

## Reconciling Carboniferous Accretions: A Performative Script

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# ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE

## Reconciling Carboniferous Accretions: A Performative Script

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**ABSTRACT** *Reconciling Carboniferous Accretions: A Performance Script* is a spatial writing text that sets the scene for a site-specific performance at The North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers (NEIMME) in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. Like any script, the text anticipates the possibility of multiple performances, and yet when augmented visually by sketches, photographs and dialogue, the script recalls one version of what did happen at its only performance to date as part of the Architecture and Humanities Research Association's (AHRA) Industries of Architecture conference in November 2014. The artwork advocates for coal as a live material caught up amongst material–corporeal relations, an approach that emerges from the philosophies of Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Grosz. The performance proceeds as a love poem to coal, a recitation that poses a radical encounter with geological processes, opencast mining practices and a red-carpeted room in NEIMME set aside for coalmining conciliations and Freemason meetings.

*A Reconciliation of Carboniferous Accretions* was performed on 14 November 2014 as part of the Architecture and Humanities Research Association's (AHRA) Industries of Architecture conference program held in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. The performance carved a spatial

journey through the North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers starting at the front door of Neville Hall, through the corridors, and up three flights of stairs to room 210. The space of the event was further activated by a red wool carpet accompanied by synthetic and organic linings, three bags of coal purchased from local supplier ABoC Solid Fuels, a nearby working opencast coalmine in Steadsburn, ten blue plastic battery-powered torches, an iPhone, an audience of approximately fifty conference participants and me, a spatial artist. A faint atmosphere of entertainment hung over the event as Friday night pub-crawlers energized the central city and conversations amongst conference delegates buzzed following a keynote lecture. All this shaped an event that sought to politicize coal as a live body in a twenty-first-century resource-depleted natural environment.

I offer the above logistical information as a means of locating the event in time. It did happen. The script was performed only once, then and there. Except for a dozen or so still images and a dark and slightly inaudible video recording, no further trace of the event exists except for in the memories of the audience and the material surfaces of the building. Many artists might try to bridge this gap by describing the performance or narrating the plot. An art critic might contextualize the performance in the light of other recent artworks in order to frame a critique, to pass judgment on its merit, to note its value or impact. Yet bringing you, the reader, to the performance, into its affective state, is not possible, not even desirable. It happened and you missed it. Such is the laudable nature of durational and experimental performance. It necessarily escapes representation, including repeatability.

This quality of resisting representation for the sake of liveness is one that I embrace in my creative practice. It assists me in inhabiting space, not time, not framed exclusively by theory and criticism, not across or between the frames of cinematic production, or by virtue of the prosthetic eye of a camera but, in the ether where energies flow. This is space that geographer Doreen Massey rescues from the clutches of representation's tendency to fix and deaden the flow of life.<sup>1</sup> Speaking specifically to social scientists and yet beyond, she asks:

And so again, what if? What if we refuse to convene space into time? What if we open up the imagination of the single narrative to give space (literally) for a multiplicity of trajectories? What kinds of conceptualisation of time and space, and their relation, might that give on to?<sup>2</sup>

Space, in my creative practice, is also the same embodied becoming – duration and movement unfettered by divisible time – that feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz cites as “the ongoing possibility of a different inhabitation.”<sup>3</sup> It enables difference in iteration; never the same twice and always live, processual and relational.

And so, the role of a script is implicated. A *performance* script anticipates a theatrical event that has been or will be rehearsed and staged, and often the success of that performance rests in its *re-presentation*, whereas a *performative* script operates as a spatial provocation – something that might have happened, something that could happen, something with generative and speculative potential. The movement resides in the script itself. In the case of this essay, the simple shift in the title from “*performance*” to “*performative*” marks far more than a grammatical operation that turns a noun into an adjective to express a tendency or disposition; it signals a turn to the active agency of lived space. It is a demonstration of what architectural theorist and art critic Jane Rendell names as “site-writing,” a form of situated practice that refuses fixity while in a state of spatial movement taking place “according to the distinctive locations of interpretation and the varying distances and conditions of responsibility interpreters and performers have in relation to authors and audience.”<sup>4</sup> Following Rendell’s lead, *A Reconciliation of Carboniferous Accretions: A Performative Script* is an artwork distinct from the performance that spawned from its first happening. It is a site-writing that takes into account the hours I spent writing under the library’s vaulted arch, poking my nose into rooms and cupboards, books and archives, walking the city at dawn and ill-fated attempts to visit coalfields. It registers a desire to overcome geographical distance between my home in New Zealand and the building in Newcastle through internet searches. It mourns over the mountain’s lack of agency to protect itself from a subsequent mining hysterectomy. The performance’s criticality arises from standing inside the space of the issue, welcoming the audience into that space with me, using my body and the building as an affective lever in order to spatialize a contentious political matter that binds my body with your body, the body of coal, the mountain and the coalmining industry. In the performance there was no escaping the immediacy of those relationships. What is it then to write a text that is itself a situated practice, is a site of a material work rather than about the work and, as Rendell wonders, to speak to the object, write as the object, to go so far as to write the object?<sup>5</sup>

