

Laughing Gas: Multimodal processes of writing for autoethnographic performance

Vanio Papadelli



Figure 11.1 *This is my son* [photocollage made of photos of a 20-week ultrasound scan of my son, a pillow and tracing paper left under the rain], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

*'You are not supposed to be crying, you're supposed to be laughing.
We gave you laughing gas'.*

These words were uttered by a senior midwife in the first moments I arrived at the maternity triage to give birth to my son at a London hospital (March 2017). My overall encounter with her and other maternity care staff led to profound questions around compassion, pain thresholds and practices of care. These questions became the seeds for the autoethnographic performance research project *Laughing Gas* (2019–ongoing) that reflects on the complex realities of the use of language and physical handling in maternity care settings, predominantly in the UK and other European contexts.

Laughing Gas (hereby LG) has been presented as a live performance twice: a work-in-progress sharing for a small invited public (Clarence Mews, London, August 2019) and a public performance installation as part of the platform Oxytocin Collective Care (Middlesex University, London, May 2023), a week-long event curated by Procreate Project showcasing intersectional art practices, workshops and panels around the maternal. Other outputs of *LG* include multiple slide presentations created for artistic research, documentation, promotion and as teaching material. Aspects of multimodal translation and questions around care were the respective topics of two conference papers that entailed a performative sharing of the slides (Papadelli, 2023, 2024). Its latest presentational format is this current experimental essay.

Multiple instances of multimodal communication and translation have occurred across the project's different stages and outputs. 'Multimodal' is understood here as a combination of modes. Marcus Tomalin coins the term 'multimodal ensembles' that denotes 'representations or communications that contain two or more modes that have been brought together purposefully to produce a collective and interrelated meaning' (Tomalin, 2020, p. 135). Those responsible for 'creating the ensemble "orchestrate" it by determining how the constituent parts are combined' (Tomalin, 2020, p. 135). How is this 'orchestration' achieved? Eugenia Loffredo sheds more light by pointing out that 'each mode does not directly correspond to each sense perception' (2019, p. 43). She argues that each medium is often produced and perceived by accessing and responding to more than one of the senses which certainly applies to a great extent to the *LG* processes. Indeed each output of the project was generated and understood through more than one sign system and sense modality – seeing, hearing, sensing, touching – and then translated and materialized into a new medium following an intuitive process of personal, artistic and academic

(re)search. In this regard, multimodal perception and meaning-making aligns with notions of intersemiotic and intermedial translation. 'Accordingly', Loffredo explains, 'intersemiotic and intermedial translation would be a creative act allowing the multimodal dimension experienced by the reader-translator to be materialised in an amplified fashion' (2019, p. 44).

Across the different of phases of *LG*, the different media expressions would either coexist within the same output in order to be perceived as a synaesthetic event by the viewer or would undergo processes of mediation, translation and transformation culminating into new 'target texts' (Elleström in Pertheghella, 2018, p. 66). In the hope that the notion of translation is not overstretched yet instead expanded through a choreographic lens, all media outputs in *LG* including writing, sound and visual material were approached as spatiotemporal and sensorial phenomena. Consequently, by borrowing qualities from the fields of movement, dance and eco-somatics, the ways by which two or more modes interacted with each other in the process of translation could be defined through a relationship of:

- porousness / symbiosis
- entanglement
- fluidity
- oscillation
- vibration
- echo / affinity
- coincidence
- fragmentation or coexistence
- rhythmic / textural interaction

OR

- connection / healing

Such relationships were never linear or finite. A movement improvisation could lead into a piece of writing that would be later echoed in my encounter with a painting; the resonance of the painting would then bleed into an ensuing rewrite of the text in a porous and vibrant manner. Alys Longley describes her choreographic methods of using words and movement as well as drawing, conversation and film as a mistranslation process that disrupts 'notions of fidelity, correctness and accuracy' (2017, p. 45). Her notion of mistranslation feels akin to *LG* processes insofar as it allows 'mistake, disruption, difference and discovery' so that 'happy accidents and imperfect symmetries' (p. 30) can occur leading to 'disjunctive, messy, lively, unpredictable material' (p. 29). Longley aptly

summarizes: ‘Affective spaces and feeling states might then be considered in a way that not only registers their existence, but allows material articulation – through performative, choreographic, visual, graphic, digital or written means’ (p. 45).

It is worth noting that the presentation of this essay is also multimodal insofar as how different linguistic registers – the poetic, the reflective, the contextual and the obscure – are spatially and dramaturgically curated to interact and coalesce with the audio-visual material by ways of echoing, challenging or rhythmically counterbalancing one another. Major inspirations for the formatting of the essay include Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010); Hélène Cixous’s *Stigmata* (2005); Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2015); Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay’s *A Widening Field: Journeys in Body and Imagination* (2004). The text, sound files and visuals integrated in the essay ‘house’ felt experiences, residues and memories, eight years after birthing my son, as they morph in the present moment and simultaneously reflect on past processes of multimodal translation. All acts of translation, as will be expanded later, encompass the intention of radical self-care, healing and raising collective awareness of systemic flaws in maternity care settings. The subchapters’ titles reflect key aspects of translation process in a



Figure 11.2 *Pebble tights I* [still from rehearsal for ‘Laughing Gas’, Goldsmiths University], 2023. Vanio Papadelli.

semi-chronological yet mostly thematic sequence similar to episodic narrative structures in theatre performances. Transitions among sections may therefore occasionally feel abrupt, as each section is intentionally written to be perceived as a different ‘scene’ of the story. Lights out ...

1. Pain thresholds

*And later I heard you saying ...
‘You can’t be in as much pain as you’re describing. Only a few women experience
that much pain this early in labour.’*



Figure 11.3 *Painogram*. [Mixed media collage: still of the computer screen, egg, light reflection], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.



Sound file 1

*How do you measure pain?
Do you weigh it in kilograms
or in tears,
in loudness of voice,
or maybe in the quantity of leftovers?
Is there a pain-ogram?*

Can I weigh your pain?

Can I weigh your pain?

Can I weigh your love?

Your anger?

Your sadness?

In all expressions of LG, pain thresholds in labour were contemplated and negotiated through different artistic modes. In her book *Matrescence: On the Metamorphosis of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Motherhood*, Lucy Jones explains: ‘Our vocabulary occludes the maternal: we do not have words for the different kinds of pain that occur in childbirth’ (2023, p. 77) and she continues, ‘even though the physical suffering was over, the subsequent silence was a new lasting violence’ (2023, p. 78).

Ready

In position.

