

**SOPHIE SEITA**  
**[ Reading-in-Progress ]**

*Vulva's School: A F\*cking Didactic Take on Experimental Feminist Performance Art, or, How to Read* is both the work and preparation for (the) work.

Here's Roland Barthes (translated by Kate Briggs) in *The Preparation of the Novel* (a pedagogical experiment in the form of several lectures about the plans for his unwritten novel):

'There is an age at which we teach what we know. Then comes another age at which we teach what we do not know; this is called research.'

We could also call this a way of reading.

My *Vulva's School* is a somewhat similar pedagogical experiment. It is based on a lecture performance first presented at Cambridge, where it emerged from a graduate seminar I taught on 'Experimental Writing by Women', in which I very much wanted to figure out how to teach what I did not yet know or knew but wanted to teach differently or unknowingly; to welcome vulnerability, uncertainty, a form of thinking for which you cannot quite be prepared. *Vulva's School* is therefore dedicated to the students of that course.

I then performed the piece in a slightly different version at the independent project space Florens Cargo in Darmstadt, Germany, as part of a city-wide arts festival, and most recently, at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, just days after violent attacks on students and faculty following their peaceful protests against a fee hike of 150% imposed by the university administration.

Every context and occasion inflected and will continue to inflect the piece and will leave a mark in my own interpretation of it.

This is how I have announced the performance previously: 'Thinking about (and through) Carolee Schneemann, Hito Steyerl, Judy Chicago, Jack Halberstam, Gordon Hall, Lisa Robertson, Gertrude Stein, Maya Deren, Sianne Ngai, and Eve Sedgwick, but also about pedagogy, about my own teachers of reading, about abstraction and autobiography, about alternative forms of learning and relating,

about pinched nerves, about visibility, about vulnerability in an institution, about detours, getting lost, but also being addicted to slickness, and as always (always) about serious copying and necessary (even inexorable) repetition.'

As a piece *about* process (of learning, of reading, of making), it also formally reveals its own process of being made. It wears its intellectual and creative debts on its sleeve. It reads itself. I read myself. I wanted the video, and the split screen in particular, to capture this multi-directionality or multi-vocality and to represent my episodic, associative thinking.

One of the characters in *Vulva's School*, my alter ego, Pony, was originally conceived as a video in response to Raul Ruiz's *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, a sort of art-historical who-dunnit, an experimental film that sits between scholarship and speculative fiction, in which an art collector and his invisible interviewer try to find the link between a series of paintings and the sacrifices of a cult. In order to find out, they stage a number of *tableaux vivants*. There's a riddle at the heart of Ruiz's film. In that sense, it's related to teaching and scholarship. The scholar or student as detective. The text or artwork as code that needs to be deciphered. After watching the film in maybe 2015, I thought to myself I'd like to make a new video in which there are no visual tableaux but in which they are merely described. I was and continue to be committed to the specific forms of thinking that are possible through poetic language. How a poetic text can make an argument, indirectly, provisionally, by encoding itself. And I am fascinated by description in language that happens at oblique angles. A descriptive language that is precise yet evasive. I never made the video. 'Pony: Five Tableaux' exists as an abstract mystery story and feminist Sisyphus-myth published as poetry. So in *Vulva's School*, I return to this vision from several years ago, but incompletely, and in a new guise.

That maybe already gets at the heart of my mode of working. I rewrite, I recycle. So that, as I say in the video, 'language can become modular'. Why should we not return to the same language, hold it to the light, view it sideways, upside down, squinting or extremely closely. For Etel Adnan, for Cezanne, and for numerous others, a mountain became the same reference point over and over again.

I just remembered that there's a quote in there from yet another earlier piece of mine: 'The loop of that which was just described or named is endless perhaps a

square is there a square that is not dull what would it take to make it like it was a knife', a text for which I *did* make a video, *Objects I Cannot Touch*. The loop of it made it into this piece, too.

In short: I'm thinking about the ongoingness of language. Its recyclability. A way of keeping something active, rather than 'done'. The return to materials previously used. To re-use them. Making re- my gesture. Rather than un- or de-. To rehearse. In another text somewhere I say 'I am so unrehearsed'. Which is anxiety speaking. You practise for perfection. I'm usually over-prepared. When I first wrote this piece, I felt radically under-prepared. In the Q&A after the first iteration of this lecturer performance, a friend teasingly called me out on my polished performance of the *idea* of unpolishedness. And asked me, What would the unpolished actually look like?

The thing is once you go down the road to slickness, the horizon gets pushed further away each time.

Slickness and messiness—the dual push and pull between my perfectionism and my desire to be surprised, to be led by uncertainty, messiness, vulnerability.

I am an obsessive editor; I go through numerous drafts. I think through writing. I also 'basically think through other people's language' as a character in another of my performances says. I think on and with the page.

Lately, I've been realising that my readings and re-readings are often multiply mediated. How, for example, I have read one author through the eyes of another, or one artist or theorist through the lens of a teacher, a friend, a student. If there's one thing I wish for this piece, as perhaps for all my work, it is to give a semblance of the process of reading, with all its distracted *and* focused, specific *and* speculative powers. Probably everything I've done in the last four years can be boiled down to this promise: how a performance or installation can be a form of reading. How can I make an audience feel as if they were reading even though they're not? Does that make sense? I keep trying to articulate it to myself. I might need several attempts.

So how do you show process? If I were to give a representative image of this particular work in progress it would have to include all my readings, my re-

readings, my mis-readings, my missed readings, all my multiple drafts. But even the technically in-process work would suggest a teleology towards the finished work or would certainly be read as a 'salient' example.

It's for all of these reasons that I struggle to come up with what 'work in progress' I could possibly include.

In every performance, every reading, the piece evolves. Each is part of the non-linear development of the story of my reading. My thinking about these issues hasn't ended. Just as I returned to Pony and keep returning to the same literary and theoretical texts, I will probably return to this lecture performance. The video is a snapshot of where I'm at right now. I might be sick of it one day but I'll probably continue to grapple with its provocations, its temptations.

I will cite myself again and rewrite myself into and out of this reading.