

Para'text for Rice Cooker
by Hamish Hardie



“You know, I could write a book. And this book would be thick
enough to stun an ox.”

Laurie Anderson

“How can you photograph words?”

Samuel Beckett

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¹ ““Para” as a prefix in English (sometimes “par”) indicates alongside, near or beside, beyond, incorrectly, resembling or similar to, subsidiary to, isomeric or polymeric to. In borrowed Greek compounds “para” indicates beside, to the side of, alongside, beyond, wrongfully, harmfully, unfavorably, and among. The words in “para” form one branch of the tangled labyrinth of words using some form of the Indo-European root per, which is the “base of prepositions and pre-verbs with the basic meaning of ‘forward,’ ‘through,’ and a wide range of extended senses such as ‘in front of,’ ‘before,’ ‘early,’ ‘first,’ ‘chief,’ ‘toward,’ ‘against,’ ‘near,’ ‘at,’ ‘around.’”” J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 3, no. 3 (1977): 441.

In 1919, Suzanne Duchamp got married. Her brother Marcel could not attend, but sent his regards along with a wedding present. His gift was an instructional artwork: Suzanne was to hang a geometry textbook from a clothing line on her balcony, pinned at two corners, and thereby expose its pages of abstract problems to the weather. Some gift, a chore to do! The title was “Unhappy Readymade.” The work reiterated the tendency of books to physically degrade. Sunlight fades the covers, which steadily fall out of alignment, and spines crack under pressure. In cases of mildew, the fore-edge warps to resemble a cross section of geological strata. Bigger books in particular are prone to condition issues, always collapsing under their own weight, as if the accumulated knowledge they contain is too much to bear. Falling apart, they become sculptures whose meaning is labour: hours of production in the stacks, scars of the devouring rationalism that would compel one to assemble an *Encyclopédie*, bricklike detritus of the will to write or record the world. Suzanne photographed the geometry textbook, producing an image she would later use as the basis of an oil painting. Decades later, Óscar Amalfitano, an invention of the poet and novelist Roberto Bolaño, living in a fictionalized Sonora, Mexico, recreated the work in his backyard. *My citation of a citation is an example of a kind of chain which it will be part of my intention here to interrogate.*²

I cite an originary transformation of a readymade object, a play of intention and chance, paper with time, and a subsequent series of citations and transformation across mediums in order to bring up the puzzle of presence and absence in contemporary art practice. Works of duration or otherwise

² Miller, 439.

circumscribed temporality have an obscure and uneasy relationship with their constituent afterlives in documentation. The intervention or happening that takes ephemerality as one of its conditions of meaning relies on images and discourse in order to exist for those who could not be present at the moment of its realization. Cults of presence in conceptual and performance art, which took up impermanence and immediacy as tools to defy received art-historical genre and commodifying circuits of art production and consumption, would demean documentation as something subsidiary, inferior to the work, a fading echo or parasitic life form, a technological hunger eating integrated gesture and excreting that which might be parcelled and sold. But the book, document, rumour or trace are the sole source of the impermanent work's (unhappy?) subsistence in history. At the table of meaning, it isn't clear which party would be the generous host and which the greedy guest, the one who eats their fill and leaves without paying.

Rice Cooker began with talking, writing and building between Christian Vistan and Kiyoshi Whitley, erupted in three performances in winter of 2023, reappears now in the voluminous, spurious life form of a book. I like the term "sputterance," one of the artists' neologisms, for thinking about the project's iterations. A sputter is involuntary, and the word draws attention to the machinic in human beings. Alongside malfunctioning mufflers, petroleum deposits, anuses and espresso machines, people sputter in response to difficult inputs, overloads of material or the strain of work. *Rice Cooker* was an utterance that performed, to my hearing, certain confusions of persons and things, time and space endemic to artmaking and other kinds of labour. The appearance of a photographic

book constitutes less a documentation than another utterance, a repetition with a difference, a new statement with its own challenges and sputtered surprises. This text will not aspire to an accounting, only provisional reflection and a meander in culture. Like most paratexts, it relates to the work as barnacle to boat, a parasitic pattern recording the vessel's movement in the world.

*Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage on which to play its part. In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed deck...*³

Rice Cooker took place in a repurposed commercial shipping container.⁴ An intimate audience sat on an oblong bench spanning its length to watch the artists cook and clean, sketch with vapour, drive in place, pace back and forth, holler poems and otherwise exert themselves. These gestures had in common an apparent lack of concrete result or reconciliation. Given that it staged labour, the architecture of the metal box referred to the infrastructure of supply chains, but more properly to the global system of commodity exchange and its subjective

counterpart in workers' experience. The term reification describes both a total system of production that obscures the human relations embedded in each product, and the individual's experience of alienation not only from the products of their labour but from their own labour-power, which becomes a dividualized quantum of capacity that they are compelled to

³ Herman Melville, "Billy Budd, Sailor" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, ed. Robert Milder (Oxford UP, 1998), 312.