Lioness deer



Sound file 2

On all fours

Umbilical eyes and tentacle hairlocks.

All white

Collapsed in gap gooey

Immense compression

Unfathomable. Cosmic blackness

(of sky compressed)

like the eyes of a deer in a forest night.

I night. dilated. heart. pupils.

mouth-hole. Fear.

clenched fist jaws in giant cushions

Immense compression

a glimpse of ...

Dilated pupils vaginas minutes.

Write it.

Write it down

Another woman is pushing and

crying next door,

will we make it?

How could you have birthed me

in your dream mother?

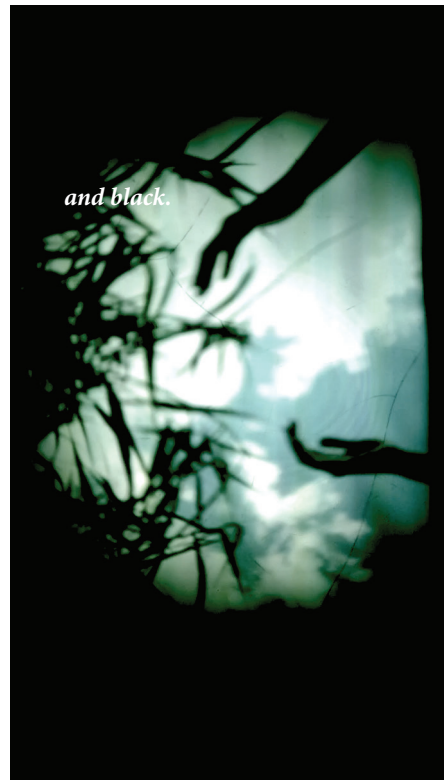


Figure 11.4 *Like the eyes of a deer in a forest night.* [Screenshot from ‘Laughing Gas teaser’], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

Spiral.

your first breath cry covered in moss, forest.

I push the whole wor(l)d out of.

A moon weightless I gave birth to.

Vagina like fossil.

Initially no breath, no heart sound, then all good.

All good deer eyes, all good ...

Do you remember your first cry?

Later placental relief | grief red pulsating not in anymore. Not in anymore. Not

grief not night not right. No time for grief. Two hearts then one ... doesn't matter.

Give birth – registered – all good deer eyes all good deer eyes.

All good deer eyes – eat me.

During my last stage of labour, as the painkilling effects of diamorphine (a strong opioid) that was administered by the senior midwife had worn off, I entered what can only be described as a heightened state of consciousness. Jones compellingly portrays the labour pain intensity: 'The words we have for pain don't accurately describe it. People call it the "ring of fire" and there is a searing to it but it also felt like being pulled apart and turned inside out' (2023, p. 76). When words failed to capture the sensory and imaginal complexity of the events, turning to non-verbal modes of expression that can hold the unspoken enabled me to expand beyond the boundaries of language by treating the ineffable textures of pain (emotional, mental and physical) as tactile, visual and sonic choreography. My encounter with other artworks in the first place and the generation of original mixed-media images as part of this essay writing that will be addressed below helped me process events in a perpetual motion of (mis) translating the untranslatable, and a slow and non-sequential coming off of the hormonal roller coaster of labour.

2. Autoethnographic multimodal translation; refractions of the self

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state that in autobiographical telling the "I" is neither unified nor stable – it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process' (2002, p. 9). When the author considers and gives voice to often underrepresented societal narratives, autobiography shifts into the field of autoethnography. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography

as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (2000, p. 739). Following a sensitive approach to personal material and a lens of radical care, I thus explored my birthing experience within its specific socio-cultural context using an autoethnographic methodology.

In his analysis of autoethnography in performance, John Freeman draws attention to the idea of selfhood as torn apart through relentless self-questioning ‘to the extent that constancy is replaced by fracture and narrative identity morphs into narrative imagination’ (2016, p. 145). He continues, ‘the subject who writes today is never and can never be the same subject who acted yesterday’ (p. 146). Narrative imagination and abstraction have proved paramount for holding aspects of the autobiographical story so that the personal can become a space for contemplation for more individuals and wider communities. It is not through faithful reproduction but through a constant reshaping, recycling and composting of the ‘truth’ that enabled remoulding, spilling, shedding, dropping, embellishing, forgetting or distilling of the past and, ultimately a reaching towards the other. As Freeman observes ‘our communicative acts always embody projections of ourselves, even if these are carried at a subconscious level and that self always says something about one’s relationship to the culture it describes’ (2016, p. 148). Furthermore, my desire to communicate in effective ways with the different audiences, platforms and contexts of presentation influenced my choices of selecting material each time and led to additional modes and modalities of translation, thus expanding the scope of narrative imagination through multimodality.

Autobiographical and autoethnographic work is a continuous balancing between vulnerable exposure and careful holding. According to Ellis and Bochner, autobiographical research entails a backwards and forward, inward and outward movement that refracts and resists cultural interpretations revealing ‘relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture’ (2000, p. 739). It stems from a desire to ‘make sense and preserve coherence over the course of our lives’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 746) challenging notions of orthodox reliability, linearity and traditional paradigms of data analysis in social sciences (2000, pp. 751–752). Coherence, reliability and linearity were indeed problematized when creating the different iterations and outputs of *LG* through all its multidirectional and multimodal movements across eight years. By acknowledging that a personal experience can never fully encompass the reality of an entire community, I moved *backwards* by diving into past histories, matrilineages and ancestral threads; *inwards* to explore difficult and entangled

patterns of the self; *downwards* to meet the 'here and now'; as well as *outwards* by engaging with other women's stories, artistic and community networks of mother artists¹ as well as with existing literature on maternal care systems.²

The processes of multimodal translation were affected by this often fragile inwards and complex outwards reach; the more I branched out into the past the more intricate and fascinating coincidences would come into the light while the wider the field of my knowledge of current practices and birth stories, the more urgent my need to share these became. Questions around dehumanizing attitudes due to understaffing and privatization of healthcare services, systemic misogynistic and patriarchal models of staff-patient interaction, racism, other forms of discrimination and wider issues of care seemed to recur. Numerous testimonies I collected and read confirmed the fact that women and birthing people are frequently taken aback during the birthing event. What unites most traumatic stories is a feeling of 'not being listened to' with sensitivity and not being believed by some medical staff. Each birthing story seems to beg to be retold as a cubist reimagining, reprocessing and repairing.

