the original James after this transformation was his voice.

OK. Wait.

I’m remembering something from the TV, some stuff I saw about Jonestown, the place in South America where Reverend Jim Jones and his cult supporters fled in the ’80s. The place where eventually there would be a huge and tragic mass suicide.

I’m remembering, in particular, that according to this TV documentary, when a child had been naughty, when a child had broken some rule of the camp, it would be dragged from its bed in the night and taken to the edge of the camp and lowered down the well. And I’m remembering that according to what I saw, when they went down in the well there, it was pitch black and something would grab at them in the dark and pull them down—I think the kids called this unseen monster “Bigfoot”—and as they screamed and yelled and kicked to get away from this Bigfoot, a microphone would be held to their mouths and their screams would be amplified—sent out through the night on the loudspeaker that broadcast all over the camp.

Right.

Outside monitors show a child’s hands clapping in slow motion. Center monitor continues with the slow-motion loop of an animated child-figure, falling into black.

Now Miles was upset by the start of the film—by the parents’ death, by the wickedness of the aunts—but what he felt now in response to James’s becoming an animated character was something quite different, quite altogether “more.” I think you could say, if you like to use words like that, that he freaked out.

He panicked. He squirmed in his seat. He said he wanted to leave. He was quite simply horrified by the transformation. He was bony and rigid, sat on my lap by now, all angles, face hidden. I’m not exaggerating to say that his panic seemed quite deep, that it was almost like, “OK. My whole life has been OK, until now, but now these people that I trusted until now have brought me here to see this...”

And even so the film continued. I could only just see his eyes as he had covered his face with his fingers and as I looked in there—into the cage that he had built for himself—and tried to talk to him to reassure him I could see that he was trying to, to keep up, to compute, or perhaps I think he was just trying to deal with what was happening in the film. And then, after a time, his question came. He asked:

“When will James come real again? When will James come real again?”

“When will he come real?”

It was the transformation that freaked him out. Passage from one state to another. Real/unreal.

“When will James come real again? When will James come real again?”

Helen told me that when she was a child she went to the theatre to see a version of Peter Pan and they had a scene where the fairy Tinkerbell had died and all the kids in the audience were encouraged to clap and stamp their feet as loud as they could in order to bring Tinkerbell back to life. She remembered clapping very, very hard and stamping her feet and that the actor on the stage was listening and then saying, “Oh. You’ll have to do better
than that,” and whipping the kids up into making more noise to help save Tinkerbell.

Helen also said that her mother was beside her and that her mother was not clapping very hard and that worried Helen because it seemed like maybe her mother didn’t care if Tinkerbell was saved or not and she didn’t want other people to see that her mother didn’t care or, maybe, an even worse possibility, that her mother didn’t really think this clapping was going to work—that it wouldn’t bring Tinkerbell back to life—and therefore there was no point in trying. And that made Helen clap even harder. She said she clapped so hard so that even the next day the palms of her hands were sore and bruised.

Helen said this moment stuck with her, remained with her as the time when she became more inclined to question her mother.

Back to the cinema.

I had this feeling that Miles ought to stay because although he was scared by the transformation I was guessing that the film would have a happy ending and I thought he should see that, that somehow the story should be allowed to finish because if it did not finish it might hang forever there in his brain, unsolved, unresolved.

So we stayed. He sat on my lap. I more or less made him stay. I talked to him. I persuaded him. We bore it out. We soldiered through. Until later the retransformation occurred and James came real again and they reached the mythical city of New York by flying in a balloon made of insects and his parents turned out to be alive and the credits rolled and the film ended and the red curtains finally closed, bringing relief. And Miles, it seemed, was contented. A human body had been returned to its proper form and order had once again been restored.

Jumpcut. This is how I came into a city once.

All three monitors show different slow-motion footage from car windows, driving into different European cities.

I am at the airport and I get in one of those cabs that has a Global Positioning System, a little computer thing that sits on the dashboard. And I say take me to this place. And the driver punches the address I’ve shown him into this little computer thing and from that point on the GPS machine speaks directions. It goes:

LEFT IN 500 METERS and HERE LEFT and RIGHT AT THE JUNCTION IN 100 METERS and STRAIGHT ON FOR 600 METERS, and so on.