⁴ Boombox, a performance venue in Vancouver BC.

sell as yet another commodity with an arbitrary value. The total victory of commodity society over the organization of human life, the distribution of its energies, would be quite complete if the image of a body in a box functioned only as an illustrative metaphor. But the image refers with varying degrees of literalness to devastatingly concrete experiences of workers from the Global South who physically enter capital's circuit, stowing across borders to sell their labour, whether as pursuers of a better life, victims of trafficking or participants in labour export schemes.

But this again was subtly modified by another and pervasive quality.⁵

Rice Cooker's protest against the regime of the commodity-form, or against the interpretation here initiated, began with decor. Tar-papered walls, hand-built furniture, appliances and instruments arranged by the artists transformed a rectal-industrial inside into humanized space. A succession of material and bodily transmutations, of paper to screen to painting to garment, of spotlight to headlight to shadow to eye, unfixed the usual meanings of things and unhinged the reader. When performers change or invent social space in this way, and an audience suspends the cynicisms of habit towards perceptual openness, even quotidian gestures can take on weight and be beautiful. Pointlessness of action in performance, the suspension of productive or pedagogical logics, might effect a passage in the viewer from a sense of ridiculousness to one of collectivity (and, often, back again). The medium dreams (or presumes) relationships of noncoercion in which labour fulfills

⁵ Melville, 287.

itself, or in which the shudders and stammers of an exhausted body can be recognized not as idiosyncratic excess (embarrassment, failure), but as relatable, even purposive gestures, grounds of mutual identification and care. But do the rarified stages on which performances take place, their embeddedness in wrong life, their paltry insinuation of an oasis that is not one, fortify or sweep away the grounds on which they are justified?

For me, *Rice Cooker* registered this dilemma with the action of a rice cooker. The appliance structured the work's duration. Loaded with rice when the audience sat down, it finished cooking near the end. Nearly forgotten over the course of a darkly immersive performance, its audible electronic jingle jolted the audience out of reverie, their relational dream, and back to a measure of cooktime. Its nourishing function thus coincided with one manifestation of reification in everyday life, the measurement and spatialization of time. Lunch break, dinner break, sleep and alarm. Will the show end soon? I have work in the morning. Some cookware, then, that can feed and objectify us all at once. *The drumbeat dissolves the multitude...*⁶

A transient crosses the threshold of a stranger's house at dinnertime. Initially grateful to be let in from the rain, they cannot shake their unease. As with audience members of performance art who do not know what to expect, or who suffer from irritable bowels, they worry if the food will sit right, if their reactions will offend, and most acutely about what might come to be expected of them. For their part, the host is pleased to have company, edified at the prospect of doing someone a good deed. After all, they have the power, it's their house.

⁶ Melville, 357.

But the host is anxious too. They cannot know if this guest is the one who will bring disease, disaster or death from outside into the home, the mysterious stranger whose infiltration will finally cause the dwelling to collapse. Episodes of conflict and confusion belied the domesticity and warmth of *Rice Cooker's* interior. Scenes of harmonious collaboration and mutual embrace alternated with those of discord, tormented overflows of emotion and watchful, tensile reticences. The audience were uneasy witnesses, brought within a hair's breadth of the tumult but kept separate, mediated, from intimacy. The artists' punning and rhythmic poems, delivered orally, expressed feelings of stuckness, describing deadening cycles of repetition and convulsive spasms of revolt that might or might not interrupt them. ...*spilled soup*...⁷

Performance and other forms of movement-based art have at their disposal the ruse of immediacy. The exertions of a strong body have an extraordinary effect on the excitable audience member, who finds themselves obscurely aggrandized in contemplating it. Some happenings trade on the intrinsic interest of tendons straining, the weight and odour of choreographic presence, to posit an art that can strike us by means other than signification. This is a confidence trick because meaning covers the body, enters by the backdoor and embattles the skin. Too often the story of sensuous relation covers the mechanism of sentimentality, the virtual or vicarious relation to an object, in this case a pained or virtuosic figure, whose writhing occasions the pleasure of the pleasure of the extension of sympathy. For better or worse, this situation of the live audience and its web of obligation is lost in translation from performance to

⁷ Melville, 357.

book. Pages splice embodied continuity into filmic staccato, inkjet fixes the ephemeral, and distribution dissipates fugitive presence. Not constrained to enter the other's house, the reader can, by contrast, relax.

