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Elephants and suffering in dusty corners

Susanna Ferrar

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Artist Presentation: Elephants and suffering in dusty corners

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Abstract

The following non-refereed paper has been compiled by the editors from the audio transcript and notes provided by Susanna Ferrar for her talk delivered to the Inaugural Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference (Perth: 9 Oct. 2005). The original program note to her presentation reads: "I keep talking about this project I'm doing, visiting places where the ashes of my grandparents' children ended up, who were all born and raised in Western Australia. As I proceed, adventures seem to be befalling me. Sometimes it seems more important to hang out the washing or change the cat litter. The level of anxiety is high. I'm not sure I can cope. I am the artist. I am going to talk. I am chipping away all the bits that aren't part of whatever it is that I am creating. I have sound, I have pictures. There are words. I don't know what they will make in the end. It will be personal, subjective, universal, pretentious, daring, weak." Ferrar also played the violin as part of her presentation.—Eds.

From the Transcript of Ferrar's Oral Presentation, 1

I've got a mission statement: I intend to speak as personally and subjectively as I can. It's very scary. I remember when I first started improvising somebody asked me once what I was thinking about when I was playing and I said, "Fear," and I was. I was always just sitting with or standing with the violin with my eyes shut, thinking, "I'm so frightened," and playing Fear. That's mainly what I used to play and that's mostly what I'm speaking at the moment.

I was born in New Zealand, but I've lived most of my life in London and I'm back here because my grandfather came in the 1890s, with my grandmother, to work with C.Y. O'Connor on the WA Goldfields water pipeline and when I was coming here everything seemed to be about water and how much we need water.¹ So I'm quite glad that he came and put 600 kilometres of pipeline into the Goldfields and he worked here until 1936 and then he drove his ancient old car across Australia to Sydney and they left. The whole family left. He had five children, the youngest of whom was my mother. The first one was my Aunt Kitty and she was born in 659 Murray Street, which is just over there. One of the pictures was of my grandmother with a pram in Murray Street when it was still sand.

What else was I going to tell you about? Oh, Joan of Arc, that's right, because one of the things I find I'm doing now is tracking energy or following energy. There was a rainbow this morning on my way in, so I thought "OK, I'll do Joan of Arc." I went to Paris—I always wanted to. When I came to New Zealand the first time since I'd been born there, which was when I was forty, I thought "I'm going to live here." So I was going to go back to London, sell the flat, and I thought, "I can't do that, I haven't seen Chartres Cathedral." Eventually, when I'd been back in London a few years I got around to going to see Chartres Cathedral.² It was gorgeous. It was royal blue. Somebody was tuning the organ and I went to the very, very back, behind the chancel, on the kind of big, sacred axis of the cathedral and I just got out the violin and I just made all these sounds along with the organ tuner. I don't think anybody even heard me. I don't know. I'm pretty sure the organ tuner didn't hear me, but I did and the energy did, and that was good. I went from there to Rouen where Joan was burnt at the stake. The first person I met there was an ancient Norwegian sailor who one year previously had had to jump from the third floor of a burning hotel. He was a kind of street person by then, and he took me to sit in the market place where Joan had been burnt. He said, "Hungry?" and he opened his coat and he had all these packets of takeaway food in his coat, so we had a picnic in Rouen and I played my violin again there, just with the people who were in the street there. Then I went on to Rheims. It was in Rouen, though, that I realised I was tracking Joan, and there was the most wonderful "arc au ciel"—a huge rainbow—'cos the sun was very low while I was going on the train round the triangle of Chartres to Rouen to Rheims. The triangle goes round Paris like that. Rheims is in the centre of this sort of

glorious champagne country. If you follow about two kilometres behind the cathedral there's a little basilica, St Remy, and there's a statue of St Clovis there—from, oh I don't know how long ago, a very long time ago—and I went into this basilica, which was quite heavy, ornate. Tucked away in a little tiny dusty corner was a Medieval wood carving of Christ in Judgement. He was just sitting looking like a miserable little Medieval man—you know, just miserable, covered with cobwebs. The ruined Christ. I played. I asked the lady if she minded if I played. I got out the violin and played in this corner because of how the suffering just goes on in dusty corners all the time. And the lady came with tears in her eyes and thanked me. So, yup, that was the rainbow.

