Resting places.

A performed paper given at ‘performing grief’, Sorbonne University of Paris, October 17th, 2014.

Bram Thomas Arnold.

**Slide 1 – camp at Ponteverté.**

Introduce yourself casually.

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**Slide 2 – camp at Ponteverté with title overlaid**

**“Resting Places. Bram Thomas Arnold”**

Introduction.

I was invited by Marie to present a performance that, fatefully perhaps, due to technical issues, of which there have already been many this morning, and the divide within French academies, I am unable to perform for you. There are no white walls at the Sorbonné.

I describe myself most frequently as an artist, a pedestrian and a writer. The sequential order of those phrases is significant, considered.

I do indeed produce writing, indeed I’m reading some now, and am indeed entering the world of academia. But I am doing so very much from the position of a visual practitioner.

I will be presenting fragments of two works from my body of research into a practice-based PhD entitled “walking home: the footpath as transect in an 800km long autoethnographic enquiry.”

As a visual practitioner I would hold to the statement that visual language enables us to communicate in a way that cannot be expressed otherwise. The medium through which ideas are visually expressed is the only way their precise meaning can be contrived. And yet, within that precise meaning, there is frequently an intended ambiguity, held within.

Grief is a lonely place. It is an isolating experience & all of this took place in the wake of my father’s death.

I lost my father several times before he eventually died, passed away in an NHS wardened institution for the mentally ill.

I received his ashes in the post, by courier from the crematorium.

And on the second anniversary of his death I performed a work called “Portraits of my Father”, it was to be re-performed here, but it is perhaps more fitting not to do so for we have never met before.

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**Slide 3 – film clip, the spoon.**

A short clip will now be shown from the original performance, if I can make this technological particularity work.

[stand still, no fidgeting, head bowed, eyes open]

5 minutes.

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**Slide 4 – transect slide, a map of Europe, a pen mark.**

‘Walking Home’ existed as an idea before my father died. He had already gone anyway, was already an absence. My own beginnings had already been mythologised by myself. For as Solnit, Dideon & Campbell have pointed out “we tell ourselves stories in order to live”. We mythologise events to make sense of them, to comprehend and contain them, Ria Hartley, a colleague of mine terms them bio-myths.

I was born in St.Gallen, Switzerland. I have an unusual name. People assume I am foreign. But I grew up in wales. I have no other language. We travelled for my father’s job. What did he do? I don’t know. He worked for Monsanto. Usually gets a negative response.

I set out to walk a transect from London, my home at the time, to St.Gallen. A pilgrimage of sorts, for pilgrimage is a form of penance, or punishment, self-inflicted or otherwise. The mind works at 3 miles an hour, walking is the best way to cope with these things. Guilt, or embarrassment, from the French: to hamper, embarre, and the Italian, imbarre, to encounter a barrier, something you can’t get round. I walked.

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**Slide 5 – camp, a B&B in Dover, Kent.**

51’ 7’37.2000” north

1’ 18’59.7600” east

And I slept. I slept in towns and in forests. And at each place I had with me a small pouch of these things. These ashes. What, even, are they? What do they burn, the whole coffin? Really? And what of the nails? The screws? The lining, whose colour I had to choose. Is that all here too?

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**Slide 6 – camp, Val de Vesle.**

49’ 10’2.9244” north

4’ 12’52.6680” east

At each place my rucksack would explode at the relief of being put down. Everything would fall out and I would be left with this pouch. Where do I put it in this coffin of a tent?

Near my face? Near my feet? In those neat little pockets tent manufacturers construct for ‘valuables’?

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**Slide 7 – camp, Col Du Mandray.**

48’ 12’9.0864” north

7’ 0’20.5380” east

Are they valuable? How do we give them meaning? Do they become an object? How do we hold that object?

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**Slide 8 – Picture of the urn.**

Funerals are a rarely attended thing. Even less spoken of – “oh that was a good one, wasn’t it” “…I enjoyed that one”…”did you go to that one?”.

Grief as Colm Toibin recently put it, is something we’re ashamed of, an elephant in the room, something we are embarrassed to be around.

