

A.B. Amelia Barratt REAL LIFE



FOREWORD	7
by Alvaro Barrington	
NOT / MY / SCENE	34
by Isobel Harbison	
THE SCRIBE WITHIN THE IDEA	74
by Holly Pester	
Selected Readings	
GUEST (9:14)	9
RIDE (3:44)	19
BOOK GROUP (6:32)	25
LAY THE FIRE (4:35)	41
A SEASON (3:35)	49
REAL LIFE (4:09)	55
FOR DAYS (11:03)	61
BUILDING A BUILDING (5:47)	81
LIBRARIAN (8:44)	89
THE LOBBY (4:29)	101
Biographies	108
Colophon	109

NOT / MY / SCENE
by Isobel Harbison

Amelia Barratt describes herself as a 'painter who writes'.^[1] Her poetic compositions are highly observant and rich in imagery, rooms full of objects, trinkets and textures each inhabited by a nervous but keen-eyed narrator. Scenarios ooze with detail, from a dreaded party at mother's house to a disastrous book club, from a day-long odyssey with a new girlfriend to an afternoon lolling with the gardener, from the 'retirement party' of a first real job to a hostile takeover by an anti-social librarian. It's all here – anticipation, panic and degradation, awkward encounters abundant with shame – positioning us, readers or listeners, as witness, absorbed at every turn.

This book includes ten pieces written over the past four years, poems that assume a central narrator, an 'I', the internal musings of whom are communicated predominantly through monologue or, marked in bold in the text, dialogues with sequential interlocutors. Barratt describes these unnamed narrators as several 'versions of the same self', producing a continuous if unsteady perspective. Each piece was conceived for a distinct exhibition space and responded to their various architectural or contextual particularities but read together here they become something else, the chronicling of a fabricated self, imagined through the refuge it seeks and the encounters it endures.^[2]

This is an audio-print publication, a format integral and foundational to the publishing endeavour reflecting the integral relationship between sound and text in Barratt's work. These pieces were written to be heard and the timbre and pitch of their delivery are vital to the work. Barratt predominantly uses her own voice, which sounds pensive, measured and earnest, but she has also used other performers including her father, with his 'wry, authoritative voice'. Her editing process is oral: when the writ-

ing is finished, the vocal pattern becomes fixed in place. Her emphases can be felt equally in the pace, intonation and severances of her clauses as in the oscillations – short, shorter, long – of her phrasing.

Barratt describes the staging of her performances as relatively plain, 'me and a mic and a spotlight, maybe coloured. Either standing or sitting at a table with a script and a glass of water... There's no action or movement so stillness becomes important and at best, with focus on the voice, can hold the attention of a room'. The presence of the artist's body initially seemed vital, but this changed in the more restricted circumstances of the pandemic. Her more recent pieces exist purely in audio, not projected from (or, tethered to) the particular vocal, physical and historical identifiers of the speaking body (middle-class, White, cis, female); the 'I' might be free of all this.

When Barratt was studying for a Master's degree at the Slade School of Fine Art, London (2014–2016), she embraced Anais Nin's use of the diary as an intimate literary form, writing short episodes to be voiced one after the other. This informed her approach to building the complexities of a character within the 'confines of the everyday'. Her mode of address, confessing peevish and blunders, conscripts the listener as confidant and takes its cues from a range of writers who have crafted watchful, alienated protagonists through poetry, short story and novels, including Katherine Mansfield, Clarice Lispector and Elizabeth Bishop. The unflinching self-exposure of the American confessional poets, a label many including Bishop ultimately abhorred (Bishop was 'vigilant in giving nothing of herself away'),^[3] seems to be of spectral influence here. They wrote in speech patterns and colloquialisms, using the rhythms of intonation and breath rather than the regularity of verses governed by rhyme or meter, and created images that reflected intense psychological experiences, often culled from childhood.

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) is most often credited for relinquishing poetic conventions and adopting an exploratory prosaic style.^[4] A poet from the 'right sort'

of Boston family, his oeuvre was peopled with parents and grandparents, cooks, nurses and chauffeurs. There were rooms with polka-dot curtains and musical instruments played animatedly by Great Aunt Sylvia. There was worry and pallor, 'anxious repetitive smiling' and death. There was frustration with the constraints of affluence but no signs of withdrawal. His turn came in the aftermath of war and the height of the Cold War, as emotional bruising found poetic form. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton had mother trouble too. Sexton addressed mother frequently but whereas for Lowell, maternal presence was ghostly or moon-faced ('For Sale', 1958), Sexton's mother was prickly and egregious: 'I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said. / And she never could. She had my portrait / done instead' ('The Double Image', 1959, 1960).

The American performance scholar Christopher Grobe has recently published a theory of 'confessionalism', his term for a mode of performative address that evolves from this school of poets and encompasses artists working in happenings and performance, early stand-up comedians and reality TV stars embracing a 'confessional mode of direct address'.^[5] Confessions within this terrain deal primarily in selfhood, which is not to be confused with the autobiographical. 'Confessional selfhood', Grobe clarifies, 'likewise an "enabling fiction," is sustained not by identity, but by difference—the inevitable difference between what you are and what you confess'.^[6] This school of poetry, he proposes, ushered in a range of critical artistic practices interested in exposing or deconstructing one's disparate or conflicting selves.