While admittedly the rates of infant and mother mortality in the West have drastically decreased in the recent decades and medical intervention has overall enabled a safer and quicker labour, it is the interpersonal interaction between birthing people and professionals that is often deemed problematic arguably due to medical institutions' fear of risk, litigation and deviation from protocols. Jones states in this regard: 'studies and figures vary but suggest that a third to forty-five per cent of women experience traumatic childbirth' (2023, p. 67). Interestingly, in *Reclaiming Childbirth as a Rite of Passage* midwife, prolific childbirth researcher and educator Rachel Reed notes, 'an international study analysing 748 women's descriptions of childbirth trauma found that care provider actions and interactions were the primary cause of trauma' (2021, p. 36).

Through my journey of making sense of my birthing story, it became gradually apparent that the choice of words spoken by staff during labour even more than the physical handling of my body left the most long-lasting effects. In fact, it was the judgmental and uncaring words of the senior midwife about how I handled pain that became the original 'source text' leading to a multitude of 'target texts' later – be it writing, movement, vocalization, singing, film or photography – as an outlet or a container for memory. An intrinsic and intuitive aspect in the initial processes of translation was reaching back into matrilineal lineages. Narrations of childbirth stories from different members of my family, some obscure while others translucent and recounted with graphic vocabulary, became palimpsests of words obsessively appearing in my writing and bouncing against other intergenerational and ancestral

voices – felt recollections of human and more-than-human landscapes. Such narratives would be later contemplated against family photographs of my mother and my maternal grandmother and digitally edited or collaged with other materials and poetic writing. This multimodal chain of self-portraits revealed affinities of gaze, perception and tacit transference of experience among generations.



Figure 11.5 *Matrilineages I* [digital photo collage], 2022. Vanio Papadelli.

*Open all drawers like tongues
sticking out ...*

Sedimented eyes

Tilts

Sealed gorges

folding at the edge of light.

At the edge of our lips.



Figure 11.6 *Matrilineages II* [photo collage with tracing paper and pebbles], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

Reed argues that there is increasing evidence that memories and fears can be passed on through generations, especially through our maternal bloodline. 'This pattern of mistrust, fear and silence has compromised the very telling of herstory and hindered our ability to learn from the past and change the future' (2021, p. 4). Similarly, Jones ponders, 'Do we avoid and deny the reality of childbirth, the pain and injuries it can cause, because we can't cope with the thought of what our own mothers might have gone through to have us? Perhaps we can't bear to imagine them overpowered by pain' (2023, p. 81). Hearing my mother recounting her experience of giving birth to me, after I had my son, and discovering that she was administered a strong opioid too which led her into sleep and loss of consciousness made me dive even deeper into subconscious terrains of felt memory, affinity and intergenerational entanglements.

'They gave me a drug and I fell asleep.

I woke up and they brought you into my arms', she said.

How could you have birthed me in your sleep, mother?

*I then never | life never.
but this real. it's real.
I birth I me I birth I me.
that's why so much*

From a

*Into this
hole at the seabed below
icebergs
total darkness krill-y slime
clenching your hand cushion
-
won't make it.
Remember?*



Figure 11.7 *I birth I birth I birth I* [photocollage of still from the video 'Laughing Gas teaser' and photo of screenshot printed on tracing paper], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

3. Translation as entanglement: | porousness – symbiosis

During the Research & Development work-in-progress that culminated into a sharing for an invited audience (Clarence Mews, London, August 2019), the raw lived experience was initially translated into movement, vocal and speech improvisation as well as experiments with video projection on my body (see Figure 11.8). I generated writing through improvised movement – and vice versa – inviting an interplay between the present moment, memory and imagination. Gemma Collard-Stokes eloquently describes the process of translation from dance back to language which can make the language itself ‘to be considered an extension of the sensuous body – a trace of the hand engaged in movement – the continuation of the dance onto paper’ (2019, p. 124). In order to expand sensations of words as tactile and affective imprints onto my skin I included a section of projecting words onto my body using a pocket projector. A member of the audience captured my attempt to translate inner emotions: ‘the invitation to even more personal space translated what is written on the body like a dream, and your words ... so many threads and layers, perspectives, voices, sounds, emotions’ (2019).



Figure 11.8 *The light polishes the dewdrops* [screenshot from rehearsals for ‘Deer Mother’], 2019. Yue Wang.

Having words projected onto my skin, imbued in tender nature-inspired imagery, heightened their *porousness*, relationality and sensual affect. Resting between the edges of tactile perception and imagination; and felt rather than interpreted meaning, they existed beyond a ‘linguistic signifying system’ and within a borderless field of sensation. According to Erin Manning, ‘to sense, we must cut through time and space, moving, challenging both semantic and geographical boundaries. Sensation is not a coding of bodies’ (2007 p. 20). And

she continues: ‘A sensing body ruptures conceptions of time and space that are considered stable, reaching toward a continued metamorphosis of the body that

violently spaces time and times space. Acute senses allow the world to appear in relation ... infinitely sensing in excess of their organisms, reaching toward songs of experience' (2007 p. 83).

Challenging the semantic and spatiotemporal boundaries of my body brought me close to more-than-human landscapes. In his book *Entangled Life*, Merlin Sheldrake wonders: 'Is it possible for humans, with our animal brains and bodies and language, to learn to understand such different organisms? How might we find ourselves changed in the process?' (2020, p. 24). It was through a process of multimodal translation as *entanglement* that I embraced the (im) possibility to translate practices of other species, fungal and mycelial networks into a web of improvised expression. By learning how 'fungi inhabit enmeshed worlds' and how 'countless threads lead through these labyrinths' (Sheldrake, 2020, p. 24), I allowed the boundaries between writing, moving and singing to become thin, fluid and porous defined by an entanglement of words and movement; performer and audience; kinaesthetic and material space.

The principles of reaching, wrapping, spiralling and rooting that abound in forest ecosystems influenced the writing and movement research. Notions of symbiosis between fungi and partner trees that 'form a mutually beneficial relationship' (Sheldrake, 2020, p. 41) became a metaphor for models of care between maternity staff and birthing people and an inspiration for writing and choreography (Figure 11.9). For instance, an interplay between a more muscular rooting and a finer entangling of surfaces as hyphae's filaments wrap around roots influenced the qualities of touch, weight and interaction with the space and the audience.³



Figure 11.9 *Hyphae* [photo, Epping Forest], 2020. Vanio Papadelli.

‘Your hands made/let me hear your invisible thoughts’
(excerpt from a spectator’s feedback after the sharing, 2019).