*...and the moon silvered the white spar deck wherever not blotted by the clear-cut shadows horizontally thrown of fixtures and moving men.*⁸

Misrecognizing the stage, a flatbed truck trailer component, for the kind of container carried on cargo ships, I associated *Rice Cooker* with the ocean and circumnavigation. I thought of the scene in *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) in which an exhausted János meets the monstrous sublime in the stomach of a taxidermied whale. Or the final scene of *Việt and Nam* (2023), in which Nam and Việt embrace on a bed of coal, dying of thirst inside a shipping container adrift on the Pacific. If the container figures the enriching and impoverishing effects of international imports and exports (simultaneous but distributed according to extreme structural inequalities of production and consumption between the Global North and South), the shipping container as *medium of expression* would carry a related set of meanings. The container emerges as emblem or atom of a digestive system that nourishes some and deprives others, masticates matter and excretes value, and entangles its apparent beneficiaries in a relationship of parasitism. The book, waterlogged, repeats the cuboid form and carries its connotations further. The book's buyer might possess information and image as so much petrified activity bound for consumption or, crucially, find their stomach unsettled by its hidden aliveness,

⁸ Melville, 347.

some riotous consciousness within the inert. Representations of an event or social wrong grow unruly in defiance of their relegation to the past tense.

The easy flow of capital across borders clarifies the tragic irony of migration compelled by immiseration yet sanctioned by law. If the image of workers inside a container, their confusion with cargo, exemplifies a potent sentimentalism peculiar to the age of economic globalization, it refers to and complicates earlier catastrophic aestheticizations of the body in transit. Herman Melville's 1891 novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, whose prose I have invited into this text at intervals, condensed anxieties about imperialism and impersonal domination in the luminous body of a boy.⁹ In that story, the British Navy impresses the effervescently handsome Billy Budd into service,

⁹ The connection was initially suggested by a lineage of reference. *Rice Cooker* contains a musical allusion to *Beau Travail*, Claire Denis' recasting of the plot of *Billy Budd* in the bodies of French Foreign Legion soldiers stationed in Djibouti. Further synchronicities between *Rice Cooker* and the late 19th century homoerotic text were suggested by Eve Sedgwick's argument that Melville posited an analogy between the space of the ship and that of the (Shakespearean) dramatic stage (*Epistemology*, 110). In both locations, culture and custom operate under severe spatial limitations, necessitating the constant redrawing and renegotiation of physical boundaries between public and private spheres. The actor's apostrophe explodes the constructed privacy of the dramatic scene by addressing the public and, with as slight a gesture as a turn of the head, reconstructs it. Aboard the naval ship, the captain's quarters may change to a court of law, or the spar-deck from quotidian workplace to the site of a public execution, on a dime, according to the exigencies of military discipline.

making him a cog in an imperial machine that will ultimately grind him up. Billy's childlike physical and personal beauty excite both fatherly affection and jealous rage, triggering a wicked scheme which will implicate not only the question of the boy's innocence but the system of patriotic submission to law and the sovereign. Billy's speech impediment undoes his perfection. At the pivotal moment when his expression is called for, he can only stammer. Finding himself tongue-tied, unable to navigate or withstand the system in which he is stuck, he sputters and erupts into violence.

*In contrast with the funereal hue of those surroundings, the prone sailor's exterior apparel, white jumper and white duck trousers, each more or less soiled, dimly glimmered in the obscure light of the bay like a patch of discolored snow in early April lingering at the some upland cave's black mouth.*¹⁰

Lacking the right words, I found an image. In 1984, bill bissett made an assemblage titled *a monkee book from sharon*. In it, a splintering, warped and utterly rusted metal container of indeterminate origin frames a diorama of equally weathered detritus and toys. As in Joseph Cornell's boxes, the primary affect is pathos. A partially melted drinking glass holding a half-burnt wick sits on top of the junked apparatus, only the most poetic indicator of the afterlife of commodification. The viewer is late to the thing, having missed even the event of its use-value. Frayed lengths of string criss-cross the container, so much rigging hooked on flaking niches of scoured metal, binding a water-worn slab of beachrock to its roof. Inside the box stands a plastic figurine, a little boy wearing blue bell bottoms. He is

¹⁰ Melville, 349.

the brightest and cleanest thing in this impossibly dank dwelling. His smallness makes it a cavern. Even the photographer's light does not penetrate the furthest reaches of the structure's interior, scrap heaps and sharp edges couched in shadow. The boy's arm extends to caress an object in front of him. Standing as high as his waist, bound in red paper boards, he has for his pains an enormous open book.

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BILL BISSETT

MONKEE BOOK FROM SHARON 1984 32 x 28 x 15 cm

