

A conversation between
HP Parmley &
Marianna Simnett
on *Desktop Compositions*
(2014–ongoing)

“Giving space to slowness, and ‘snatching time’ is a conscious resistance to sleepwalking through the suffocating desires of late capitalism.”

Marianna Simnett: I want to talk about 'bearing witness'. I was made acutely aware of this expression through the artist Tiffany Sia who proposes that bearing witness is both the least and sometimes the most we can do in times of crisis. She is specifically talking about embodied experience and the ethics of looking at violence, and her own experience of the recent Hong Kong protests of which she has recorded hundreds of hours on her iPhone. This means not always situating yourself in the centre of the narrative, and is as much about not showing, as it is about showing.

HP Parmley: The term came to me a couple of years ago while I was having a conversation with my friend Charlie [Harrison]. He used it as a way to describe my practice when I would question 'is it enough?' Making work that isn't displaying a grand narrative can make you feel vulnerable. Far from being uninvested, I mean to approach work from a place of unknowing which allows both myself and the viewer to listen and observe. A situation can present itself and unravel without my intervention.

I'm drawn to documentary, a genre which can be regarded as very authoritarian because there's always a subjective perspective behind the lens - but there's an attempt to capture situations that can speak for themselves, unfold on their own terms. I suppose bearing witness is a rejection of the loud, self-assured narrator or ominous spirit behind a lot of contemporary art.

MS Some narratives are propaganda and patterns of the state. Most narratives prefer white skin to black or brown skin, able to not able, heterosexual to homosexual. And bearing witness - is that an attempt to get away from oppressive forms of storytelling?

HP It's an unease with the way storytelling becomes a bearer of truth. I agree about patterns and propaganda, where one perspective flourishes within the present nightmare of systemic violence. But also, there are stories that exist outside of this monovision which are vital in their resistance.

I'm not saying all storytelling is violent, but rather it falsely neatens and tidies life's chaos. Life is constantly evolving, everchanging and fluid, messy and open-ended. It's a complex web of an entanglement of selves. So for me, it's the limbo spaces built from fragments and incomplete thoughts, of unfixed

narratives and poetics where layers of complexity can be revealed. I'm more drawn to something unravelling, rather than say, being built into a story. Or when communication moves beyond language.

MS The work is the work. You don't need an explicatory statement.

HP Yeah, it's led by something more intuitive, where all the decisions are led by what feels right, such as the rhythm, the pace, the vibrations, the sublingual conversations happening between elements.

I'm obsessed with loops - when you listen to a long electronic track and you're hearing the same beat over and over again. Over time, the song sounds like it's changing, but you're just imagining it. Is the world changing around me or am I hallucinating? Your perspective is all warped, but it's just the repetition playing tricks on your mind. When reality starts to shift and destabilise you, there's this deconditioning effect that pulls you out of a trance and gives you a different perspective.

MS And if you start to do that with language - I remember as a child I would do that with my name or with words that I was over familiar with and I would try to rid myself of their meaning.

HP It's called semantic satiation - when you constantly repeat a word until it loses all of its original meaning. Language organises all meaning, all time, space and matter, so it's really exciting when meaning can begin to break down and reveal something other, when ingrained patterns start to reshuffle. For me it's about taking things that are overly familiar or banal, and twisting this everyday material to reveal some really weird shit about the lived experience.

MS You have an immediacy with your material, it's all made in the present tense. This work couldn't have been made six months ago. Is it important that it's made here and now?

HP Yeah, there's a strong desire to explore how present-tense a film can feel. But also, I've shot this series on my phone, which inherently has an immediacy to it, an intimacy or impulsive rawness.

MS What happens when other humans are in the room, how does that affect things? I wonder if your interpersonal relationships with non-mediated life get affected if you're always on your phone? Is it a private moment, is it shared, how does it affect your real life with others?

HP My phone has become an appendage. I have a fluent relationship with it, so I don't feel like a line is being drawn between my life with or without a camera. I think that's why I'm drawn to the phone as a tool. There's an invisibility, a quietness to it. It doesn't seem to affect life's flow. Other larger cameras would change the dynamic completely.