The raw reality of contraction pain as well as the indescribable thrill of enduring it was experienced as a monumental rite of passage between life and death. During the last stage of labour, in particular, a sensation of being alone in a dark forest flooded my inner landscape and felt utterly tangible and real. In fact, the forest became a wider interdisciplinary framework for translation and for the dramaturgical landscape of the piece. Its mythological, ecological, folk and symbolic dimensions of quest, self-discovery and transformation proved potent and highly generative. Interestingly, the initial title for the work-in-progress was *Deer Mother*, inspired by Frida Kahlo’s painting *The Wounded Deer* (1946). The painting captured elements of my experience of the last stage of labour – also affected by labour induction substances, intake of gas and air and diamorphine. The arrows became symbols of the words uttered by the senior midwife; the deer’s antlers and its proud gaze leading away from memories of inner violation; and the solitude and vastness of the forest a fitting imaginative backdrop for the birth event. The wounded deer became an archetype for movement work while inherent notions of captivity, woundedness and pain were explored in an intrinsically multimodal manner.

The Greek word *κλαυσίγελος* [klafsíjelos] meaning ‘cry-laughter’ became an equally fundamental container for the initial artistic explorations of my experience of giving birth. Inspired by the symbiosis of opposite states of grief and joy, crying and laughter within one word, I treated *κλαυσίγελος* as a frame for movement, sound and speech improvisation in English and Greek (Figure 11.10).

κλαυσίγελος < ancient Greek *κλαυσίγελος* [klafsíjelos] < *κλαῦσις* crying + *γέλως* laughter = crying and laughing at once.

Spending time in the studio producing laughter from an initially ‘cold’ departure of vocal and kinetic vibrating, shaking or micro-shivering led to an inescapable and exhilarating alternation between laughing and crying. This resulted in ‘quasi-alchemic’ and visceral states that oscillated between tenderness and violence, eventually filled with more complex expressive potential and leading to a flow of improvised speech with unpredictable tonalities and vocal muscularity. Improvised spoken words were immediately translated into stream-like writing that was palpable and infiltrated with movement and affect. After the sharing, a spectator wrote in their feedback: ‘The crying/laughing, I felt it with my womb, my



Figure 11.10 Κλαυσίγελος. [Screenshot from 'Laughing Gas teaser' overlaid with text], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

insides, I felt you calling to my own memories laying in my flesh and bone, offered, held. The words that most haunt you, now touch and stay with me' (2019).⁴ It is exactly this liminal, vibratory, contradictory yet encompassing in-betweenness that influenced the initial processes of multimodal translation in *LG*.

4. Translation as a polyphonic synaesthetic collage: Echoes | coincidences | fragmentation | coexistence

During the pandemic, the findings and embodied memory of the 2019 sharing were translated into words and images in a series of slides initially presented as an example of multimodal writing practice for the online version of the module 'Writing the Body' (MA/MFA Creative Practice, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, 2020–ongoing). A main aim of the initial slideshow was to translate the conventional information-filled PowerPoint presentation into a live yet multi-sensory performative experience for my students. Special attention was given as to how words emerged from and activated visual material as a *polyphonic synaesthetic* multimodal collage. Hélène Cixous's quote became a motto for approaching ongoing challenges of translating embodied experience into words and images: 'Above all do not waste time passing from the outside to the inside. Don't waste time wiping your feet before entering. The first sentence takes off like an arrow and sticks in the heart of internity' (2005, p. 195).

The initial slideshow was expanded and edited for all the ensuing in-person iterations of the same module; for various artistic network sharings (*Arts and Health Hub* 2021; *Mothers who Make Peer Mentoring Programme* 2021); as well as for documentation and promotional purposes.

In all the above instances, the text, sound files and images (paintings and photographs) were intended to be appreciated as a stand-alone multimodal choreography on a slide deck. Titling each slide as ‘Minute 1’, ‘Minute 2’ and so on so that it echoed loosely the forty-two minutes of my last stage of labour was an equally helpful compositional frame that ensured a vibrant and varied sense of rhythm (see Figure 11.11). The slides were not connected in any linear manner; instead they invited moments of breath (through some intentionally left blank slides), echo, juxtaposition, coincidence, repetition and amplification – strategies borrowed from the field of movement improvisation. By also integrating interruptions, asides and digressions through the sharing of domestic life details and short excerpts of dialogue with my son or descriptions of dreams, I sought to create ‘a sense of unedited and unpolished immediacy’ (Smith & Watson, 2002, p. 1); a postmodern medley; a collage of interior realities, akin to common – at the time of the pandemic – practices of performing the domestic, such as the one below.

I embrace your dad. You rush to squeeze in between us.

‘Can I come into your jungle mum?’

My body confiscated, hijacked, adored – a battlefield.

You look at your belly button:

‘Mum, is this where the voice comes from? Is this where the wolf comes from?’

- Yes, but don’t take goodies to your grandmother yet ... The umbilical is not that long and you won’t find your way back. It will snap.

The main concern in the initial slideshow was how to transpose notions of tactility, rhythm and musicality that were pivotal in the 2019 informal sharing (Clarence Mews, London) into the layout of images and words akin to proxemic relationships on stage. After studying publications that combined multiple writing registers such as Miranda Tufnell and Alys Longley’s writings as well as writers of visual or experimental essays such as Claudia Rankine (*Citizen: An American Lyric*, 2015) and Anne Carson (*Nox*, 2010), I treated the slideshow as a breathing archive. I paid attention to the physical space of the slides and experimented with the typography and graphic materiality – size, colour and type of font; arrangement of media; borders and spacing – as well as with the sonic materiality of language by integrating sound files into the slideshow.

Experimenting with the materiality of the page is certainly not novel; it has been previously explored in modernist visual poetry (including Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, Tristan Tzara's Dadaist collage poetry, Stéphane Mallarmé's emphasis on the typography and the layout of his poems) and has nowadays reached fast-developing hi-tech dimensions through digital editing programmes for digital screen and printed format artefacts. In my slides, words were mingled or juxtaposed with images or sounds into low-tech 'multimodal ensembles', to borrow Tomalin's term, without, however, any 'hierarchical ordering' (2020, p. 135). The 'typographical forms' were 'deployed to suggest performative gestures'; photographs and paintings were meant 'to supplement the written text and further destabilize conventional linearities and orders' (Tomalin, 2020, p. 153) while sound aimed at enriching the rhythmic, tonal, textural and affective engagement with the material.