Only you have to imagine that the computer is saying all that in perfect Swiss German that I can’t really understand, but it doesn’t matter because sitting in the back of this cab I am super-impressed with this technology that monitors this particular taxi cab and knows where it is on the earth and that also it knows the street plan of this city and now it knows the place I want to go and now it is speaking to the guy to tell him exactly which streets to take so that I can be where I want to be. I mean it is Beautiful. I am enjoying the journey very much, maybe too much. And then I dunno, I forget about it for a while, start daydreaming and looking out of the window.

And then, after some time I begin to notice slowly that things are Not Good in the front of the cab.

The footage on two monitors has switched to footage shot while driving in Tokyo at night; the third screen shows footage shot in a long tunnel. Material on all the monitors plays in erratic fast-forward, with occasional stops.

First of all the driver is punching more keys on this little GPS computer unit and second he is kind of looking around in a lost kind of way and third our progress in the streets is now very far from even—we seem to be speeding and slowing—and fourth, on top of all that, suddenly the driver is muttering in Swiss German under his breath and even I can tell, with my minimal command of the language, that he is unhappy.

Within a minute or two we have to do a U-turn and the GPS thing has gone NOTICEABLY and OMINOUSLY quiet and then it chimes up again with some suggestions and when it does so the driver is more or less rolling his eyes and then after some time we seem to hit a dead end and we have to reverse out of it and the driver switches off the GPS.
and the meter with a flourish and a great deal of bad grace and he offers me an explanation which I don’t understand except maybe I hear the word “tunnels.” We drive in silence from this point on, but clearly, very clearly, we are lost…

*All three monitors show a man in a rowboat, using a flashlight to navigate through the ocean at night.*

Christmas 2000. They showed James Cameron’s version of *Titanic* on the TV.

Of course Cameron’s version had a bigger budget than Miles’s and more actors and bigger stars and the special effects were more state-of-the-art. But I think Miles won a prize for narrative economy.

Miles watched the Cameron film in the company of a lot of grownups who, this being Christmas time, were sleepy and had eaten too much and talked too much. And at first he was bored: the romantic plot didn’t hold much interest for him (he was eight at the time) and the setup of the unsinkable ship and the whole passenger list of characters seemed to take forever. But he did get interested once the adventure of the sinking began. And he was very tense about whether the protagonists would survive. And this tension was once again transformed into horror at a certain point in the film…

Wait.

Helen said that not long after the play where the kids clapped to save Tinkerbell, her aunt had died and she went to the funeral with her family and she was sad and afterwards she sat in the toilet of their house and wondered if the clapping thing would work. She wondered if it was worth giving the clapping thing a go—if that might bring back her aunt. She said she decided it wouldn’t. But she remembered very well thinking it through, sitting in the toilet, and wondering.

For Miles the crunch came way towards the end. The ship was broken in two and the drama was all but over. All that was left was hundreds of dead people floating in the ice-cold water, bobbling silently, and some scared-looking guy in a rowboat coming through with a torch, and Miles was clearly finding this all too much, seated on Deborah’s lap by now. He would occasionally say, “It’s just a story isn’t, it’s just a brilliant story really well told?” and the corpses were floating eerily, eyes staring, skin puce in the water, and Miles would ask, “It’s just a story isn’t it, just a story, not real?” and each of the adults in the room would take it in turns to turn to him, with a bizarre and incomprehensible note of triumph, to say:

“No, Miles. It really happened. This is real. It’s true.”

In different ways as the years go by, amidst the daily business of school, the Gamecube, wanting to buy an electric guitar, Miles and I continue to have these conversations about what is real, attacking the topics:

What is true? What is an illusion? Is magic real?

At his instigation, several years ago now, we make another video.