British art historian Gavin Butt’s musings on the paradoxes of criticism offer some guidance. Noting art criticism’s threatened life force, Butt calls for criticism to find a mode of working which frees it from the protocols of institutionalized forms of thought.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that such reanimation resides in criticism’s own agency, “within the very mode of the critical address,” in the “performativity of critical response,” hosted by an “event-ness of the critical encounter.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Butt reminds us of how feminist and performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan’s work explores critical writing as an art form that is subject to happen, and once it has happened, it then vanishes. Such absence of a concrete art object, according to Phelan, occasions the opportunity to “remark again the performative possibilities of writing.”<sup>8</sup>

How can a text–act elicit spatial experience like that of a speech–act? The performative script to follow begs to be spoken such that your feet and heart feel the strain of climbing the stairs and ascending through geological matter. Its (mis)punctuation employs syllabic enunciation as a tactic for stirring up rhythm, and more than often rhyme, as a recollection of poems written as odes. Mouthing each word, utterable text. You are directed not to imagine what coal smells, tastes or sounds like, but to reach out to it directly, physically, to get down on the floor with it, lay with it. As a performative script, you can inhabit the spoken lines, stomp and whisper as loud as you see fit, jiggle your organs across the dance floor to Lee Dorsey’s smooth voice as vivaciously as you dare. It is what you do with the script that matters.

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*Assemble 3 bags of coal at the foot of the front steps to Mining Institute. Open the bags. Place 10 torches (geordies<sup>9</sup>) on end amongst the bags. Each torch carries a note. Turn the torches on.*

### SEAM ONE

*Gather an audience at the entrance to the Mining Institute. Open the door, and call out from the top of the steps, reading from a notebook:*

**So.<sup>10</sup>**

Hold UP your hands:  
Who amongst us drinks filtered water,  
distributes fertilizer,  
builds with concrete or steel,  
travels by plane, bike or automobile?

### **TAKE a lump of coal!**

Who uses  
solvents,  
repellents,  
plastics,  
cosmetics,  
rayon,  
nylon,  
aspirins,  
resins,  
shampoo, toothpaste or soap?<sup>11</sup>

**TAKE a lump of coal! TAKE a WHOLE bag of coal,** you carboniferous-consuming creatures!

Help me ferry these accretions of geological events to a space of reconciliation!

*Signal for people to gather handfuls of coal from the bags and to carry the bags up to the second floor. Lead the group to the steps guided by a torch.*

Step with me through 542 million years

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of amorphous Pre-cam-bri-an gases emerging as oceans,  
continents and atmosphere,  
a matrix forever.

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*Pass through the front door, then through two sets of double doors and up first flight of stairs.*

Bacteria was magically born in the vapours of volcanic e-rup-tions,

SEAM TWO<sup>12</sup>

a complex pest triggering fer-til-is-a-tion,

*Lead the audience up several flights of stairs in the dark. Read one line per riser, loudly. The pace is slow; pause regularly and enunciate carefully. Let your voice resonate in the stairwell amongst whispers from the audience while torchlights touch wall surfaces.*

laying down, sed-i-ments

earth's pressures, sent-i-ments

of ar-cha-e-am,

the yawn

of ancient dawn.

Sac-like bodies, one-cell MEM-branes,

all mouth, no anus or brains

eat-ing up the sun

ex-cret-ing sweet ox-y-gen.

For-mi-nif-er-a algae flare

and fecund sponges suck Pro-ter-o-ZO-ic air.

Invasions of ice sheets

CLAW back the layers as they retreat.

Continents clash in epi-SOD-ic crust production,

the first crisis of earth's pollution.