*There are words that etch the flesh and others
that are woven around you as a hammock.*

Smith and Watson note that the artistic production of the autobiographical within the long lineage of female artists often occurs at the interface of 'the visibility (image) and textuality (the aural and written word, the extended narrative, the dramatic script)' where one implicates the other in intricate ways (2002, p. 7). They add that 'in these heterogeneous self-displays, textuality implicates visibility as, in different ways, the visual image engages components of textuality at material, voiced, and/or virtual sites' (p. 7). In all the slideshows I created as part of *LG*, the images I responded to and generated text from were predominantly works by female artists such as Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, Francesca Woodman, Ana Mendieta and Otobong Nkanga who deal with social, cultural and gender identity through mostly surrealist modes of expression. The depiction of the female body trapped in or in symbiosis with – often monstrous – elements of nature exposing and challenging tropes of domesticity, sexualization and relationship to land felt strangely liberating. Selected artworks⁵ aptly resonated with my experience of birthing and the first months of mothering, especially with regards to the interplay between the human and the-more-than human; the evoked silences and unspoken oppression; and these artists' defiant stance towards life sounding in my perception almost like a rebellious cry-laughter.

Engaging deeply with such bold visual work became a fitting and empowering container for grappling with the discomfort of exposing my intimate story and the raw reality of birth set against the backdrop of domestic routines, daily walks in parks and trips to forests. The self, spilling and gathering its memory limbs – a

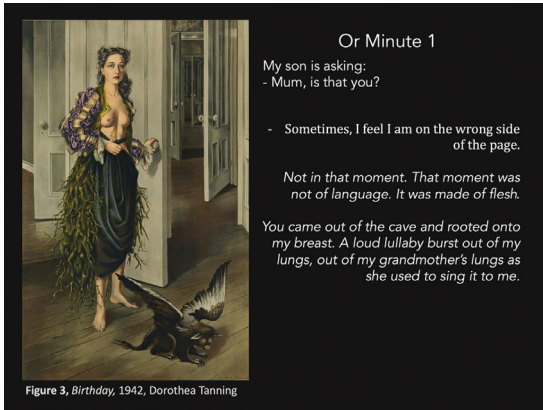


Figure 11.11 *Mum, is that you?* [Screenshot of a slide] 2021. Vanio Papadelli.

After viewing the slide (Figure 11.11), please click on the sound file below, containing an edited sound recording of a lullaby sung by my grandmother and myself.



Sound file 3

psychogeography of intense and novel love hormones muddled with tree and breast rooting, sleeplessness, feelings of isolation, inadequacy and puzzlement by the persistence of postpartum pain.

Phantom or real, I will never find out.

5. Translation as connection | healing

In 2023, the multimodal slides acquired a new dual function; to host the script and the visual and textu(r)al ‘storyboard’ of a site-responsive performance installation that was titled *Laughing Gas (LG)* and that was presented as part of the Oxytocin Collective Care platform (Middlesex University campus, London, 13 May 2023).⁶ In this iteration, I invited Michael Picknett to work on the sound and Natalie Katsou on the dramaturgy of the piece. During this phase, the aim of translation was placed on widening the imaginative world of the piece – hosted for a few years in the digital space of slides with finite boundaries – into an expanded physical space. The unique architectural design of the site where I presented *LG* with its imposing overlaying of the outside onto the inside and its dynamic combination of materials – glass, metal, concrete and green natural landscape – turned into a spatial metaphor, a symbolic set for ritualizing the birth of my son (see Figures 11.12–11.15). By using pre-recorded text; semi-improvised movement; asemic writing⁷ on large tracing papers; wearable

objects; and audience interaction, I translated images, words and memories into embodied spatiotemporal events aimed at live and embodied *connection* and *healing*.

The piece had three sections. In the first one, I was moving inside a long corridor made of transparent glass windows, acting as a bridge between two buildings, while the audience could witness the action from a green field outside and listen to a pre-recorded text-soundscape on their headphones. Through Katsou's dramaturgical support and Picknett's sound design, I sought to recreate a similar tactile sense of words akin to their felt haptic quality when projected onto my body (Clarence Mews, 2019). I combined writing registers – from the confessional, the poetic, the reflective, the epistolary through to the descriptive and report-like – and read the text mostly with an everyday tone interspersed with moments of more expressive inflection. Choosing to broadcast the text through headphones aimed to reach the audience in an intimate manner, like the reading of a letter. Environmental sounds would bleed into the aural experience coupled with the visual events of my live moving, mark-making and drawing of semi-intelligible letters on large tracing papers, inspired by asemic types of writing. In the second section, I came down a long metallic staircase by carrying a contraption-like wearable object made of pebbles placed inside entangled tights – a symbol of weighted sensations experienced during my long postpartum recovery (see Figure 11.2). In the third section, I met the audience and interacted with them in the green grass field. The analysis of the performance below comes as a stream rather than organized reflection; a more associative and multimodal chronicle merging my personal reflections, voicemails left by the dramaturg of the piece, Natalie Katsou, excerpts from the original text, sound recordings and stills from the performance by Katie Edwards.

Section 1

A muted birth canal.

Vertical sheets hanging. Masks of the body, extensions of the skin.
The darkness of the womb contrasted by the daylight, the celestial and the trees
flooding the body.

Appearing erased | disappearing.

The body written and rewritten by images, reflections and
transparencies – *palimpsest*.

Asymmetrical and stream-like mark-making, writing as im-pulse.
My voice granular, gramophone and pebble-like multiplied. *Distant* yet close.
Crying laughter becomes a muted shaking, mouth wide open. Solitude.

Spiral movement. Undulations, disruptions, pauses, hesitations.

Intimate alienation –

you

my
body.



Figure 11.12 *Laughing Gas* performance still 1, Oxytocin Collective Care, May 2023. Photo by Katie Edwards.



Figure 11.13 *Laughing Gas* performance still 2, Oxytocin Collective Care, May 2023. Photo by Katie Edwards.

Section 2

Animal-stone-human, monstrous, of no-language.

*Organs, words petrified, contained in elastic tentacles, extensions,
dragging thoughts – pebbles.*

*The body crumbles, placentas words memories spilling, dropping, re-collecting.
Tighten the grip.*



Figure 11.14 *Laughing Gas* performance still 3, Oxytocin Collective Care, May 2023. Photo by Katie Edwards.

Section 3

Meeting you, quietly invested throughout ...

Heavy lightness, webs of connection, breath and care...

Inhale, exhale.

*A multiheaded octopus. A mycelial maypole. The concrete
institution disappears.*

The stones become holds. Elastic entanglements. Is this translation?



Figure 11.15 *Laughing Gas* performance still 4, Oxytocin Collective Care, May 2023. Photo by Katie Edwards.