*All three monitors show my son Miles (aged around six in this recording) at a kitchen table, where he is attempting to demonstrate a magic trick for the camera and for his younger brother Seth. The trick involves the disappearance of a handkerchief and a square of paper and is performed with a lot of enthusiasm but with limited success. At the end of the tape, the camera jumps to Seth, who is only a few months old, sitting in his high chair by the table, looking straight at the camera, and waving a conjurer’s magic wand.*

*All three monitors cut to white.*

A new tape arrives. The envelope unmarked. Don’t even know who it’s actually from.

I’m making juice, rushing breakfast, cutting fruit.

Slam the tape in the VCR. Hit play.

I am eating. Waiting.

Screen blank.


Rewind.

Nothing still.

Eject the tape and check the tape. Blank casing. No label.
I shake it. Tap it. Stick it back in the machine.

Nothing still.

Later on I take the tape to some video place we use.

I say, “Look—is this some other format? Something my machine won’t read?”

They take it round the back. I flip the magazines. All stuff about machines.

The guy comes back. The guy says, “Look—there’s nothing on this tape. You want it?”

I say, “Yeah.” I take it back. I take it home.

I decide to play the tape anyway. As a part of the performance.

Like a break, like a breathing space, like a pause.

All three monitors show the blank tape—silent flickering electronic “snow.”

**Part Three: REHEARSAL**

*All three monitors are filled with a cartoon of hand-drawn animated blue raindrops on a white background.*

Vlatka tells me that in her stories her own part is never quite clear, never quite focused. She sees herself in fragments, glimpses in the edges of her vision. She laughs. She says, “Don’t count on me for historical veracity.”

She says that mostly she finds in her memory not events but rather systems, that she remembers not so much “what happened” as how things worked in a general way. She thinks “we,” not “I.” As if, she says, years of being taught socialist collectivity left her plural, generalized, spread out. As if her part in the past was only by membership and implication, not by agency or action.

She sends me an email which is titled, in the subject line, “Rehearsal.”

Dear Tim,

Here goes. A story of growing up in Croatia in the ’80s.

Each April would bring the day called *Nista Nas Ne Smije Izne-naditi* or Nothing Can Ever Surprise Us. Such a beautiful name. I think it was only once a year, though it’s possible that it was more frequent. I do know that as kids we always looked forward to it since Nothing Can Ever Surprise Us often brought serious disruption to school.

For Nothing Can Ever Surprise Us the whole country would be mobilized to pretend that a war or some other bad thing was happening. Each part of any town would have its own disaster—all getting rehearsed at the same time—you know—from nuclear war to nuclear accidents, chemical spillages, germ warfare, air raids, and good old-fashioned ground war, too. A massive attempt to be ready for anything.

Dear Tim,

As kids we’d keep our fingers crossed, hoping that our building or neighborhood would be scheduled for something really cool, like helicopter evacuation or even just that we’d get to slide down a chute from a very high building.

Nothing Can Ever Surprise Us had loads of stuff like that—jumping out of windows on what looked like gigantic toboggans and sliding down chutes to the ground where you’d get caught by rescuers wearing these socialist-realism space suits. It was great. In a 10-story building over the street—we called them the Old Skyscrapers—people from the lower floors would jump (free-fall really) onto a trampoline (only minus the bounce) while the people from the higher floors would climb down on a system of ladders. Like something from Fellini.

Wait.

I start to wonder if the blank tape has anything on the audio. I mean somewhere on the tape. Maybe someone recorded something, some way, into the tape, you know, just on the audio. Maybe I should listen to it. Maybe I should check. I make a mental note to listen to it. I should listen all the way through.

Dear Tim,

Each year we’d hope that our disaster would be something exciting, not boring like air raids where the sirens would go off and you’d pack your essential belongings then spend six boring hours in the shelters. Or we’d hope that this year in particular we’d get picked to be amongst the wounded and that consequently
we could spend the day being ferried 'round on stretchers, lying wounded in the parking lot, or having imaginary wounds dressed by volunteer medics and nurses in the temporary hospitals they set up. Tim—the wounded kids were always super cool in school afterwards for about a week. Nothing could beat that.

