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VARIOUS WRITINGS: CHAPTER I

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Abstract

There are rumours that writing will cease, books will die, the digital eye will take over. Standing at the edge of this precipice we look away from these preoccupations. Instead we look back, investigating the act of writing through systematic consideration, attempting to disregard all preconceptions. This exposition focuses on the gestural and uses Vilém Flusser's concept of 'pseudo writing', to analyse the interaction between the physical actions and the technologies of writing. The first act of 'Various Writings' was a response to Vilém Flusser's text *The Gesture of Writing*. This text radicalised our ideas on what constitutes research and thematised the conditions of sharing in 'other' terms. Flusser meticulously disassembles the act of writing. We follow in his footsteps, using personal mythologies, Oulipian constraints / translations, taxonomies and non-verbal conversations as implements to excavate relics of writing. We collect codes, tools, surfaces; test writing against various technologies and translate it into movements, attitudes and objects.

The Exposition

This exposition uses elements from *Various Writings: Chapter One*, a performative lecture at SAR *Please Specify* 2017 conference. *Chapter One* presents a selection of the acts of writing, observational texts, images and objects that constitute our research, serving to break down these activities and present the terms and conditions employed as a framework for activity. Focusing on the gestural and using Vilém Flusser's concept of 'pseudo writing', it is an analysis of the interaction between the physical actions and the technologies of writing.

The three *Observations* pages (1, 2, 3) present filmed workshops and experimental acts of writing combined with texts that comment on the scribbled, digital and personal universes of writing. Three workshops are layered with three performative acts and three observational texts. Our themes and separate theoretical speculations place us in a *mise en abyme*. The *observations*, *workshops* and performative acts are interchangeable and there can be different combinations, each time slightly skewing the meaning. The body is revealed as a golden thread that connects these different areas of research.

Various Writings

Various Writings expanded out of conversations between the three artists (Maria Christoforidou, Lizzie Ridout and Dion Star) about making work that examines reading and writing. Our theoretical research is inextricably linked with making work and *the act of writing* emerged as a clear direction, bringing our project into the field of *artistic practice*. We began to consider every element of the project as an artistic pursuit, and the project as a whole, a broad survey of the landscape of the *act of writing*, constructed via a series of practical and theoretical exercises and artworks.

The most enduring and prominent text of the past two years is Vilém Flusser's essay *The Gesture of Writing*, from which we derived valuable terms and approaches. Oulipo, *Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature), which investigates the possibilities of verse written under a system of structural constraints, has also influenced our practice.

The output of *Various Writings*, as a series of **acts, texts** and **artworks**, is three-fold:

~ The **acts** take the form of workshops and performances, which focus on the public and pedagogical dissemination of our work.

~ Our **texts** are an ongoing collection of 500-word personal observations relating to our collaborative and individual experiences of writing. These observations aspire to become a volume of 500 texts, reflecting the 500 sheets contained within a single ream of paper and the typical amount of words required to fill a standard A4 sheet. This amount of text is perhaps insurmountable but appealing as it contests ideas about finality within writing and within the text itself, suggesting perpetual activity. For this exposition, a sample of three of our texts presented as *Observation 1*, *Observation 2* and *Observation 3*.

~ *Studies* brings together individual and collaborative **artworks**, and as such exists as both a conceptual and physical library and archive of visual and practical enquiries exploring the act of writing.

Flusser & Pseudo Writing

Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) was a philosopher, media theorist, writer, and journalist. Born in Prague, Flusser held Brazilian citizenship and wrote his texts in different languages, "translating himself over and over again, moving from English, to Portuguese, German, French and back again" (flusserstudies.net). Flusser's work observes the cultural significance and relationship between images and text developing "interdisciplinary and multilingual approaches" and "juxtaposing and contaminating different discourses: philosophy, anthropology, communication theory, art and design" (flusserstudies.net).

In his book *Gestures*, originally published in German in 1991, Flusser analyses different gestures "as the expression of a particular form of consciousness" (Flusser, 2014). When he examines *The Gesture of Writing*, he performs an in-depth provocative analysis of both internal and external observations of writing. Flusser registers nine distinct components evident in the gesture of writing:

1. Surface
2. Tool
3. Shapes
4. Convention
5. Orthography (rules)
6. Shared Language
7. Grammar
8. Idea
9. Motive.

For this stage of *Various Writings*, we have focused on code, tool and surface (we have reduced components 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 to *code*). Idea and motive do not feature in this part of the research.