Pal-e-o-ZO-ic life thrived then waned

UN-explained.

*Cross the landing between ground and first floor.*

Spineless creatures of Cam-bri-an

BEGET vascular plants of Or-do-vic-i-an,

BEGET jawed-fish and giant scorpions of Si-LUR-i-an,

BEGET wing-LESS bugs, trees and fish of De-VON-i-an.

Gondwana and Laurussia collide,

super oceans and mountains side by side,

*Reach the first floor.  
Cross the landing  
and head up the next  
flight of stairs.*

a land of pungent mires  
transfixed by alternating floods and fires:  
floating wetlands of rhe-o-TRO-philic hy-dro-lo-gy

left fens dry in a seasonal quand-ar-y,

mangroves fermenting tidal stews,  
fern mosses and conifers accrue,  
amongst adventitious roots and vines,  
moist spore SEX and an-gi-o-sperms incline  
shells of mollusks, clams and snails,  
fragile carcasses of millipedes, cockroaches, spiders prevail  
accumulating as putrid bogs  
of peat, swamps and drowning logs.  
Carbon satur-ated,  
salt deni-grated,  
lithified by the weight of time thereafter.

The trapped heat of dead plant matt-er,  
the impact of dinosaur colossal,  
com-PRESS-ing ground into fossils.

Coal sleeping  
between festoons of sandstone rippling,  
over rolls of silty shale ROOT-ing,  
and bands of siderite concreting.

*Cross the landing  
between first floor  
and second floor.*

The horizontal integrity of coal's first steamy seam  
disturbed by washouts, uplifts, splits, and reams.

FAULT-ing, FOLD-ing, FRAC-tious cleats  
lubricated by earth-seats.

Gentle warping,  
complex thrusting  
dia-PIR-ic intrusions,  
to-PO-graph-ic contusions,  
to rearrange combust-i-ble  
dia-GEN-e-tic mater-i-al.

*Arrive at the second floor level. Enter room 210 from the hall.*

*Motion for the audience to deposit the bags of coal in the zones without carpet, the former locations of the thrones.<sup>13</sup>*

*Close the door, nearly shut. Pause to hear heavy breathing, possibly see warm exhales meeting the cold air.*

#### SEAM THREE<sup>14</sup>

*Stand in the middle of the room lit only by torches and the lights of the surrounding city creeping in the windows. Use a softer voice.*

*Walk to the corner window to recite to the open pit surface mine in the distance. Draw in the grime on the glass pane.*

Now,

the Kingdom produces 10 million tons of coal each year, not always the case, much more, as history makes clear.<sup>15</sup>

Somewhere between here and the horizon must have lived a well-endowed mountain.

Its veins flowed with coal running horizontal, shal-LOW to a surface that was stripped and ripped

*Position yourself at the south end of the room, bend down and start rolling up a section of the carpet and underlay to reveal a bare timber floor.*

by a dragline and ex-ca-vat-OR  
maximizing profit and eliminating need to cut and cov-ER.<sup>16</sup>

surface scraping vi-vi-sec-TION  
an overburden produc-TION  
separating the hard, the bright and the shiny  
from the MUCK, the GOB pile<sup>17</sup>, a barren sol-u-TION.

Ironic, isn't it?

We stand in a space set aside for arbitration  
between workers and the coal mining association.

Imagine a table of disputes, claims, terse conversation,  
talk of union, land, black lung, child labour, wages, grieving widows and  
reclamation.

The fighting,  
the swearing,  
the appeasement  
and bereavement.

But did any one defend the mountain?

*Gesture with a torch  
to the three holes in  
the carpet.*

Imagine three thrones of Masonic so-ci-e-TY  
reigning over the room, under the G,<sup>18</sup>  
the space of the lodge breeding a system of fraterni-TY,  
illustrating symbols of morali-TY  
veiled in allegor-Y,  
structured by geometr-Y.

Brotherly love and coal mining fuse  
excluding women from the mason's tools:  
the square, the compass, the level, the trowel and the rule,

The knowledge of building,  
architectural industries,  
segregated from the histories of becoming,  
feminist ecologies.

#### SEAM FOUR

*Gather the torches  
and tuck them  
between the  
underlay and the  
floor to prevent  
rolling back. Point the  
torches to illuminate  
the floor area.  
Activate an iPhone to  
play a song. Begin to  
dance.*

Workin' in the coal mine  
Goin' on down, down, down  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Oops, about to slip down.  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Goin' on down, down, down  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Oops, about to slip down.