I liked the spectacle of Nothing Can Ever Surprise Us, the way it changed the city. That there could be hundreds of people in gas masks or firefighters everywhere or smoke rolling through the streets or that the water supply would turn out to have been rendered undrinkable by contamination. It was only pretend contamination, of course. But imagine this, really, we were always too nervous to drink the water because we did not trust how far the simulation might have gone.

Dear Tim,

Perhaps it’s just that these tales from my growing up are now so distant and bizarre, that they have started to seem unreal. As if I don’t remember the real stories, or I’m making all of this up.

Funny that I don’t remember—ironic when I can still recite verbatim the various oaths of allegiance and honor that I was made to memorize and swear to at the age of six.

I talked to my family about it again, this morning, but before long it turned out we couldn’t agree on the way that things happened. I was on the speakerphone, telling my sister what I remembered, and my dad was in the background going, “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong.” My mum was disagreeing too, with me and with my dad. Then Krista saying something else. Then my dad again (getting very annoyed) going, “No, no, you’re mixing everything up. You’re mixing EVERYTHING UP.”

Perhaps that’s the REAL Balkan syndrome! An argument about memory. Like none of us can even agree what happened anymore.

All three monitors go back to the blank tape—electronic snow.

I play the blank tape, checking for audio. As it plays I am thinking about memory. About what we keep, where we keep it, where it goes when it’s “gone.” About the role that stories play in this process. About what a strange, ambiguous, and distorting mirror they are.

The tape plays. All snow and hiss. And I am thinking about rehearsal. Wondering if you could write a history of the world from the perspective of things that people (or cultures) choose to rehearse. Or of the gaps between their rehearsals and the stuff that actually goes down.

Blank tape. By now I’m sure there’s nothing on it. But in this one thing I’ve become a stupid completist. Determined to see it through to the end.

Counter counting. Counts nothing.

Think again about the TV thing I saw about Jonestown. Some guy, a survivor, said that when they weren’t busy broadcasting the screams of frightened children that Jones himself would be broadcasting on the loudspeaker system all through the camp. Talking conspiracy, fear, and plots against him. This survivor said they’d compete to work further and further out in the fields: “that way you couldn’t hear Jim on the loudspeakers the whole time. He was talking on there 24 hours a day and if he had to sleep they’d just play the tapes of them that they’d made on previous days or nights.”

They said that as Jones’s paranoia came to boiling point, they’d begun to rehearse the mass suicide that they eventually put into practice. The rehearsals sounded terrifying. The scenario was always the same: The government or the CIA was coming to get them. They should commit suicide—men, women, and children—all before they could be taken.

WHITE NIGHTS was the code name for these rehearsals. Jones’s voice would come over the loudspeaker. “WHITE NIGHTS,” he would say, “WHITE NIGHTS. All gather in the pavilion.”

The tape is blank.

I decide to play it anyway, as a part of the performance.

Like a break, like a breathing space, like a pause.

All three monitors cut to a single blurred shot of high-rise buildings in a city late at night, the
camera zooming in very slowly toward one of the windows.

Dear Tim,

I sometimes wish I could live in one of those unimaginable countries where people get so bored that they commit suicide—like Sweden or Norway. Instead I am stuck in Beirut and things are changing so very fast here.

I’m thinking a lot about some things of my father’s I found recently—a notebook, an address book, a medal, and so on. He was killed by a Phalangist sniper at the beginning of the war so I hardly remember him. I’m not sure what I’m going to do with these things of his. I want to use them in my work but I’m not sure how that will evolve; my sheer proximity to these objects is a problem in a way.

Now, for my story:

We have a neighbor called Suzanne who’s in her mid-20s and she lives with her father and sister.

Recently, Suzanne has been constantly fighting with someone. She starts screaming and swearing, very early in the morning, around 7:00 A.M., and the phrase that keeps coming back is, “Stop looking at me. What do you want from me? Stop looking. Stop looking at me!” I never heard who she’s fighting with, but I always assumed it was her father, since in Arabic you can tell if one is talking to a man or a woman.

Then a few days ago, I was standing on the balcony early morning when Suzanne started her usual shouting and screaming, and I saw though the window who it is that she is fighting with.