Sound file 4

6. Translation as a multimodal letter

This essay does not only reflect on previous processes of translation; it has led to new representations of my birthing experience. Returning to a digital mode of expression, namely a visual essay in an electronic format, was treated as a creative obstruction that offered me the opportunity to expand the written content and reflective analysis of the work further. As previously seen, the text

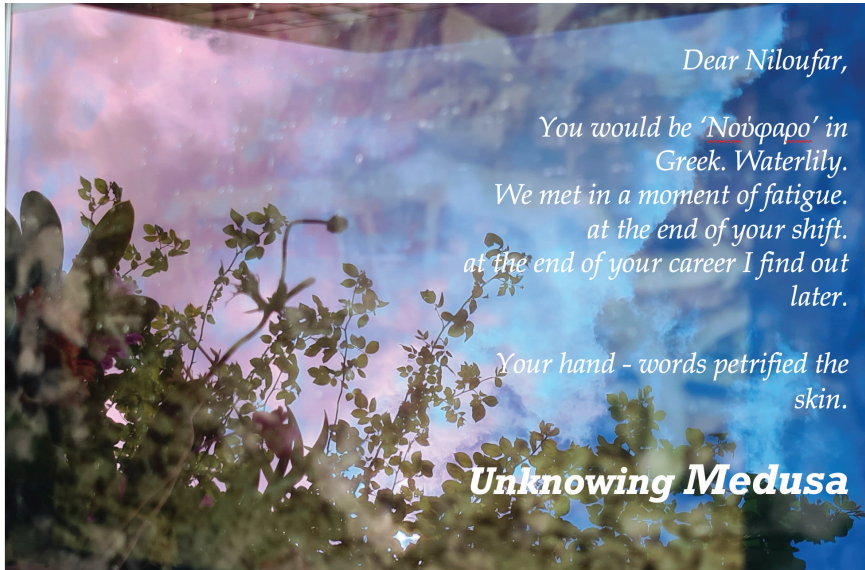


Figure 11.16 *Niloufar* [screenshot with light reflection], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

in this project navigates different ‘temperatures’ and registers: the reflective, the descriptive, lists and streams, the associative, the poetic and the epistolary (letter-writing). Especially the latter became a generative frame for imagining a conversation with the senior midwife, in the form of a confessional letter that merges the I-You and rewrites the real. In this essay, I have attempted to expand the boundaries of the letter as a mode of communication. I have followed an intuitive, unruly methodology open to ‘happy accidents’, ‘mistranslations’ and the desire to reoccupy my domestic environment with moments of free play as a reimagining of myself in labour beyond stereotypical representations, and moments of free letter-writing addressed to the senior midwife as an erasure of lingering patriarchal projections onto myself.

At the same time, the copyright restrictions for reproducing well-known paintings which constituted major sources of inspiration in all the previous creative outputs of the project helped me embark into a new and intricate process of multimodal translation. In an uncanny and intentionally impossible attempt to emulate the world of selected paintings and photographs, I created new mixed media images exposed to different weather conditions such as rain, wind and light, and collaged them with ‘poor’ materials found in the domestic environment such as garden pebbles, grass and soil; bricks; papers; and eggs (see Figures 11.1, 11.3, 11.6, 11.7, 11.16–11.19). This process emerged organically

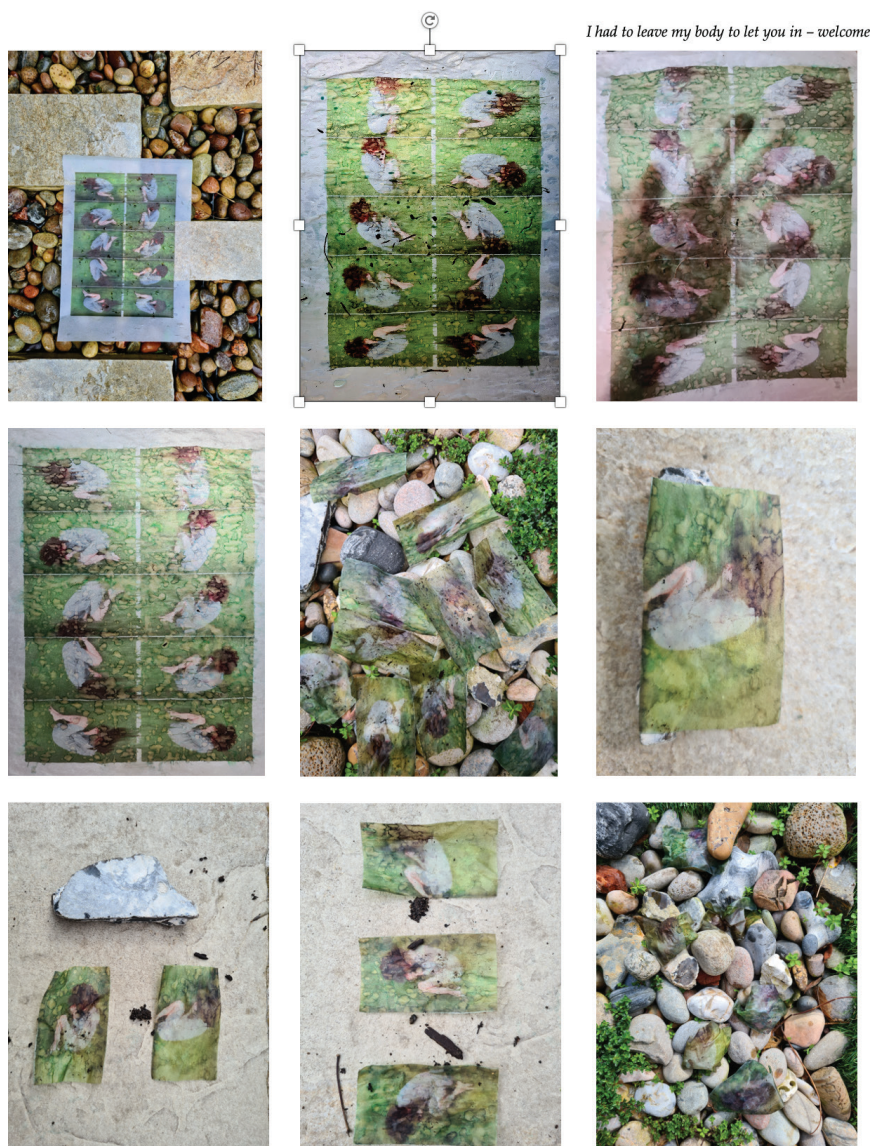


Figure 11.17 *Numb* [mixed media photocollage printed on tracing paper, cut and left to weather under the rain], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