Five o'clock in the mornin'  
I'm already up and gone  
Lord, I'm so tired  
How long can this go on?

Workin' in the coal mine  
Goin' on down, down, down  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Oops, about to slip down.  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Goin' on down, down, down  
Workin' in a coal mine  
Oops, about to slip down.

'Cause I make a little money  
Haulin' coal by the ton  
When Saturday rolls around  
I'm too tired for havin' fun.

*Empty each sack of  
coal in a pile on the  
floor.*

Workin' in the coal mine  
 Goin' on down, down, down  
 Workin' in a coal mine  
 Oops, about to slip down.  
 Workin' in a coal mine  
 Goin' on down, down, down  
 Workin' in a coal mine  
 Oops, about to slip down.<sup>19</sup>

How?!

### SEAM FIVE<sup>20</sup>

*Look up to the ceiling  
 at the large letter "G."*

*Exclaim:*

Oh God, great geometer, when will it ever end?

*Drop to knees, look  
 up, then down at the  
 floor and whisper  
 loudly:*

Oh coal-bearing ground! Did any one offer an apology?

*Back off, then  
 re-approach, lay  
 horizontal to face the  
 coal and the light.  
 Speak in a slow soft  
 and intimate tone.  
 Reach out to touch  
 the coal and play in  
 its dust.*

I notice you by a blue haze wafting from stovepipes when clouds and temperature loom.

Your acridity lodges in my throat  
 chok-ing-ly distinct from the sea's perfume.

I recognize you by the way your fractures inhale a flame from a match  
 and the way your embers sustain heat drenched in an-i-mal fat.

You cast off infinite skins as soft smut-ty pow-der,  
 heavy dust migrating lib-er-al-ly,  
 defiant, fa-mil-i-ar.

The mass sacrifice of your ancient form  
 is consumed in mere seconds of light and warmth.

Your touch leaves a lasting impression-  
 you resist, you per-SIST to teach me a lesson.

Far from ballast mere,  
 we lay together here,

carbon-based cells of writhing energy  
bonded in mu-tu-a-l-ly independent stillness and mu-ta-bil-i-ty.

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Here I am, here you are, entan-gled  
in a relational embrace,  
a trace

of a horizontal de-mo-cra-cy,  
no room for violence psychologically or phy-si-cal-ly  
where there is no room for romanticism, per-son-i-fi-ca-tion or an-thro-po-mor-phism.

In this state you are you and I, I am me,  
for one can not ever know the other, truly.

Ours is an on-to-lo-gi-cal chor-e-o-graph-y  
of eros animae, inter-sub-jec-ti-vi-ty.

For what emerges of love, not the love of possession or consuming au-thor-it-y,

or love seeking oneness, a unity,  
but the love of spec-i-fic-it-y,

a MATT-er of rights not sov-er-eign-ty.  
a MATT-er of communicating across difference ir-re-du-ci-bly.

*Stand up, roll the underlay halfway over the coal to ‘put it to bed,’ drape the carpet over the underlay, and offer a hand gesture of ‘stay.’ Slip the script into the pile.*

Goodnight, sleep well.

*Walk through the dark to the door. Turn on the harsh reality of ceiling lamps and leave the room. Proceed down the stairs leaving the audience to close the seam.*

*What the audience chooses to do with the coal in/on their hands is left up to them.*



**Figure 1**

The audience makes sense of the scene (and seam) once the room is illuminated.  
Image by Jenney Greveson, 2014.