I find the narrative of 'put down the camera and experience life!' quite alien. I get it, but for me, I am experiencing life the most vibrantly when it's through a lens. It's filming for filming's sake, a compulsion to just capture a moment that is speaking to me.

MS If you're with a group of friends, and twelve other people are talking, would you be the voyeur, the one filming?

HP Haha yes. I often feel on the periphery. If I'm at a party and I notice there is a beautiful moment unfolding, I'm more interested in observing it. I know that sounds really weird, but most times I would rather capture something than experience it. That's not to say I'm never present with my friends. I know when to turn the camera off.

MS What are your views on voyeurism, is there a difference between looking in an anthropological sense of being on the outside looking in or...

HP That's a really important question. I am extremely sensitive and aware of the power dynamic that plays out between someone's chosen gaze and their subject. I don't feel like I, or anyone, is entitled to just go around and collect whatever or whoever they want. I have a hard time with the way some artists feel entitled to pick up a topic like it's an apple on a tree, without respect to position or embodied knowledge.

There have been very few times where I've filmed people who are unaware of my doing so, and if I did, it would be their feet in a crowd, never their faces.

And even then I agonise over it. I usually document intimate moments with friends and family, whose permission I have, and my gaze being there in that space is trusted and respected. I'm never coming from a place of judgement or laughter. That's not the space I want to occupy. I love moments of humour, but not in a cruel way. It's more endearing.

MS Yeah, it's not mocking.

HP Never mocking. I take great care over things I film. I just have to trust that my approach to it, a softness and kindness in its looking, comes across as authentic.

MS Just picking up on something we spoke about once your stubbornness. There's a sort of, hmm how to describe it, maybe like 'snatching time'. A contradiction between a seemingly floating, wandering, privileged gaze versus a way of looking that is absolutely vital. It's not frivolous. It's light, but it's not light, it's weird, it's like, how do you manage to capture weightlessness, but at the same time make it so deliberate and strong?

HP I think it comes down to a kind of weaving, where countless threads intercept, rub against each other or collide. I'm not fixated on just 'slowness', but let's consider burnout, time-off, feeling stuck. With scenes of 'nature', it's not just nature that interests me but rather our white Western relationship to it, the need to name it, garden it, store it, capture it, colonize it. So I allow moments of softness to interact with something more sharp.

My friend Ulijana [Odišarija] once said, "can our bodies afford to be slow when we still have so much work to do? Can we afford slowness when our material reality and economic factors do not allow it?" Giving space to slowness, and 'snatching time' is a conscious resistance to sleepwalking through the suffocating desires of late capitalism. With regards to weightlessness, I have always been obsessed with the more formal laws of physics that govern and contain us, like weight, gravity, surface tension, air.

MS There's so much air in this piece, but this is what brings me back to bearing witness. It's a critical stance, a deliberate position. You're not just wasting time. You're deciding that this time is valid and vital, even if it's not machinic or productive. By making that

choice explicit you are creating a different value system to the one that a lot of us live by.

HP My practice has definitely been shaped by a disenchantment of our current value system - one based on productivity, individualism and fixedness. There's such an intense professionalism within the art industry. It becomes athletics, where you have to be a specific kind of person to survive in it. It weeds too many brilliant minds out. What angers me most is that so often one has to professionalise to have your practice legitimised. Within this atmosphere, nothing gets nurtured or nourished. It's like being attached by an umbilical cord to something really poisonous. For me, working in a more unpolished way, allowing uncool or unfiltered content to stay in, feels more sincere and authentic.

MS What do you mean by sincere?

HP I suppose a resistance to irony - to actually being invested in something, to want to offer more than critique. Things are really fucked up, and I'm not sure critique is the most active form of resistance right now, it feels passive. Just a side note, I view critique and being critical as two very separate things. Here I am referring to critique as the well crafted language we learn within the art canon, involved in the economics of discourse, something I often find violently circular. The space of sincerity holds more potential for emitting something potent and energetic.

MS Sensitivity, sincerity, authenticity; these are all important things. Which is funny cause there's so much fake news and propaganda in the world. It's quite hard even to hold an authentic space without people thinking you're taking the piss.