It’s her teddy bear. It’s a largish grey teddy bear that she doesn’t touch while she’s shouting. She sits in front of it and yells and screams, “Stop looking at me. What do you want from me? Stop looking. Stop looking at me!” And then she stands and she paces, and she throws things around the room, throwing clothes and shoes, slamming doors very loudly. “What is this? Stop looking at me!”

I only saw what happened for five minutes, then I got nervous and had to go inside.

Dear Tim,

To be honest I’ve known for a while that something must be wrong when it comes to

5. Videos play more or less constantly behind Tim Etchells in Instructions for Forgetting, a Tim Etchells/Forced Entertainment project, at the Theatre Kunstlerhaus, Vienna, May 2001. (Photo by Hugo Glendinning)
Suzanne. I work in a small shop and each day I see her turning up to work in the building opposite. She comes to the door and goes in and then not long after she leaves again. I know for a fact that she doesn’t work there anymore. She lost her job a long time ago, but she keeps on going there each day.

I don’t know where she goes when she leaves that place but she does not go home until teatime. Like she is pretending that nothing has happened. Pretending that nothing has gone wrong. Or perhaps she thinks that if she acts out the structure of everything being OK then it will be OK somehow, that order will be restored.

At first I thought this would be easy. I have tons of stories that I can tell you—but the more I’ve thought about it the harder it is to decide. Stories should have drama—important things should happen. But I like this story with Suzanne. I guess it’s hardly a story at all. Just the start of one.

A few years ago a couple of English journalists came here and were asking people about what they used to do for fun during the war. I met them at a bar and I really didn’t want to talk but they asked and asked, so I told them what they wanted to hear:

“We didn’t do anything, there was shelling, we used to stay in shelters and play cards.”

Now, that’s not true of course, but I wanted to get rid of them and now if you search for my name on the internet (Tony Shakar), you can find that untrue story I told them repeated in several languages, published along with my name, for everyone to see.

Dear Tim,

Of course I could tell you other stories, real ones and true ones, but they’re about the war. Since I found my father’s things I am remembering a lot of stories from that time. But you know Tim, I don’t like telling war stories for people who weren’t here during the war. They would be impossible to tell and impossible for you to understand, and, besides, they are mine.

Take care, Tim, take care,
Tony.

Part Four: HUMAN FOLLY

This is the last part. And it does contain some human folly. So if you like that kind of thing, this is definitely the section for you.

I agree to meet Matthew. He says, “We’ll go to this big landmark building. It’s in all the books on postmodern architecture, just around the corner; it’s in every movie they ever shoot in Chicago. It’s in High Fidelity and it’s in The Fugitive and it’s in What Women Want and it’s in, you know, Echo of Shadows. There’s bound to be something we can eat there.”

So we descend to the basement food area of this impressive monstrosity and we do find food with the same choice here as there is all through the world. Pizza Hut, Tex Mex, and plastic trays of uneatable salad.

We sit. Matthew tells me that at the Art School right now he is teaching a 10-week class on Failure. It sounds so great I want to enroll straight away. We eat. I tell him about my project. That I want a videotape from him. He says, “Oh Tim, Tim. I have the perfect thing for you.” And two weeks later a parcel arrives.

All three monitors play a four-minute documentary fragment about a dead whale that washed up on a beach in Florence, Oregon. Members of a local news team sent out to the scene describe the town’s attempt to remove the whale using dynamite, which ends with comical and grotesque results. Shaky and grainy footage shows the “whale detonation” which causes blubber to rain down on spectators gathered on the beach.

The tape ends with one of the witnesses who says: “Every time somebody comes up and says, ‘Tell me about the whale…’ Yeah, yeah, I’ll tell you about the whale, that’s a story I’ll never forget.”

All monitors cut to black.

I wake with a hangover.

There are vodka bottles. Wine bottles.
There are clothes all over the floor.
I check mail.

There is mail from my friend Graham Parker that has the subject line “George Best.” It seems that Graham has been collecting stories too, but he’s much more focused than I am. He’s only collecting stories about the
genius-but-doomed ’70s Irish footballer George Best.