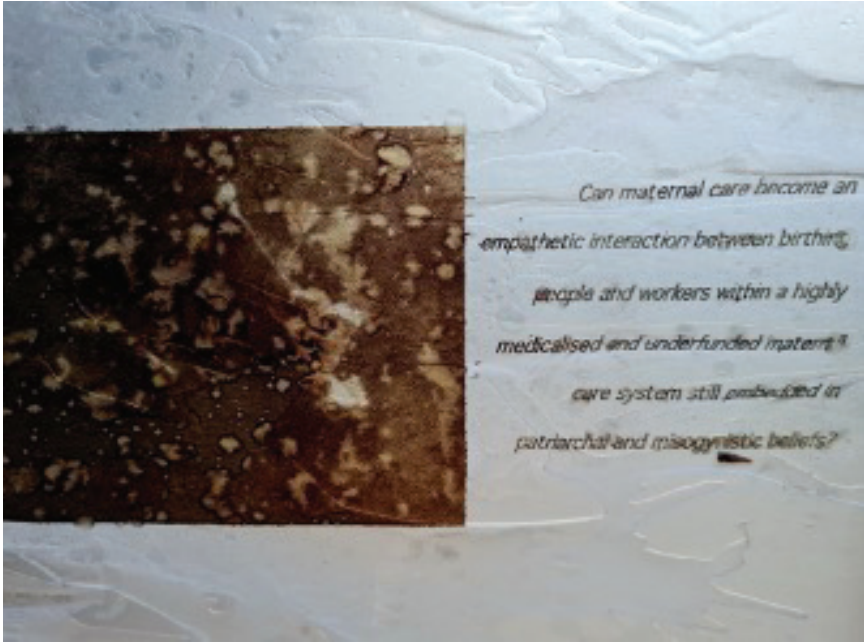


Figure 11.18 *Pebble tights II* [print of still and text on tracing paper left to weather under the rain], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

and intuitively as an intimate and solitary yet playful ‘getting lost’ within the domestic environment; a knowing and unknowing of myself refracted through these new lenses of representation.

We fly; we dream in darkness; we devour heaven in bites too small to be measured. (Solnit, 2017, p. 176)

Below are some examples of the visual experiments that took place as part of this essay writing (Figures 11.16–11.17).

*I give you the name
Niloufar.*

*my body implodes.
The upper into the lower, entangled, I drink the umbilical, I-you are drowned.
I’m back to my beginning.*

I had to leave my body to let you in – welcome

Epilogue

The reality of birthing is beyond representation and, to some extent, beyond language-ing. In such a raw and unpredictable rite of passage, that brings the birthing person at the threshold of herself, every word and touch by maternity care professionals matter to an unmeasurable degree (see Figure 11.18). Birthing experiences are liminal and highly performative. Intimately and infinitely rehearsed during gestation and often carefully designed through elaborate (yet rarely materialized) ‘birth plans’, they also exist against a backdrop of over-medicalized representations of women in labour saved by (often male) educated medical experts representing what Jones calls ‘the post-Renaissance enlightened age’ who came to replace the stereotype of the often ‘illiterate and superstitious female midwife-witch’ (Jones, 2023, p. 59). There are numerous other long-held or more current ideologies and archetypes of the mother-martyr who has to endure pain silently, the frail female who opts quickly for painkillers, the over-controlling ‘too posh to push’ career woman who does not know her body or knows too much, the ‘natural birth’ fanatic. The list is endless ...

My childbirth experience became the site of continuous reimagining and creative translation in ways that obscured, shapeshifted and illuminated the real by enabling kinships with other women, audiences and artistic lineages. Wishing to empower, advocate for and connect with anyone interested in or affected by the maternity healthcare system through compassion, I treated this autoethnographic research project as a portal for self-healing and a platform of advocacy for women’s rights in the pivotal threshold and identity shift that is giving birth to a new life. Ongoing research has led me to consider my privilege as a white middle-class and well-educated woman in relationship to those mostly affected by systemic and intersectional injustices such as Black, migrant, disabled and non-binary people. The instances of translation that occurred throughout all processes of *LG* were not always linear or smooth, at times centrifugal and at times centripetal; purposeful choices or intuitive inventions. Especially language lost ‘its privileged status as the primary agent of meaning-making’ and its centrality (Boria & Tomalin, 2020, p. 14). In fact, in all instances and in a non-hierarchical manner, language (written or spoken) has been the binding tissue; movement the vital engine and perceptual lens; while the visual elements the energizer and spatial container, provoking their materiality and stretching their potential in multidirectional and unpredictable ways.

Whenever I presented versions of *LG*, in an attempt to reconstruct and make sense of the sequencing and intention of each element, I always found myself editing the words and reorganizing the connections between text, images and movement – adding layers of opacity or disentangling knots. As new outputs emerged, new aesthetic languages and new meanings kept being communicated in constant flux. Key concerns revolved around the integrity of each medium, what was lost and what was gained in each phase, and how the ensuing hybridity and coexistence of media affects the audience experience, stemming from a longing to encounter individuals and collectivities.

LG proposes translation as entanglement, as collage, as a letter and as a healing and creative reimagining of the self. Its outreach aim, through upcoming workshops and performances, is to also carve a model of interaction between birth professionals and birthing people defined by non-judgmental language that encourages, empowers, listens and guides with respect. As Reed observes, ‘growth and distress can coexist, and suffering can nourish self-transformation ... There is power in the shadow part of life, which we tend to suppress as a culture in favour of the light’ (2021, p. 84). By embracing fear and pain, without ostracizing them, *LG* resists sentimental or over-sacralized stereotypes of the

