

## The Art of Object-Oriented Ritual: an interview with Sarah Cave

*The Merits of Tracer Fire* is a beautiful paperback book produced by Abridged and designed by Luke Thompson of Guillemot Press. (The contents are also available online: see [www.abridged.zone](http://www.abridged.zone)) It contains Polaroids by Dragana Jurisic, poetry by Sarah Cave, and an essay by Susanna Galbraith, which serves as an introduction and framing device for the book, considering the blurring of social and private space and the traces of our lives we leave behind. She writes well about the online world we inhabit, of how the translation of the real into the digital undermines the self, and the social context for all this. I thought I'd ask author Sarah Cave for her take on this project.

Rupert Loydell: Susanna Galbraith seems to find the Polaroids here, which seem to be taken from the internet, much more exciting, shocking, and revealing than I do, as I am struck by their ordinariness. Galbraith discusses them as private moments made public, but isn't one of the things we have discovered about social media and the way we live online is that many people live their lives in public now – these are constructed scenes, surely, be they hugging the cat, filming at the zoo, making love, talking to the camera, or presented as part of the news?

Sarah Cave: I think it's quite complex. Our public lives inhabit a different sphere now, one that is weirdly accessible to all. I think though art and poetry for centuries have show us that human beings enjoy performing themselves, inhabiting framed tableaux, scenes of both public and private import. The troubling thing about this online space is the presence of capitalism, intelligence gathering and national governments, and the relationship between this unholy trinity. In terms of human behaviour though, public and private are often interchangeable with the private, the domestic often being the most staged. For example, in the Polaroid poem 'Instagram & The Art of Objected Oriented Ritual', the poem references a Dutch style of ornate still life called *pronkstilleven*. *Pronkstilleven* affects a chaotic scene of decadence, which serves to exhibit wealth, a wealth that can afford waste. The public and private scenes we share on Instagram are just a little more ephemeral, but in many ways, they are similarly about exhibiting wealth, taste, possessions, and cultural capital. In the same poem, the rituals are distinctly domestic, moving possessions into shapes that can be 'liked' but ultimately frustrate. Rain, rain, against the #cottagecore, is my war cry.

The interesting thing about Dragana's Polaroid approach is that it is a technical medium that encourages ephemera, the quickness of the medium also adds an element of surprise to the encounter, creating the illusion of candidness. Susanna even writes about this quickness in her essay, and I think what's interesting about the Polaroids are the imperfections that cannot be changed because they are immediately committed to their medium. However, the Polaroid can still be used to stage scenes, the very gesture of the camera toward the 'scene' is artifice, and although not usually as lavish as the calculated arrangements of *pronkstilleven*, this still adds a layer of artifice, one that encourages us to think of it as truth, as something surprising, which really sets the scene for post-truth. Instagram capitalises on this Polaroid aesthetic, using the same double-edged artifice, and even absorbing the Polaroid aesthetic into the

platform's design.

In some ways this process is not that much different from how we construct post-confessional poetry.

RL: Your poems seem in many ways much more private, or perhaps gnomic. I don't want to conflate the poems' narrator with the author, but they inhabit a world which seems much more unusual, one which discusses obsessive religious behaviour, pagan and mythological Cornwall, covid-19 in relation to breadmaking, the nature of time, Derrida's writing, accompanied by a soundtrack of Pussy Riot and John Cage. How do you see them relating to the Polaroids? Did you write from/to them, or was the project put together from separate submissions?

SC: I wrote these poems in isolation, which as a collaborative form I think is very effective. I was given a concise brief by Greg and Susanna at Abridged and then they left me to get on with it. I knew I was writing the poems to sit alongside artwork by Dragana, but I didn't know what shape this would take. I was pleasantly surprised to discover how process driven Dragana's work is. My poems aren't always process poems as such, but they often seem to touch on artistic and poetic process.

It wasn't until the end of writing the sequence that I saw Dragana's Polaroids. The emphasis on following algorithms (what we came to call the 'rabbit hole') was present in both our work. I'm interested in the algorithmic nature of human thought and how the spiritual and the artistic might then emerge. Algorithms seem to mimic human thought, leading them to make often surreal and esoteric linguistic connections. These connections often succeed in decentering the lyrical and de-familiarising language; this for me feels like the point of poetry, or, at least, the point of my poetry. I think it's something that I was playing with in *Perseverance Valley* and something the poet Anna Cathenka does to great effect in her pamphlet *Computer Dreams*.

RL: I guess one problem I have is that if you talk about tracer fire, what we leave behind, you could include almost anything and let the reader make connections? (For instance, in the light of some of your poems there is an image of a painted hand which I read as a stigmata.)

SC: This is exactly what I want the reader to do. Reading is a kind of pareidolia that keeps re-configuring itself. I like to think of the reader as an augur of signs, reading and re-reading the leaves, bones, entrails, clauses of the poem. I especially love it when people read something new into the poems, tracing their own lines through the language.

RL: I'm especially intrigued by your first poem, 'Even the Ghosts', which takes place 'when the internet is down', perhaps in that zone of 'the real' which Galbraith discusses? (Other poems are also earthed in collecting driftwood or traversing a Cornish marsh.) How do you feel about internet connection and disconnection? How do you see artists and writers shaped by the digital and online worlds? Or perhaps simply how do you use it?

SC: I don't think there's a separation between the real and the internet. 'Even the ghosts' is about levels of artifice and how we find ways of creating miniaturised worlds whether we're online or not.

Personally, I use the internet as a social space connecting me with friends and family who live far away, so when I disconnect, I am disconnecting from those people. However, it's also a space that I inhabit as a poet. I like to play with the medium of Instagram and how we might perceive what a poem is through it... I also like to post cute pictures of my dog.

We shape our own online worlds, which is easier for artists and writers because they are skilled at manipulating the illusions of reality and artifice.

RL: Your short biographical note in *Tracer Fire* mentions a book you are writing about 'the poetics of prayer', and one of the poems is titled 'A Prayer for Summoning Masha', which almost turns prayer into a spell or incantation. What does the notion of sacred language, liturgy, or private or public conversation with a deity, have to do with poetry?

SC: So, in some respects a lot of these poems are anti-prayers, or at least prayers that don't take on the shape of orthodox ritual or liturgy. I think language in poetry has the potential to be directed toward the sacred, acting as an incantation, a key or violent breaking open, which I suppose brings us back to the process of reading the trace lines or fractures of the poem. Prayers, spells, and incantations all come from the same place; a place that So Mayer describes as the moment before the word, 'the broken open', the breaking open.

You mentioned Pussy Riot earlier and 'A Prayer for Summoning Masha' is a response to Maria Alyokhina's prison memoir *Riot Days* as well as riffing on ideas of misalignment, object-oriented ontology, and ritual. Alyokhina's memoir is a passion play of Christian martyrdom, or what I like to think of as divine heresy. Heresy is a kind of breaking open. Pussy Riot's performance of 'Punk Prayer' transgressed traditional Russian Orthodox values, offering a very different kind of prayer, one that asked the Virgin Mary to intercede on behalf of feminism. Conrad Noel wrote in *Jesus the Heretic*, we mustn't 'mind being called heretics for what we believe to be true.'

RL: Thank you for this conversation, and for sending the book to me in the first place. It's much appreciated!

SC: Always a pleasure!

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