Flusser considers writing imperative to cultural life but, unlike walking and speaking, superficial to our genetic makeup. A learned habit that nonetheless we do without thinking. "But as it always happens

with phenomena covered by habit, and more than habit, writing becomes almost mysterious when we discover it by deliberate consideration" (Flusser, 2014).

There is lot to argue with Flusser but also a lot to collect. The view of writing as a multilayered heterogeneous practice that can be systematically examined became part of our project's methodology: to study the act of writing through its distinct facets, to create situations and objects that animate the habit and enhance the mystery of writing. Perhaps because Flusser's text moves from systematic analysis to passionate polemic and because he defines writing by what it is *and* by what it isn't there are numerous ideas and key words to explore: penetrating, informing a surface, writing machines faithful to the mind and hand, the true gesture, motion/stillness, inner reading, facta/data, reading the invisible text, linearity, tablets.

Pseudo writing is a term Flusser uses in relation to the urge for expression of *facta* (things to be expressed) that puts values on *data*(given external elements). The frustration and confusion that comes thereof he describes as "the tragedy of writing". *Pseudo writing* becomes an entry point we interpret for *Various Writings* to cover a multitude of sins/practices questioning gesture, authorship, expression and legibility, authenticity and the intersection of drawing and writing, grammatical codes et al. Asemic writing might be viewed as *pseudo writing's* bedfellow. Asemic writing comes from the Greek *asemos*(ἀόεμοβ), meaning *without sign, unmarked, obscure*. Where *pseudo-writing* may attempt to mimic the gestures of writing, perhaps has aspirations to *be* writing, we could argue that *asemic writing* is less bound to the conventions of the code – though it may still include, loosely, lines, characters etc. – and instead happily picks and chooses the characteristics of writing that it prefers to ape. It is stylistically influenced by writing but cares less how, or even whether, it is understood. Asemic writing sits between existing as a text and an image and invites an open reading from each viewer. Thus it is both universal and utterly specific.

Oulipo & Antonymic Translation

In our individual research and as *Various Writings* we identify with *Oulipo*, beginning with the title. The OULIPO emerged in Paris in December 1960 founded by French mathematician Francois de Lionnais and writer Raymond Queneau. Oulipo brought together other writers and mathematicians who wanted to think about the possible effects of conjoining mathematics and literature. The title *Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle* (OULIPO), translates as Workshop of Potential Literature. The *Various Writings* research was encouraged by "Workshop" and "Potential". The workshop inspires experimentation and action. Part of our project takes the form of workshops that observe experience. Another part goes into the workshop to create objects that physically and conceptually animate writing. Potential implies not yet existing; formulas and devices expand the field of action producing "not yet existing" perceptions of writing stretching beyond the habitual.

Constraints and mathematical organisation in Oulipo were seen as a way to liberate the artist. These constraints operate on various levels within the text progressing up through the phoneme, syllable, word, syntax, sentence and finally paragraph level. Although not mathematical Flusser's methodology also shows a devotion to the potential of quantifiable properties of language. In *Does Writing Have a Future?* Flusser comments "Writing is about setting ideas in lines, for unwritten ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles" (Flusser 2011, 6).

In *Chapter I* we have combined Flusser's Code, Tool, Surface, with the Oulipian formula of *antonymic translation* to create objects that exist as sculptures or as props to be used in workshops. In Oulipo this translation involves replacing each word in a text with its antonym, applied to objects and materials it creates objects that simultaneously contain an idea as well as its opposite or its digressions. The *antonymic translation* further connects with our preoccupation with *pseudo writing* as the antonym of *true writing*.

A Eulogic Stance

In *The Gesture of Writing*, Vilém Flusser is preoccupied with whether alphabetic writing is becoming useless. Are there better means to express something within? What happens to these habitual gestures

if they are not there to express our true thoughts? For *Various Writing* the idea of looking at writing and its history from the vantage point of the future arose as we tried to move away from a redundant inquiry that is associated with efforts to restore something lost. This allows us to ask – what may initially appear to be – naive questions.

The Trialogue (and the nature of our artistic research)

Trialogue is a word, we thought we had created but have since seen others use, for describing the way we work that encapsulates the idea of a three-way conversation. It is a triple perspective that doesn't settle on binary oppositions, instead expanding the dynamic of a dialogic communication back and forth into unexpected territories and trajectories. The layering and simultaneity of the exposition reflects the "trialogue" between the three collaborators.