In this context Grobe references performance artist and poet Eleanor Antin (b.1938) who wrote, in 1974: 'I am interested in defining the limits of myself. I consider the usual aids to self-definition—sex, age, talent, time and space—as tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice'.^[7] Her works from this period explore these limitations by creating alter egos, which inhabited different genders, races, professions, eras and locations. According to the curator Emily Liebert, Antin created 'a motley group,



I.
Eleanor Antin, *R.N.*
1976/2007. From: *The Adventures of a Nurse*
©Eleanor Antin, courtesy
the artist and Ronald
Feldman Gallery, NY

whom she called her "selves," in works across mediums'.^[8] The same year, she performed 'Eleanor of 1954' at the Women's Building in Los Angeles.^[9] a piece modelled on Sexton's final rendition of 'Self in 1958' – both writing up a self in a downward spiral. 'I sat in a chair and talked', Sexton recalled in 1979, 'and made confessions about things that had happened twenty years earlier. What I was trying to do was to find out if there was anything real left of that self. I tried to shame her out'.^[10] Moving from her own experience or 'self', from 1975 to 1991, her work encompassed other imagined selves, a king, ballerinas, nurses and a film director, allowing her to explore roaming, unfixed identities, and themes of self-actualisation and transformation.

Antin was not the only artist toying with the slip-pages of self during this period. Performed selves appear often in feminist art practices of the 1970s, across a range of mediums that record, document and further fracture these projected personalities. In 1972, Joan Jonas performed in several works as both herself and as 'Organic Honey', a hyper-feminised version of herself, represented by a live feed shown on a monitor on stage; in 1973, Adrian Piper performed her Black male alter ego reciting poetic incantations loudly on the streets of New York; from 1973 to 1978, Lynn Hershman Leeson explored rituals associated with gender – make-up routines, weight-watchers weigh-ins – through the character 'Roberta Breitmore'; in her performances of the mid-1970s, Julia Heyward used great vocal range, singing, chanting and warbling, to inhabit various characters, including her father.

a Southern preacher, exploring the embodiment of patriarchal pressures and its exorcism through the voice.

If the selves being explored by the confessional poets of the late 1950s bore biographical relation to their makers, the confessional performances of the 1970s abandoned the notion of 'real' selves. Theirs were other bodies, exploratory subjectivities, splintered, mutating and on show. If the confessional poets rattled a specific inheritance – a fund, an estate – their successors attempted to unsettle an infrastructural legacy informed by patriarchy, sexism and racism. In dramatising pressurised selves, they hoped to illuminate the dominant ideologies that weighed upon them. Both groups, bordering on breakdown, sought release.

Barratt's writing combines some of the tonal qualities and mode of address of the confessional writers of the 1950s with the careful construction of self of the persona performers of the 1970s. Like the confessionals, speech informs form, lines run like breaths, some shorter than others. There's routine referencing to convention ('It's a legacy thing', *Guest*, 2018), with staged encounters set in homes staffed by maids, cooks and gardeners. Encounters and dialogues are common, but the safety of real friendship is absent. 'Mother' looms large and seems steadfastly impossible; inheritance is both singular and societal. The poetic voice is attuned to the small details of a room, details that frame an action and cling to its memory, the surface textures of furniture, fabrics and instruments. There's a sense that every room holds refuge from the discomfort of the company of others. Tonally, imminent breakdown seems as threatening as the obstinacy of mother.

Mother is a ploy, one of several 'external directives' as Barratt explains, adopting Audre Lorde's terminology from her essay 'Uses of the Erotic' (1978). Barratt's unnamed narrator resents such directives, appearing to push against what Lorde describes as a 'fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves [that] keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many

facets of our oppression as women'.^[11] In retaliation to mother's prudishness, desire surges but is mishandled – Barratt's 'I' introduces or touches guests inappropriately, 'as one does' (*Guest*). Gender is inscribed at various points, through mother's instruction of how to feather one's lashes in *Guest*, or the narrator's desire to share a bath, then a gown, with a female 'doppelganger' (*For Days*, 2020). We might assume the protagonist here is female but there is no sure footing. These works are works that refuse gender and try to maintain the unidentifiable 'I', works that queer, that write into being a self 'at odds with everything around it', to borrow Barratt's citation of bell hooks, a self that 'has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live'.^[12]

Sexuality appears in glimmers – 'and she still in bed, but following me with her eyes/ her lips now bright violet and alive/ imitating several different voices of the village peoples' (*For Days*, 2020). Accounts are spliced with puns, with lips like this and that, with about-turns and surreal asides. Potential pleasures are keenly awaited then swiftly spoiled. The idea of the book group, the narrator explains, 'was basic but I was enthralled to understand how we all might fight/ or love/ around a table/ in one room'. The excitement immediately sours: 'The supper laid on was apparently to be sandwiches/ and if the sandwiches were anything to go by/ this was/ not/ my/ scene'

II.
Performance at Smoking
Inside, London, 2018
Photo: Josephine Baker





III .
Original performance
of *Book Group* (2019)
Photo: Gabriella Boyd

(*Book Group*, 2019). Like gender and sexuality, Barratt's careful wordplay resists fixed periodisation, juxtaposing anachronisms with the terminology of the social media age, 'Acronyms are what I use to hide what I'm saying when I speak with the dog/ TMI I said' (*Lay the Fire*, 2019).