It's frightening playing in places where nobody else is playing, probably where nobody's improvised ever, releasing sound.

I was going to write this talk about the creative process from the inside, so I was going to do daily things. I was going to have a daily practice of writing in my journal. I did it for about three days and then completely forgot—well, not really forgot... There was more than three days' writing. Parts of it are reproduced below, because I believe that every bit of my experience contributes to my music. The experiences, inner and outer, that are written there are those that contributed to my music within the allotted time.



The author as a young girl with her family.
Image courtesy of Susanna Ferrar

The project—I've been now to the five gravesites, or rather, ash-sites. The dust was lovely, getting covered with dust, like Liza Lim said, and I've been to three gravesites in England and two in New Zealand, where people who were born and raised in Western Australia ended up dying. These are my aunts, my uncle and my mother. As I say, my first aunt was born in Murray Street. The others were born in Northam and I'm going to play in Northam (WA) later on and what I wanted to do was play those recordings and answer them. This recording that I'm playing now was in Somerset. My grandparents are both buried in the grave which is on a hillside of a big valley—deep country, England—where I used to go when I was a child for my summer holidays. So my grandparents are both buried there, and my Aunt Kitty who died in 1995 at the age of 93 and a half. My aunt Kitty's ashes are buried here too.

The intention of writing daily notes was to elucidate the creative process from the inside. The main problem with that was that until something materializes it's very difficult for me to trust that my process is creative. It does just pootle on underneath the surface of whatever I'm doing and then when I open this "chest" of the violin, going under my chin, the violin always has something to say. I'm very wary of saying that because one day it mightn't. I might run out of "now". Ram Dass said that the reason people kept so much stuff in boxes was that they were afraid of running out of "now." What I love about improvising is that you revel in the "now" and there's no time like the present. It's very odd speaking instead of playing. What I'm trying to do here is use the same process, but talking.

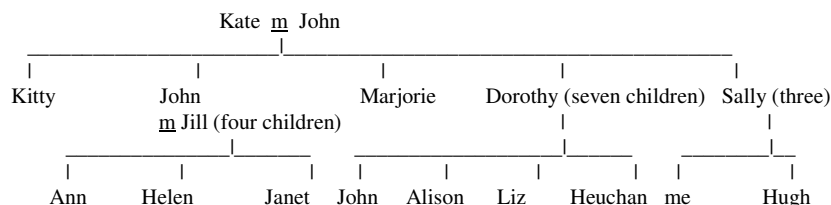
I'm now looking for the thing I wrote, which was daily notes. Here we are. This is nice. This is the linoleum cut I did for my Christmas card in 1967 (it says "LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED"). I don't know quite why it's in this book, but it is.

Does anyone have any questions?—this is also a reference to Ram Dass. He has a story about the early days of LSD, when he'd been tripping out by the ocean, but had somehow mistimed things, because he had a lecture to give and was still tripping. His friends got him into his clothes and over to the lecture theatre, so he found himself on stage, looking out over a crowd of students expecting a lecture about synapses in the brain. He knew this on one level, but on a more real level it seemed that what was in front of him was the ocean, full of fishes. He couldn't think of a lecture about synapses in the brain, so he asked if anyone had any questions. One of the fishes then asked a detailed question about synapses which Ram Dass recognized on one level, but on the more real level, he heard the fish ask, "Do you love me?" to which he replied, "Of course I love you." The student then said, "I'm not satisfied with that answer," and Ram Dass realized, "One of us was in trouble!"

Background: From Ferrar's Journal, 22 Aug – 9 Oct 2005

Sun 22nd Oct 2005

Today I shall start to type in the printable bits from my "tough" book. I shall censor some comments about other people—or maybe just their names. Dickon is my son, Hugh my brother, Heuchan, Liz and Alison my cousins, John and Susanna Isherwood my great-grandparents.



Thurs 1st Sept 2005

Daily notes indeed! I started again this morning in my handwritten "tough" journal book! I need to get out now. Have been pottering about all day without even getting dressed. I'm not very well and break out in a sweat at the effort when I start trying to write the abstract and bio for the conference notes... When I've been writing, which isn't much, it's been in the other book "tender." I'm not sure now why I split them like that. This morning I chose this book because the other one is in the other room, downstairs, and also because I am experiencing the task ahead of me as a tough one. I'll be talking about the creative process from the inside. Project working title *Parrs for Perth*: that's because I'm currently thinking, "What do I need to take with me?"