Film Trialogue / Conversation

Observation 1:

Workshop Film: Various Lines by Axi-Draw

- LR: The glide of the mechanical hand, versus the awkwardness of a similar human act, in which the hand has to shuffle across the page, constrained by arm and elbow; each human shuffle effects the evenness of the line. Yet Elsa (the Axi-draw) skims the page; it's like a dance.
- MC: There are two layers of imitation. The line is imitating writing, the mechanical arm imitating the human arm. The tools appear as themselves. The pen is a pen and the paper, paper.
- DS: Rather than writing in a linear fashion, Elsa (the Axi-draw) focuses on the end game of the finished piece and breaks the writing up into smaller chunks so it may be written in a more economical way. She perceives time in a (nonlinear) fashion which is unfamiliar to us (it is this unfamiliarity that is fascinating). Also, I'm struck by how much more pleasing I find Elsa's handwriting than mine (even if I feed into her a digital copy of my own handwriting).

Performance Film (background): Various Lines, Sea of Text

- LR: The connection between text and texture: 'text', from Latin *textus*, *tissue*, *literary style*, from *text* - woven, from the verb *texere*. The effort of the draughtsperson / typographer / writer to create an even-toned landscape of "grey".
- MC: The human hand trying to behave mechanically – as the automaton – ineffectively. You can feel the strain of the arm, whilst the machine seems tireless.
- DS: Looks almost exactly like Lizzie's handwriting.

Observation 2:

Workshop Film: Authorship Gestures (Third Hand)

- LR: Simply finding a comfortable and practical way to accommodate three hands holding one pencil is the first challenge. This is followed by the need for a disconnection between brain and hand in order for one hand to become merely a "tool". When we are the tool, we try to step back from predicting the word that is being written, otherwise we find ourselves inadvertently influencing the formation of the word.
- DS: The main obstacle to the hand becoming the tool is the insistence of the eye. Only through forcibly averting your gaze does the body become compliant with the second (or third) hand. After succumbing to the forced gesture, relinquishing control, everything becomes easier for all involved. Like a conversation when everyone is talking at the same time, only when one decides to truly listen can another voice be heard.
- MC: The phrase *force someone's hand* takes a new meaning, pondering still on authorship and freedom. When someone is using your hand to write, do you let them? When you are using someone else's hand to write, do you think of their hand as your pencil?

Performance Film (background): Text Landscape

- MC: The line is everything to writing. Deleting and underlining. Neat piles of asemic text. Repetition and order.
- LR: The typographer within me asks: Did Maria plan her text before she started? Did she control the composition of the "text" on the page? Left-aligned, right-aligned, centred. Or did she focus only on the act of "writing" the line: for even writing a straight line is hard.
- DS: Grids, form, structure. A flat plan for a publication, indicating "text goes in here". The line becomes a symbol for "Lorem ipsum..."

Observation 3:

Workshop Film: Unencumbered Gestures

- LR: Choreography; orchestral conduction; arm-dancing; air-writing. When writing something as familiar as an autograph in the air, it appears sped up on film.
- MC: Without codes, tools or surfaces the hands are in a frenzy. The gestures are finally on the *proscenium*. The gestures are finally on the *proscenium* rather than in the wings, not hiding anymore behind the more enduring performance of ink and paper. However, unlike sign language where the gesture holds meaning, these gestures are not a code of its own but a shadow of writing. This must be a species of pseudo writing. Semiotics are confused. Fingers are pencils. Written words melt into air as if they have been spoken.
- DS: I notice first the varying pace of which the body moves, more frantic than anticipated, but perhaps more noticeable is the range of movement – exaggerated by the absence of surface – there is a considerable effort by these *Balletic* hands. In following the movement of another; there is a pleasing lag of translation, the *latency* echoes the relationship between language and the written word. There are micro gestures which are lost or reinterpreted in bridging the gap – lost within the latent space – yet it doesn't seem to matter. The attempt at mirroring one another only further reminds us of the importance (and absurdity) of the gesture.