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- 1 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2005), 20–35.
- 2 Ibid., 5.
- 3 Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 8.
- 4 Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 3.
- 5 Ibid., 7.
- 6 Gavin Butt, “Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism,” in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 5.
- 7 Ibid., 5–6.
- 8 Ibid., 10, citing Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 148.
- 9 “Geordie” refers to the safety mining lamp invented in 1815 by mining and railway engineer George (Geordie) Stephenson. It is also a reference to the people of Newcastle; “Glossary of Terms Used in Coal Mining,” [http://www.archive.org/stream/glossaryoftermsu00gresrich/glossaryoftermsu00gresrich\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/glossaryoftermsu00gresrich/glossaryoftermsu00gresrich_djvu.txt) (accessed December 27, 2014).
- 10 Northern Irish poet, playwright, translator and lecturer Seamus Heaney is well known for his substitution of the first line of *Beowulf* traditionally known as “Listen!” for “So.” The shift in meaning and punctuation was intended as a transition word to mimic Anglo-Saxon diction and indicate the continuation of the conversation. Heaney explained: “when the men of the family spoke, the words they uttered came across with a weighty distinctness, phonetic units as separate and defined as delph platters displayed on a dresser shelf. [...] They had a kind of Native American solemnity of utterance, as if they were announcing verdicts rather than making small talk”; <http://www.mhpbooks.com/did-everyone-get-the-first-line-of-beowulf-wrong-or-did-seamus-heaney-get-it-right/> (accessed December 27, 2014). See also Robert Anderson, “‘So’: The Worlds of Oral Performance” (n.d.), [www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/19\\_so.pdf](http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/19_so.pdf) (accessed December 21, 2014).
- 11 An abbreviated list of items containing “coal” reveals its pervasiveness in modern everyday life; “World Coal Association,” <http://www.worldcoal.org/coal/uses-of-coal/> (accessed December 27, 2014).
- 12 Seam Two was informed by “National Geographic: Carboniferous Period,” <http://sciencenationalgeographiccom/science/prehistoric-world/carboniferous/>; “Palaeontology Online,” <http://wwwpalaeontologyonlinecom/articles/2011/fossil-focus-coal-swamps/>; Russell Garwood, “The Geology and Terrestrial Life of the Carboniferous,” [https://wwwacademiaedu/1217835/The\\_geology\\_and\\_terrrestrial\\_life\\_of\\_the\\_Carboniferous](https://wwwacademiaedu/1217835/The_geology_and_terrrestrial_life_of_the_Carboniferous); and “Energy Story,” <http://wwwenergyquestcagov/story/chapter08html> (accessed December 21, 2014)
- 13 NEIMME librarian and historian Simon Brooks attributes the three patches of uncarpeted floor in the room as the sites of three freemason thrones better known as daises.
- 14 Freemasons Dictionary,” <http://wwwenergyquestcagov/story/chapter08html>; “Masonic Worldcom,” [http://wwwmasonicworldcom/education/files/apr02/include/colour\\_symbolism\\_in\\_freemasonryhtm](http://wwwmasonicworldcom/education/files/apr02/include/colour_symbolism_in_freemasonryhtm); Pauly Fongemie, “Freemasonry: Foundation of the American Revolution,” <http://wwwcatholictraditionorg/masonry3htm> (accessed December 26, 2014)
- 15 “UK Coal Production: BGS Minerals UK Centre for Sustainable Mineral Development,” <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/mineralsuk/mines/coal/occ/home.html>; “Great Mining,” <http://www.greatmining.com/glossary-b.html> (accessed December 27, 2014).
- 16 For details on opencast mining processes, see D.A. Bullivant, “Current Surface Mining Techniques,” *Journal for the Transportation of Materials in Bulk: Bulk Solids Handling* 7, no. 6 (1987): 827–33.
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- 17 "Gob piles are piles of waste made up of a small amount of coal mixed with shale and other mineral by-products from coalmining operations. Gob stands for *garbage off bituminous*. Gob piles are also called boney piles, culm dumps, or simply coal refuse piles. During mining, non-coal minerals are collected from within the coal seam or from the walls, ceiling, or floor of the mine. Combining the minerals with the coal makes a mixture referred to as low-grade coal. This low-grade coal has a low heating value (the amount of heat that is released as it is burned) and so it cannot be sold with the other coal from the mine"; ZME: Mine Coal to Gas Plants, "Gob Pile," <http://mobilecrushers.in/quarryproject/mine-coal-to-gas-plan>.
- 18 Simon Brooks, unpublished manuscript of 2012, "The History and Heritage of Wood Memorial Hall, Neville Hall and Collections of the North of England
- Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers."
- 19 Song music and lyrics by Allen Toussaint (1965–66), sung by Lee Dorsey (2010): "Lee Dorsey – Working in the Coal Mine [Promo Video – British]," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjuJpdJ8mrl>. Lyrics sourced from "Lyrics Freak," [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/devo/working+in+a+coal+mine\\_20039682.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/devo/working+in+a+coal+mine_20039682.html) (accessed December 24, 2014).
- 20 Seam Five is inspired by Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008); Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 2–13; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011)

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