I asked myself, "If I had to leave tomorrow, what would I need to do?" I think I have everything. I've collected music from the gravesites of Mum, Kitty and Uncle John. Auntie Kitty's ashes are in the grandparents' grave, which is rather unkempt. Would I like to live down there and keep an eye on it? I rather think so. Maybe South Prawle. I need to organize selling my shares so that I'm not utterly brassic in WA. Maybe that's my title *Utterly Brassic In WA*.

After picturing working on the door and hanging up the washing, I tried to think what I *need* to do to progress my project. It all makes continuing difficult for me. Discouragement discourages me—slows me down—distracts me. Uncle John said last night he thought my parents' untimely deaths distracted me.

I pictured my workroom as it might be without all that STUFF—and I visualized tidying up the cellar and using it a bit more for storage. I thought I should ask B. about his boxes there. I also wondered how much stuff the W's have and whether they'll need the table from the cellar. I pictured myself bringing the sideboard out of the wardrobe in their room, putting its legs on and setting it up somewhere: wondered if they might like a second armchair...

At some point there was a little wave of pleasure at having Uncle John and Susanna Isherwood's marriage certificate. I'm delighted to find myself descended from a stonemason. The collier delights me too, but the stonemason brings me great happiness!

O.K.! To the washing machine!

Fri 2nd Sept 2005, 1.19 a.m.

As I was cleaning my teeth (I think it was) I wondered if I might not talk about my Joan of Arc trip around Paris—then I remembered that that’s the last thing I wrote about in here. I know that because this morning I read over just a tiny bit about Rheims. My arm is still not quite happy when I write. There are twinges near the break.

Fri 2nd Sept 2005, 7.40 a.m.

Yesterday at some point I wrote “the creative process from the inside”—it was here, in this book! I just looked back. I’d thought it was in an email or something. I have the track record of creativity—that was the 3rd idea, I think, that popped into my head. I suppose, unusually, there’s a definite conception point for this project. It was when I received the “conference call” from Cat Hope at Perth’s WA Academy of Performing Arts. I thought, “What could I do in Perth,” and in the light of having already made a little piece at Marjorie’s grave, the idea of visiting the others and then taking them home was a small leap. Mind you, I don’t know when I thought of playing at Marjorie’s grave. That was a gift from Dickon, really, and it was very awkward in its way. We’d decided to go to Sydney for Hugh’s fiftieth (28th Nov). Dickon wanted to be home for Christmas. I had a choir concert in the Albert Hall on 24th Nov. Dickon wanted me to forgo the concert and go earlier. I didn’t really want to leave till 26th, but in the end we left on 25th. Hugh had his party the week-end after his birthday and Dickon and I went to New Zealand a few days after that. Dickon was in New Zealand with me for nine days, from the 9th to the 18th of December. Marjorie’s birthday was on 14th. He was DETERMINED to get to her grave on her birthday. I wanted to drive through the tunnel with him and show him Milford Sound, but I had to let go of that. We went up to Kaikoura and saw whales. That was also on his “MUST DO” list. The other item was to see snow and understand how a person could ski in the morning and swim in the sea in the afternoon (something my dad used to say was possible—even easy—in New Zealand). We were staying at Amberley and Marjorie’s grave is in Burwood. We wanted to get to Wellington too. In the end we went to Kaikoura and back to Amberley, then, when we left for Wellington, on 14th, we went via Burwood and had to drive like the clappers to catch the Picton ferry. Dickon flew down to Christchurch, and thence home, on 18th, so I didn’t have to hurry on my drive South.

I was missing Marjorie. Sometime in the previous few years I’d visited her and we’d walked a few blocks to get fish and chips. She had a stick, but only for waving at the traffic. She was striding out, hale and hearty. I saw her a couple more times I think, both times in the care home, in 1999, before and after the Dunedin trip when Jack died.

I realize I don’t say much about New Zealand. No one here shares this other life of mine—though now Dickon does, to a certain extent.

Anyway, Dickon was insistent we get to the grave on the 14th. I’d been very grumpy and upset the night before and had had great difficulty packing and getting my arse in gear in the morning too. Dickon suggested I was upset about Marjorie and I pooh pooh -ed the idea.