Performance Film (background): Writing Gaps; Curves, Holes and Darts

- MC: There are various ways to write or understand writing. Especially when you are for some reason, (unable or unwilling) opposing the accepted ways to do so. This performance looks at interaction with the alphabet in a ludic mode remembering childhood, school and other moments of constructive boredom. Filling in the "gaps" in printed text you pay attention to each letter without acknowledging its function. Some letters are completely ignored reminiscent of Georges Perec's novel *A Void*(1995), which does not contain the letter e. Daniel Levin Becker, in his book *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* (2012) describes how Oulipians consider "literature in the conditional mood; not the imperative".
- LR: It is a creative translation. Instead of reading you physically interact with the text. Is that a form of reading? Reading the volume and form of the letters, examining their counters and bowls, stresses and strokes.
- DS: Text as a vessel. The "counter", becomes the rare and valuable object of this particular pursuit. A frantic search for an a, b, d, e, g, o, p, or q. Colouring both inside and outside of the lines (as this act is difficult to do under a microscope).

Observation 1: Pseudo Writing

In *Tristes Tropiques* (1961), Lévi-Strauss describes a meeting with the Nambikwara tribe, who – he believes – are unable to write. In his view this goes without saying although what he found to be unexpected was they were also unable to draw – save for a few dots and zig-zags. A while after he had distributed some pencils to the tribes people he found they were making long wavy horizontal lines in an attempt to "copy" what he was doing in his own notebooks. They were "writing".

In discussion with Strauss, the leader of the tribe – going one better than his people – asked for a notepad of his own and in reply to Strauss' questioning would reply by making wavy lines on to the paper. On making his marks he would with great care examine his lines, awaiting the "meaning" he felt would leap forth from the paper into his eye. This meaning, to his disappointment, did not come but he did not give up trying. With his tribe assembled he would produce a piece of paper from a basket covered with his scribbled lines and he would pretend to read from it. A true performance of Reading and Writing.

We can assume that he figured his subjects would not know the difference and that he – in his elevated position as tribe leader – was naturally well versed in the activity of writing. Or perhaps his belief was that through imitation, the combination of tool and surface would be a forgiving teacher, and they themselves would ascribe meaning to his gestures.

Perhaps the tribe leader's view was wiser than Strauss. If writing is a form of *artificial memory*,¹ is it not natural to assume you would need to access it artificially? Did the problem lay with the *artifice*?

Whilst his performance may not have been the truest act of writing, perhaps it was the most authentic of writing gestures – as he believed the code and the meaning it contained would emerge from the collaboration of his manipulation of tool and surface. Something was just simply Lost in Translation. The fault could have been in the pencils inability to transform his noble communicative gestures. Or maybe it was the disobedience of the paper, with an act of insolence – fingers in ears – blocking out the message.

Of course, pretending is an important part of learning; as children we learn to write (and speak) through copying and pretending. Yet in adulthood our internal critic skews our levels of expectation and we become all too aware of the pretense. "Imposter Syndrome"² is a recognised psychological trait common to many of us, it affects seven in ten people at some point in their lives. "*Surely people can see through this charade and see I am an imposter?*" My own "little voice" is currently saying something similar as I write these "wavy horizontal lines".

1. Lévi-Strauss, C. 1961. *Tristes Tropiques*. New York: Criterion, 290-93.

2. Jaruwan Sakulku, J. & Alexander, J. 2011. "The Impostor Phenomenon." *International Journal of Behavioural Science*, 6(1): 73-92.

Observation 2: The Line & Space

For 18 months, I've been classifying a collection of symbols, gathered online, all representing the "portable document". To be specific, those rectangles that denote that what you are looking at, as you stare at your screen, is in fact, at least notionally, a piece of "paper". There are hundreds of them – each one individual, but designed around a repeating set of characteristics, namely:

1. the orientation, type and delineation of the page,
2. inclusion of a folded corner,
3. incorporation of a representations of the written word – one or multiple lines,
4. additional pictographic content, or letters, and
5. the number of documents represented.

Characteristic number three (the decision to represent the written word or not, and *how* to represent it) is compelling when investigating the act of writing. Vilém Flusser, comments "Writing is about setting ideas in lines, for unwritten ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles."¹ Marshall McLuhan adds to this "Until writing was invented, man lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizon-less, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, terror." ²

We could suggest that the surface upon which we write can *also* seem "boundless, directionless, horizon-less", albeit on a smaller scale. The white page, for example, represents a dichotomy: a

microcosm of McLuhan's fearful, intuitive dark mind whilst simultaneously being a place of thrilling potential. The line can help us navigate that expanse, either by delineating a productive space for words or in the case of those document symbols, going one step further and ultimately *becoming* the abstract depiction of the words themselves.