In Barratt's waggish comedies, naïve expectation routinely leads to grim anti-climax. It's a register that distinguishes Barratt's work from predecessors and places it squarely in the present. The comedic was a tone the confessional poets avoided, even loathed – Anne Sexton, tired of poetry readings by the mid-1960s, wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 'in the end, the 'reading' is a gastly [sic] sort of show—an act such as a comedian has'[13] – and satire was an approach uncommon among feminist performers of previous generations. But it might be considered among a raft of contemporary female writers such as Julia Davis, Vicki Peppardine, and Diane Morgan for whom British etiquette, its restraint and stoicism, provides scope for bawdy and outlandish storytelling full of errant bodily functions and physical imperfections, female libido, impropriety and humiliation. In their podcast *Dear Joan and Jericha* (2018–2021) Davis and Peppardine play a pair of agony aunts responding to listeners' letters on local radio. Sexual questions prevail yielding fantastically lurid suggestions. 'Dark and stinky meat' attract men, they advise, including 'offal, caecum, pancreas, right to the

end of the rectum' to stimulate the 'semi-engorged organ'. Asked about the podcast's popularity, Davis speculated, 'Because it's so ridiculous and rude and terrible, it's like a release for some people'.[14] What's penetrative about such works, as with Barratt's, is not just the integrity of its perversity, held and communicated by the female voice, but the question of how I or we, as audience, so immediately connect with this material.

This form of writing is pumped from the bilges, pulled up by the roots. It comes out in spite of external directives or social expectations. Barratt's performed introspections tease out a self at odds with their surroundings and the people she finds there. And she takes pleasure in imagining and finding form for what, from these scenarios, most curiously spills or stinks.

1. The artist in correspondence with the author, February 2022. All quotes that follow emerge from this correspondence.
2. The pieces were written between 2018 and 2021, each commissioned to be performed in a specific space. London venues include SET; Art Licks Weekend; Live Art Development Agency; Plaza Plaza; The Block and Seventeen. Recent commissions include audio works for Kendall Koppe, Glasgow; Drawing Room, London; and Uferhallen, Berlin.
3. Claudia Roth Pierpont, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Art of Losing', *New Yorker Magazine*, 6 March 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/elizabeth-bishops-art-of-losing.
4. Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* [1959], London 2001.
5. Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV*, New York 2017, p.190
6. Grobe 2017, p.25

7. Eleanor Antin, 'Notes on Transformation', in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley CA 1996, p.775.
8. Emily Liebert, 'Introduction to Eleanor Antin', Museum of Modern Art, New York, available at www.moma.org/artists/8183, accessed February 2022.
9. This performance exists in various forms of documentation and has assumed multiple titles, one of which is 'Eleanor of 1954', others include 'Ely, 1953' and 'Eleanor 1974'.
10. Eleanor Antin interviewed by Eleanor Munro, in Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, New York 1979, p.428; quoted in Grobe 2017, p.87
11. Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, New York 1984, rev. ed. 2012, p.90
12. bell hooks, 'Are you Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body', panel discussion, the New School, New York, 6th May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJkOhNR0vzs, accessed March 2022.
13. Kamran Javadizadeh, 'Elizabeth Bishop's Closet Drama', *Arizona Quarterly* 67, no.3 (Autumn 2011), p.136. Quoted in Grobe 2017, pp.34–35.
14. Harriet Gibsone, 'Julia Davis: "I'm worried there's going to be a backlash"', *The Guardian*, 18th October 2018, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/oct/22/julia-davis-im-worried-theres-going-to-be-a-backlashsally4ever, accessed February 2022.

A.B. REAL LIFE
Amelia Barratt

Edited and produced by Charles Asprey

Designed by Ard.works (Guillaume Chuard, Michela Zoppi)
Printed by Healeys, United Kingdom
Flexi discs produced by DMS, United Kingdom

Texts, audio works and illustrations
© Amelia Barratt 2022

Additional texts
© Alvaro Barrington, Isobel Harbison and
Holly Pester 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electrical, mechanical or otherwise, without first seeking the written permission of the copyright holders and of the publishers.

All tracks recorded at Studio One, London
Engineer: Chloe Smith
Mastered at Abbey Road Studios, London
Mastering Engineer: Frank Arkwright
Special thanks to Bryan Ferry

Thanks also to Jo Barratt, Martha Barratt, Ben Eastham and Alicia Matthews for their contributions to this project

Listen to all the readings online at
www.ab-real-life.com

ISBN: 978-1-3999-2489-4

Image overleaf: Amelia Barratt, *Mirror*, 2020 (detail)
Ink on paper, 34 × 48.5 cm