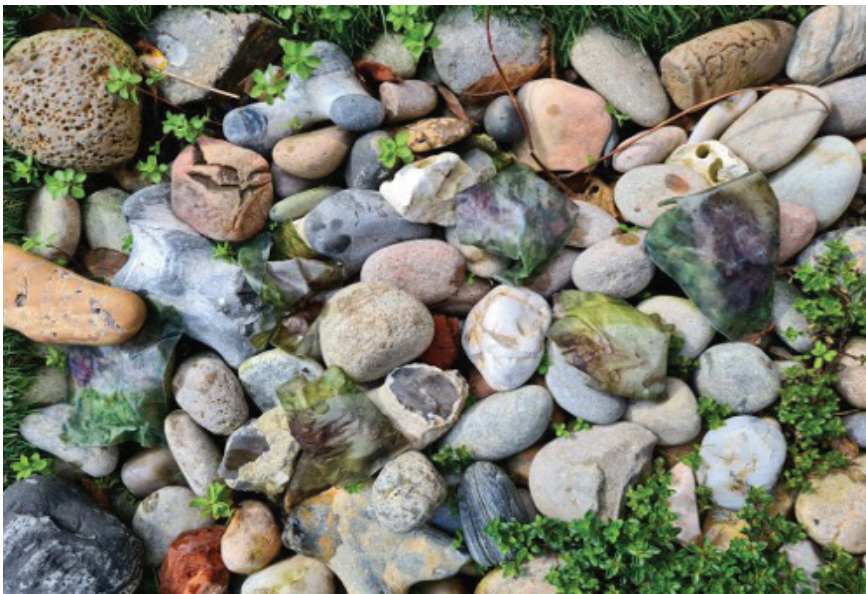


Figure 11.19 *Numb - detail* [mixed media photocollage with screenshots from ‘Laughing Gas teaser’ printed on tracing paper, left to weather under the rain], 2024. Vanio Papadelli.

maternal and other intersectional prejudices. It calls for an acute presence of 'being with' instead of a 'doing to'.

Close your eyes.

Think of all the moments a new body came to breathe life.

Tender explosions.

*Compressed, nuclear, all in one moment at the centre
of your skull – celestial magnitude reversed.*

What is the taste in your mouth?

A hospital bag alphabet**Sound File 5**

- a. A handful of lullabies with clementine scent.
- b. A wet seashell. You just found it under your foot.
- c. A swing hanging from a tree.
- d. A butterfly fluttering in your hair.
- e. The liquid tittering of the moon.
- f. The first time a cherry bursts into your mouth.
- g. Midnight summer laughter with friends.
- h. Bike ride down the hill.
- i. A paper boat backlit with a candle.
- j. Chase in a small forest.
- k. My hands make shadow puppets on the wall.
- l. Jasmin scent as you walk at night.
- m. Crisp sun of a winter morning.
- n. Awakening from a sweet nap on the sand. Lick your salty lips.
- o. A cuddle attack.
- p. You open a scrunched paper to find a poem written in an unknown language.
- q. A pouch of freshly cut grass after the rain.
- r. A ladybird lands on the back of your palm as you're chatting.
- s. The first snowflake.
- t. You spy on an adult talk through the keyhole.
- u. The tap is giving birth to starflowers.
- v. You realize the true lyrics of a song you kept listening since you were a child.
- w. A myriad-pleated veil with printed fairy tales to keep you company at night.
- x. The ripple of a pebble.
- y. Lazy watermelon afternoons.
- z. A spell.

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P.S. A chunk of sky

Mum, when I'm 4 I'll be really big.
I'll climb up into the sky and cut it.
But the sky will be made of iron ...

- Oh, wouldn't it be a bit difficult to cut it then?
- ... but my hands are going to be fires and the iron will melt.
- Excellent! Will you bring me a chunk of sky to see how it tastes?
- Yes.

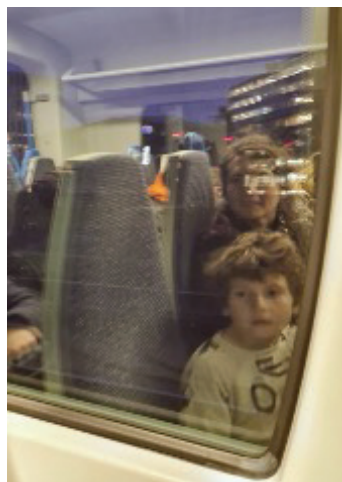


Figure 11.20 *A chunk of sky*, 2023. Vanio Papadelli.

Notes

Content warnings: childbirth trauma, dissociation.

1. Mothers who Make (<https://motherswhomake.org/>), Hackney Children's centres, the Arts and Health professional development group (<https://www.artsandthealthhub.org/about>), Positive Birth Movement (<https://www.positivebirthmovement.org/>), Procreate Project (<https://www.procreateproject.com/>) and Birth Rites Collection (<https://www.birthritescollection.org.uk/>) among others.

2. This essay draws on critical studies on the maternal (Rachel Reed, 2021; Lucy Jones, 2023; Susan Maushart, 2000; Jenni Nuttall, 2023) as well as on informal conversations and workshops with birthing people and birth professionals from diverse backgrounds.
3. In the book *Translation and Multimodality: Beyond Words* (2020), Tamarin Norwood proposes a novel method of writing that ‘can be derived from a particular technique of “half blind” drawing that she calls “writing ‘drawingly’”’ (Boria & Tomalin, 2020, p. 19). The movement of the live performance of the piece also derived from a process of moving ‘blindly’ (inspired by readings on the symbiotic relationship between roots and fungal systems) and writing blindly (inspired by Hélène Cixous’s chapter ‘Writing Blind: conversation with the donkey’ in *Stigmata*, 2005).
4. From minutes 02.33–03.25 in the Laughing Gas teaser, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIGoyGEpu-4> the viewer can see an audio-visual ‘multimodal ensemble’ (Tomalin, 2020, p. 135) that combines vibratory movement, sound recordings and reading of text, based on the concept of *κλαυσίγελος*.
5. Especially *The Wounded Deer* (1946) by Frida Kahlo; *Birthday* (1942), *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943) and *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202)* (1970–1973) by Dorothea Tanning; *Self-deceit #6, Rome* (1978) by Francesca Woodman; *Embrace* (2014) by Otobong Nkanga; *Silueta Series* (1973–1977) by Ana Mendieta.
6. Here is a short teaser from the performance ‘Laughing Gas Oxytocin 2023’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpbGwWgyR8Y>.
7. Asemic writing was given its name by two visual poets, Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich. Peter Schwenger explains that ‘in the case of *asemic* it is meaning itself, or rather the sign’s capacity to convey meaning, that is eliminated. So asemic writing is writing that does not want to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing’ (2019, p. 1). Although in asemic writing the signs do not belong to any familiar system, ‘they put themselves forward in the form of a sign system, recognizable as marks disposed on a page according to certain conventions’ (Schwenger, 2019, p. 2). Schwenger explains that those marks hint at comprehensible systems such as Chinese characters, Islamic calligraphy, or Paleolithic pictographs (2019 p. 2). They encourage us to read them and may frustrate our reading emphasizing the materiality of writing and the expressive power of handwriting reacting against the uniformity of keyboarding.