A line is elemental. It is a subtractive act and an additive one; a division and a divide; a movement from one person to another through space and time; a boundary that halts; a guide keeping us on the straight and narrow; a queue to walk alongside. It is texture – the warp and the weft; a score, a fold, a fissure, a cut, an attack, a blemish upon the space within which it resides.

A line is play, it is an idea, it is potential. When we encounter those line-filled document icons on our computers, is it encouraging that they aren't always just white voids, awaiting occupation, but are instead documents already underway? Albeit with only a line, one suggesting only non-specificity and the generic.

My research practice learns from the document symbols' enchiridion. In order to scrutinize *what really happens when we write*, if the pressure to write coherently is removed, if concerns with semantics, syntax, orthography and grammar are dismissed, all the small yet remarkable acts that coalesce to form the completed gesture, rise to the surface and each can become a subject worthy of individual attention.

So for now, in my practice at least, I'm ditching the use of a code, of actual words altogether. The line becomes my code, my tool for exploring issues around and within writing.

1. Flusser, V. 2011. *Does Writing Have a Future?* Translated by N. Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 6.

2. McLuhan, M. 1970. *Counterblast*. London: Rapp & Whiting, 13.

Observation 3: *Elsa: A Machine for Writing*

After the first act of writing we named the drawing machine Elsa.¹ We instruct Elsa to write a handwritten note that said *pseudo writing*² a word from Flusser that powers this project. Elsa holds the pen securely and marks an end to the purity of the page. Thus, the machine earns a name. Georges Perec wonders "In order to exist, did I really need to line up words and sentences?"³ *Elsa* comes into existence through writing; the act of writing identifies **the machine** as a unique actor in our play. All the separate elements (soft and hard) including the "ghost in the machine"⁴ are gathered in a name. Elsa touched my memory and imagination generating **peripheral** observations about writing:

When Elsa starts writing the air is electric with mystical wonder and a few things happen simultaneously that produce a lightheaded feeling.

Somehow when the ordinary Act of using a tool to inform a surface is recreated by the mechanical arm, that Act regains some of its ancient magical lustre. The digital sounds Elsa produces **enhances** the magic and positions me both in the past and the future: back, to the first cinematic fantasies of artificial intelligence and forward, to a plausible future where we write just with our eyes. This is what we wanted, to witness writing as an archeological miracle.

Watching Elsa write **my** handwriting, I become "the viewer"; audience to my own act. I think of Borges commenting on narratives where characters, in *mise en abyme*, read stories about themselves.

My various acts of writing come into focus. I take notes in pencil or pen but "true writing"⁵ as VF calls it...I normally type. I briefly consider Elsa as an external outgrowth of my nervous system and then go back to watching hypnotised. Although Elsa is a machine it breaks the tap/tap/tap of typing. The pen travels across the paper, so gentle and so determined, with the restraint ease of a dancer. Elsa is inspiring me to write or perhaps to be more like the machine. Are we comparable?

Elsa is indifferent to the writing surface and legibility; Elsa is focused on the act. Perhaps we are comparable? Elsa can't see nor judge what is written. But I can and I love it. It's my hand but steadier, full of authority. *Symbiosis*.

"The viewer(me)" realizes Elsa is reading from an "internal tablet"⁶ where the signs are a "not arranged in lines"⁷ but collated in patterns of curves, holes and darts. Elsa breaks free from the linearity of writing, reading it as series of gestures. Elsa begins a text by writing first the circular gaps in the letters. This act transport me to my granddad's kitchen table, when I still can't read but I decide, I can write. *Anyone can.* My writing consists of filling in the empty spaces in the letters with different coloured pens. The gaps are the only part I can comprehend.

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1. After the young woman who received the first communication from this machine.
 2. Flusser, V. 2014. *Gestures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 68.
 3. Perec, G. 1997. *Species of Spaces & Other Pieces*. Penguin Books: London, 122.
 4. Ryle, G. 2009. *The Concept of Mind*. London & New York: Routledge, 56.
 5. Flusser, V. 2014. *Gestures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 70.
 6. Flusser, V. 2014. *Gestures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 74.
 7. Flusser, V. 2011. *Does Writing Have a Future?* Translated by N. Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 9.