Can you talk a little bit about suspension and stasis and the groups of ideas that brought these images together?

HP I'm drawn to moments of limbo, such as waiting or daydreaming. A lot of the footage I take has a floaty nature to it. But floating has a complex tempo - it can be calming, but it can also be a result of intense anxiety where you are held in suspension, unable to move forward, stuck in a loop. It could also be a space of contemplation, transformation or growth. There are some very strange rhythms going on right now, we are moving 'forward' because

time appears to flow that way, but it also feels very much like being held within a kind of paralysis.

MS Why did you mention anxiety?

HP I suppose on a personal, but also collective level, anxiety has become this underlying vibration affecting and connecting every one of us. Because my work is dictated by moods and atmospheres, if a certain vibe is coming across in the work, it's not necessarily a chosen choice at the time, but a by-product or energy seeping through itself.

MS Let's talk about your use of the screen and technology. Particularly right now, at a time when everyone is forced to be online. Your scenes depict escapes to nature or quiet zones that one normally experiences without technology. Do you have any reflections on how we look at screens right now, because screens are for many, like an addictive drug. But you don't seem to be using them in this hyper-capitalist, self-aggrandizing manner.

HP It's true, they are exhausting, unhealthy, violent and addictive, but they are also educational, radical and revolutionary, where we are seeing movements gain momentum like never before. When I started using my phone a lot for filmmaking, it felt liberating at a time when renting a studio or having good equipment was too expensive or out of reach.

MS Was it a form of notetaking?

HP Absolutely. I remember I started making in desktop composition style around 2013, and I was using it as a moodboard tool for something else. And I began to realise that the sketch was a lot more interesting than its finished version. Unrelated strands of subjects and voices became choral in how they began to harmonise with one another.

MS There's a way you involve other people, like when you include a fragment from Kaino Wennerstrand's radio show where they talk about missing their friends. And you similarly bring all these voices in, and it's not like sampling from anywhere, you're not sampling Beyoncé, you're sampling sounds and images local to you in some way, even if you haven't met the person IRL, you share an intimacy.

HP I'm drawn to the minutiae of life; the Whatsapp exchanges, a comment someone made, a word I overheard on the bus. Exchanges between people are really important to magnify. Time is so precious, the best thing you can give to someone is to be present, actually listen and slow down enough to sense what's going on. Sometimes it feels we are all moving so fast, for no reason, that there's no communication or care being exchanged.

MS Can you mention some of your other influences, like filmmakers, heroes, notetakers that have inspired you?

HP My practice has been really influenced by Youtube and vloggers, lo-fi SoundCloud accounts and beautiful bedroom mixes, anonymous Tumblr accounts, online poetry movements, the raw energy at a party where jams will just break out or other eruptions in everyday life; stuff that feels really alive and vibrant, and of the moment. I think the hyper professionalisation rampant in the art world catapulted me towards anything that was DIY and uncompromised. Although this space is not without its faults, it can keep you safeguarded within a space of free labour.

I'm drawn to the more diaristic or poetic work of filmmakers like Marie Menken, Jonas Mekas, Maya Deren, Naomi Kawase, Ben Rivers and John Akomfrah to name a few. And one of my biggest love affairs of late has been the author Lydia Davis and her unbelievable ability to dive into the minutiae of life and create beautiful narratives out of them, the hilarious way her characters need to be desperately understood, and the way she's able to create a kind portrait out of their lived experience.

MS I want to mention the video of Athena [Papadopoulos] you recently made and the portraiture you do of others - is there a differentiation between that and your work? It just seems like an extension.

HP There is no difference for me, and it's completely in the remit of my practice. The *Desktop Compositions* series are more poetic the way they go off into a myriad of directions and subject matters, but the portraits are still in this zone of intimacy and observation and trying to get that essence across on screen.

MS Would these portraits have to be of friends or specific people?

HP So far they all have been, but not necessarily. I just have to be able to see properly.

MS See what properly?

HP The person. If I'm drawn to them in some way - if I find them captivating - I am able to see them. I know immediately if someone fascinates me or not, and when they do I can't help but follow that thread...