All three monitors show slow-motion archive footage of George Best and a few other people laughing, drinking champagne, and fooling around in the sun beside a swimming pool.

Graham tells me a story:

George Best is in a hotel room. His soccer talents are squandered, his career is over at age 27, he’s boozed up and fallen from grace, but still somehow living what he calls the high life. In his hotel room is a beautiful blonde. And strewn across the bed is a large amount of cash which he has won in a card game. Late night, a room service waiter brings champagne and upon entering the room takes a moment to decipher the scene. He looks at the drunk fallen idol George Best, the scattered money, and the girl, and he says, “Oh, George, George, where did it all go wrong?”

In fact, my friend Graham is only collecting this one story, this single story about Best, success, failure, and a dream gone sour—which has been told and retold so many, many times that whatever truth it held has all but disappeared, or until it finds a different kind of truth.

Graham tells me the story again:

As a “washed-up” talent in his early 30s, the footballer George Best is staying at a hotel one night with a Beauty Queen. Having scooped quite a fortune at the hotel’s casino, he whisks Miss Universe up to his room, throws both her and the money onto the bed, and phones down for champagne. When the waiter brings the champagne, he knocks, enters, and upon surveying the scene from the doorway says sadly, “Oh Mr Best. Where did it all go wrong?”

Graham tells me the story.

He tells it as he found it in some unauthorized biography and again as he found it in a tabloid newspaper and again as he has found it in countless magazines and again and again as he has found it on website after website, the story changing, mutating, slipping, and solidifying, until whatever truth it holds is all but gone, or, perhaps until it finds a new truth.

Graham tells me the story.

George Best is back in Belfast to open a supermarket, for which he’s apparently been paid £20,000 in cash, which now lies scattered across the king-size bed; his latest girlfriend, the current Miss World, Mary Stavin, is sat at the dressing table, wearing very little and letting down her hair. A waiter arrives with champagne and oysters and takes it all in—Miss World, the £20,000, the champagne—and utters the heartfelt cry, “Oh, George, where did it all go wrong?” Best shrugs and looks at his shoes.

Graham tells me the story.

A night porter wanders into Best’s Spanish resort hotel suite, where the former footballing genius is cavorting on the bed with two lovely young admirers, champagne at the ready and a night’s winnings from the casino strewn across the room. The night porter asks Best, “But Georgie, where did it all go wrong?” Best gestures around the room and replies ironically, “You tell me, son.”

Graham tells me the story yet again.

George has just completed a gig where he has to do a speech at some fancy dinner in London and has been paid a great deal of money in cash. He’s going out with a beautiful blonde who is a former Miss World and when they get back to their hotel suite, she strips to her underwear and reclines on the bed while George counts the money. Happy that all is as it should be, Best rings room service and orders champagne and a tray of smoked salmon sandwiches. Within a short time the waiter enters with the order, but his jaw drops when he sees the former Miss World and the huge stack of money on the bed. He turns to Georgie and, in a sorrowful voice, asks: “Ah Jesus, Mr. Best, where did it all go wrong?”

One night, George Best has a big night on the town, pulls a couple of girls, goes to the casino, and wins some money. When he gets back to the hotel, he calls to room service for champagne, and the bell boy who brings it asks him, “Where did it all go wrong?” George looks round the room: there’s $25,000 in cash on the bed, and two beautiful women in the bath… George says, “How can you say I’ve gone wrong!”
Right monitor cuts to a tape of ticker tape falling from skyscraper windows.

Best is in town to open a supermarket. He is sitting on a hotel bed with a bellhop when Miss World comes into the room carrying a large amount of cash. She takes in the scene with George and the bellhop sat on the bed. She says, “George, where did it all go wrong?”

Best is in a hotel on the Spanish Riviera, returning to his room with a large amount of cash (his winnings from the casino). In the elevator he encounters two blonde lovelies who are running their hands over the bellhop and giggling a lot. As Best leaves the elevator, cash spilling from his holdall, one of the blondes calls after him, “Where did you learn that song?” It seems Best has been singing in the elevator without realizing it.