We went to Burwood and, not without wrong turnings and some difficulty, found the grave. We switched on the DAT. I played. Dickon spoke. I spoke. Playing brought me to my senses. My sense of loss, my sense of history, my sense of celebration, were released and integrated. I became aware of them as the violin told me of them. I was listening. The violin was playing. It turned.

That’s enough for now. I’ve been writing for half an hour. I’d got up at about 6.30 a.m., been to the loo, fed the cat, sorted some stuff out of the cupboard to put in the cellar, put away the dishes from last night. I didn’t put porridge in the oven because I wasn’t hungry. I put some mung beans and lentils in the sprouter and looked at the solar water temperature (28 °C). I’d brought my bathers in from the garden, still damp, and put them on a chair back in the kitchen. What next? It would be good to do half an hour of trying to tackle my work room, then half an hour’s sitting, then breakfast, then parcelling up Alison’s mail, ringing F, checking film times, ringing K, checking email, then the post should arrive, then I post Alison’s parcel and go for a swim—or eat lunch first? Or work in my room some more? We’ll see.

Mon 5th Sept 2005, 8.17 a.m.

Services at Warwick. What about this project? My mind's jumping around—tried on, "I'm doing a gimmicky project because I'm not a good enough musician." That may be true. I don't think it is, but there's not much mileage in it as an idea. In church, I read the 1st lesson, then sang the Psalm: "Teach me O Lord the way of thy statutes." I think it was—I thought I'd keep the leaflet, but it's at home. While I was singing it occurred to me that it was interesting to read and then straightaway sing—useful practice for my "artist's talk"—but the thought nearly led me to lose my place! I had to pull myself sharply together and make a determined effort to stay on track, but then I sang the wrong acclamation for the Gospel. We had "Blest are the Pure in Heart" too, which I'd sung at Marjorie's grave. I'm trying to work out how much petrol to buy. I need about 170 miles' worth—say twenty four litres, but it'll be expensive here. I have a Tesco coupon, but Tesco is back in London. I don't know where one is around here. I think I'll just put in a tenner's worth, which'll be about twelve (eleven or twelve) litres, then ask N where to get it in Malvern. Brain is tired. Must go.

Thurs 8th Sept 2005, 00.22 a.m.

Remembered, earlier, with a laugh, that I'd forgotten to write this for several days. Too tired now, as well. Time to destination 5:42

The aeroplane is about to fly over the Java Sea. On the little screen in front of me are, I suppose, altitude and so on in Thai. We've just flown over Banjarmasin. It must be about midnight—well, it's 11.22 Sydney time, that's p.m., Friday night the 9th Sept 2005. I love the way it's all up for grabs in the sky. I just watched a film called *Millions*, in which two small boys picked up a case of money chucked off a train. It finished with the 2 boys, their father and his girlfriend (the mother was dead) fulfilling their dream of bringing fresh water to a desert place. When I was in France, I said to P that I was tempted to vow that, after this journey to Perth, I would take no more aeroplane flights until the world—all of it—was provided with clean, safe water. There was John Parr, working under C.Y. O'Connor, sending water back into the goldfields from the mouth of the Swan River, over 100 years ago. On Curaçao all the water comes from desalination of sea water. Why not everywhere? It hardly makes sense. Just at that point cabin crew came round, handing out bottles of water. If here, how come not everywhere? They're saying the levées should've been stronger in New Orleans. Such a wicked world! And me wicked in it, not sorting it out. M indicated my guilt issues. I need a constructive plan for good, not just bumbling along letting myself be dazedly robbed blind.

What am I going to do for my talk? What was Sarah Maitland's phrase—about how what was, in some women's lives? The locus of something or other—liberation? Whatever... I just remember her so succinctly making the point, picking up some jargon-y Western phrase to do with making things better for ourselves and saying, "For some women, the locus.... is simply to do with the distance, how far it is to the well" (or words to that effect). I would be very happy if my Perth gigs "raised awareness" of water supply issues worldwide.

Sat 10th Sept 2005, 3 a.m.