They arrived in this. The lid taped up with gaffer tape. And upon unscrewing the urn, they spilt themselves out of the thread, and vanished into the shag pile carpet of my new flat in a town I had only just moved to. They de-materialised themselves in that one action, they were no longer one, they were no longer whole, they were all over the floor.

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**Slide 9 – portrait 2.**

Grieving for someone you knew, I imagine, is very different from grieving for an absence. During the performance I produced 4 portraits, one for each surviving member of my family. I call them portraits, for they hang, passport photo sized grey squares.

Like minature landscapes in relief of a country I didn’t know well, nor had any idea how to navigate. I got lost in them. The past was a foreign country, and I didn’t go there often.

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**Slide 10 – installation shot 1, audience perspective.**

I wore black, and do today, because it feels right somehow. As though it were the only motif I had to cling to, from a time perhaps when mourning was more acknowledged in society. When grief and dying were closer to all involved. When death was ever round the corner.

We have banished death from out late-capitalist world. Where the perpetual now is all that matters. Is all that we are told is really valued.

Death is a far off place that we do not discuss.

We have lost the ability to deal with it when it turns up.

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**Slide 11 – installation shot 2, post performance.**

‘Portraits of my Father’ was an attempt at reclaiming this sense of ritual.

Invitation was by invite only. Invites were delivered by post only. Responses were accepted by post only. This is perhaps why it makes sense that I am not simply doing this performance again for you now. Perhaps it need never be performed again.

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**Slide 12 – installation shot 3, post performance.**

Afterward the installation stood for 3 days. The ashes that fell on the floor stayed there. The ash that blew back into my face, dried my eyeballs and dusted my mouth, became part of me.

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**Slide 13 – portrait 2 unframed.**

I come here as an artist. I have not yet looked too closely at the academic conversations surrounding grief and performance. I come here to learn from you, and to offer a small morsel from the front lines of grief.

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**Slide 14 – ashes in a crystal glass.**

When I arrived in switzerland I threw the ashes I had carried with me into the river near where I was born, from a crystal glass I retrieved from my fathers attic.

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**Slide 15 – ashes in midair over the river sitter.**

I did not want to carry them into the home where he once lived. I did not want to burden the people who live there now with that weight.

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**Slide 16 – fondue installation shot 1.**

Fondue.

Fondue is something else I am working on also. When I arrived in the house I was born in, in Switzerland, the family welcomed me home, and we had fondue. It exists now as a performance and a place where all the angles of this autoethnography can be displayed and displaced amongst each other.

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**Slide 17 – fondue installation shot 2.**

Invite is by post only, and the event will be performed over a number of evenings in a gallery in the UK next spring. The evening is dispersed along the transect of a journey from London to St.Gallen, both literally and metaphorically through the span of my research and practice.

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**Slide 18 – still of ashes and resting place, Ponteverté.**

On Monday I am going to revisit a ruined Cistercian monastery near Laon. Re-walking my memory into the place and introducing my research into the environment there.

To return to a place I was in once, 5 years ago, is an experiment that may go horribly wrong. For as Dylan Trigg puts it: “experience shows us repeatedly, that when returning to a place from our past the effect is invariably alienating rather than reassuring”.

For then we have to carry that feeling back into the places we currently inhabit. And it inverts our vision of the world, it is disquieting.

For places we revisit after a long absence remind us that we do not matter. That we are of no consequence to the passing of time. To the turning of the seasons. To the lie of the land. It carried on without us while we were away. It noticed our passing not at all. It did not notice we were there. It did not notice we had left. And then we have to carry that feeling back, into the places we currently inhabit, and it inverts our vision of the world, it is disquieting.

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**Slide 19 –**

I would like to conclude with another clip from portraits of my father. At the time the work was titled ‘(ref 183376)’, the number, printed on the label, that didn’t quite fit, in the groove on the plastic urn, that I continue to move house with, every time I find a new home.

Due to the minor technical issues I now have to go to that part of the room, and do something with this.

**film clip 2 is shown.**