Left monitor repeats the image of the toy caravan falling through water.

Best is working in a casino as a bellhop. A former Miss World is also working there, serving champagne to the guests. They are tired. A band is playing. It is some kind of charity thing. The band plays a song called “Where Did It All Go Wrong?” From the back of the crowd Best yells drunkenly, “How can you say it’s gone wrong?” and is ejected from the casino.

George Best gets a job as a waiter in a Belfast Hotel. Late one night he has to take two bottles of champagne on ice to the room of the current Miss World. Best takes the tray in and notices that she’s been crying. He asks, “Where did it all go wrong?” and she gestures sadly to the £20,000 in cash, which she has apparently been paid to open a supermarket, and which now lies floating in the water of her bath.

Two blonde girls send a bottle of champagne as a gift to George Best’s hotel room. When the night porter comes in, Best is sat on the bed naked and drunk and counting 50 pounds from out of a dirty envelope. The night porter takes one look at this scene and then asks, “George, George, where did it all go wrong?”

Best and a hotel waiter are in a hotel room counting about 500 pounds worth of loose change they have robbed from the fruit machines in a nearby casino. Miss World comes out of the bathroom wearing only a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan “Where did it all go wrong?”

A night porter at Belfast’s Europa Hotel wins £20,000 in a casino and to treat himself checks into a hotel suite which was once famously stayed in by George Best. At 3:00 in the morning the phone rings. Mary Stavin asks him, “Where did it all go wrong?”

Best is in a hotel room. He gets a phone call. The guy at the other end says nothing at all. Best says, “Who is this? Who is this? Who is this?” and the voice says, “Come on Georgie, where did it all go wrong?”

George Best is drunk and appearing at some social function to earn cash. He has finished his speech and has asked if there are any questions. A bloke at the back puts his hand up and says, “Yes. George. Where did it all go wrong?”

Center monitor repeats the slow-motion loop of the animated child-figure, falling into black.

The variations are endless, often minor, sometimes major.

Best is drunk, half-drunk, dead drunk, or sober.

The woman is Miss World, Miss Universe, a blonde, two blondes, three blondes, a model, an actress, Mary Stavin, twins, a former Beauty Queen.

In the bath, on the bed, naked, in a camisole, on the floor, in a negligée, in a swimsuit, in a bra and knickers.

The money is from the casino, from a public-speaking engagement, from opening a supermarket, from an extravagant bet, from a photo shoot, from a card game.

We are in Rome, in London, in Belfast, in Texas, in Vegas, in Derby, in Liverpool. We could even be in Vienna.

The money is £10,000, £20,000, £15,000, £20,000, or simply vast and nameless amounts. It is spread on the bed, around the room, it is spilling from a holdall.
The person surprising them is a waiter, a bellhop, a receptionist, an Irish waiter, an old Irish night porter, a Texan soccer fan who just happens to have a job in a hotel.

Best is ordering champagne, salmon, caviar, chicken in a basket, whiskey, vodka, a club sandwich, chips, crisps, peanuts, pernod, oysters.

Only one thing stays the same. Coming back again and again and again and again.

The question: “Where did it all go wrong?”
“Where did it all go wrong?”
“Where did it all go wrong?”

All three monitors cut to black.

Last week of rehearsals in Sheffield.
The piece is incomplete—a half-finished arrangement of other people’s fragments.

In this last week, things are still arriving daily, some of which make it into the work, shifting its pattern, some of which do not.

On the very last day before we leave, I check mail and find something from a friend. I decide that whatever else changes this will be close to the end of the piece.

The 600-word letter from a friend that I read to more or less conclude the performance is omitted here at the request of the author.

INTERLUDE

I am writing this years after I made the performance, years after she sent me what she wrote, years after the events that she described took place. But the consequences of events continue. Stories are also living things. The lives continue. Complexities multiply. We talked on the phone and discussed some options. How to edit her text. How to represent it. But for her, nothing was possible. Omission was the only way. I am happy with this. I mean: I respect the decision.