London, 2 p.m., noon in Sydney, which seems to be where we're stuck. The cabin crew have just come round with beakers and bottles of water. Water again—vital! I spent my last little while in the terminus having a shower. This plane was supposed to leave at 9.15 a.m., but we're about to get off it for the 2nd time. Hugh will be on the harbour now, in his boat, Jabiru. Heuchan said it's a nice day in Wellington too, with no breeze... I bought myself a new shirt for \$10, which I put on after my shower. I just tried Heuchan again, but my phone has died. I realized a little while ago that I've left the other book like this in London.

Sun 11th Sept 2005

Just sent text message to Dickon. I had a big sleep this afternoon, then Heuchan made dinner. There was a film on TV about the suicide bombers who destroyed the World Trade Centre. Heuchan went to bed about an hour ago. I'm rather cold and giddy. I'm anxious about being able to concentrate on preparing a talk. It seems all rather far fetched and remote. Here daily life is really all there is. Art is an odd thing for anyone to be involved in. It could be a mistake to have my family!

Mon 12th Sept 2005, 6.12 a.m.

I fail to see how anyone can justify or not justify their life. I so often think how at D's funeral her brother said she was good at crosswords. How on earth does that make the world a better place? I suppose it's a way of keeping out of trouble, of living quietly and economically. What if Beethoven were to come back and demand royalties for all his symphonies? Or even just for one of them? Would we just say, "Well, actually, we don't really need them, thank you. They don't exactly put food on the table, do they?!"

Wed 21st Sept 2005, 5.30 a.m., Sydney

Nine days have gone by in which I haven't once thought about the notion I had to write in here on a daily basis. I'm getting very good at crosswords. I have a book of them and I've just been doing one when I wake up like this at an antisocial hour. I've been trying to listen to the recording of the stuff I recorded at Blenheim, because the sound I liked best was the sound the wind made blowing across the violin. "Easy Wind, blowing cross the violins ... there's a whole lot of women, mamma, out in red on the streets today, and the river keep a-talkin' but you never hee-rd a word it say."

Fri 7th Oct 2005, 2.55 p.m., Fremantle

Frances' lovely house. Why on EARTH didn't I come here sooner? It's good that I didn't write every day. I have far too much material and don't yet know what the talk will BE! I'm off to the beach, though, in a minute, then to the start of the conference; registration and welcome. I am here. Entangle!

Sun 9th Oct 2005, 9.50 a.m., PICA bar, Perth

One hour to my slot now. This morning there was a rainbow and I decided to speak of my Joan of Arc journey. Remembered this morning that what I was playing about first as an improviser was FEAR.

From the Transcript of Ferrar's Oral Presentation, 2

Every time I get the violin out of its case, I feel like saying, "This is a vi-o-lin!" It's over a hundred years old and I've had it since I was twelve. All of my aunts heard this—whether they liked it or not. It seems like a very strange object now, in the massed ranks of machines and ruined pianos!

I play along with the recording, for about seven minutes, after which there's quite a long almost-silence. I think the recording has ended, but I can hear something. When I ask what it is, I'm told it is a baby crying and that the recording has indeed finished.

I haven't done what I thought I'd do at all. I thought I'd play the recording and then play along with it on the violin. I found myself simultaneously in Somerset and Perth.

A couple of notes: how do you carve an elephant? Get a block of marble and chip away the bits that aren't elephant. I certainly failed to chip away the bits that weren't "talk" from the talk I was trying to create, but I still believe that the musical project is under way and will be completed.

Notes

¹ Engineer C.Y. O'Connor was New Zealand's Under Secretary for Public Works before becoming Chief Engineer of Western Australia in 1891. He was responsible for such public works as rail infrastructure, the Goldfields water pipeline, Mundaring Weir, and harbor works to the Port of Fremantle. High costs and slow progress brought much criticism and O'Connor committed suicide. See P.W. Davis and Merab Tauman, "A Glimpse of One of the Giants Who Built Our Nation: Charles Yelverton O'Connor 11/1/1843-10/3/1902," *Heritage Quarterly Magazine*, <http://www.alor.org/Heritage/Charles%20Yelverton%20O'Connor.htm> accessed April 2006. -Eds.

² Chartres Cathedral has the best preserved and most extensive Medieval stained glass in Europe and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. It is also architecturally exceptional and, along with Rouen and Rheims, is one of main cathedral cities of the Ile de France region surrounding Paris. See http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=81 accessed April 2006. -Eds.