I am on a train. Traveling north. There is snow on the ground. Since I made this performance I fell in love with one of the people who wrote me material for it. When that person wrote to me, we had only just met. Time has passed. Lives continue and get more complex. I hesitate to name the person. We became lovers. And still are, as I write this.

I hesitate to name the person. There is a certain fear of things in black-and-white. It is connected to the fact that I am writing and the other person is not. If I were to write the name, in some ways I would also write the person. This is a kind of temporary ownership—to write someone else. A temporary ownership that makes manifest an ethical complexity, connected to the question—who has the right to write another person? The problem of representation, of who may speak for or of another. What is the difference between writing a person and speaking (of) them? What is the difference between what is said and what is printed? Is it something about the provisionality of speech? Its impermanence?

Several people who sent me texts for this project avoid using the names of other people—they talk about “a friend” or use initials. Perhaps the refusal to name is connected to some kind of superstitious magic, or the wish to avoid it—a way of ducking or avoiding the power involved in representing another.

I hesitate to name, here, the person I love, to say that we are lovers. Perhaps it is like this: I am scared of losing that person and to use a name here somehow gives or implies a fixity. But I know that love is not fixed, not fixable. To fix it in writing is to tempt fate. To flaunt the fragility of breathing with the permanence of print. I dare not. I mean—it is not a big deal, but for now, for today, writing on a train that is heading north, I choose not to write the name.

There is sunshine on the snow that covers the landscape. The snow will melt.

I wrote Carol Martin to tell her that the final part of the text for the performance could not be represented. She wrote me back:

“Both respect for authors and their stories, respect for the personal and painful are important to me. This is the ethical thing to do. At the same time, the work is quietly magnificent and the final narrative is important. [Marking the absence might] become a way of pointing to all that we don’t say, can’t say, and yet live with, every day. Let me know what happens…”

Now.

On the train.

I take the last look through the text that cannot be printed here.

Some more landscape speeds past.

I read, entering the elsewhere, the other time and place of the past and my friend’s voice speaking (writing) to me back then.

In the last line of the letter, the author—having concluded her narrative—reminds me:

“Stories are a strange, ambiguous, weight in the mouth, aren’t they?
I’m sending love to you.
X"

I ask my friends to send stories and videotapes. For the stories I ask for things that are true. The topic can be anything. I ask for short reports on things that have happened in the world. For the tapes I say, “Don’t make me something special—send me what you have.” I say, “I’m sure that whatever you choose is bound to be right.”

Elizabeth sends sunlight, reflected on water. The stage right monitor shows a tape of sunlight on water—a static close-up of the ocean. No land visible. Just a frame around sparkling water, the movement producing endless bursts of glittering light on the crest of each tiny wave.

Russell sends some fighting kangaroos. The stage left monitor plays a tape of three kangaroos fighting on an expanse of well-kept grass. They jump at each other in slow motion, kickboxing, paws flailing in the air and at each other.

Elyce sends a tape where strangers on the streets of Chicago are persuaded to audition for an imaginary musical.

The center monitor plays Elyce Semenee’s tape “Audition.” People of various ages dance, one by one, from one side of a six-lane Chicago road to the other, waiting for breaks in the traffic so that they can spin and sidestep across the asphalt. Elyce stands on the sidewalk with a clipboard, encouraging the dancers. Mostly these are nervous, self-conscious dances, fraught with the embarrassment of doing such a thing in public, and constantly negotiating the noisy oncoming traffic. Only one person waits calmly for a gap in the traffic before he spins boldly out into the road, pirouetting with flair to the other side. The penultimate dancer takes a long time to find a break in the traffic. She looks ready to go, standing on the edge of the sidewalk, her eyes intent on the far side. But each time she is about to step down and start moving, another car comes. There are flickers of embarrassment and tension on her face. Then a break does come and she crosses, gracefully, across the road.

The final dancer who crosses the street is a slightly clumsy guy. As he jumps from the curb to start his journey the images on the other two monitors cut to black. When he has danced his way to the other side of the road, Elyce is waiting with her clipboard, clapping a bit to encourage him. She says, “That was great!” And the guy replies, “Oh… I don’t know…” The final tape cuts.