

ROSEMARY JOHNSON'S CLOUD WORKS (1975-1976) THE OPPOSITE OF NEGLECT

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Ancillary photograph included in the Rosemary Johnson archive, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu.

When art is temporary, it makes some form of documentation apparently necessary; to those who value documents. The museum object might be preserved, but the ephemeral work, of which the non-permanent public art work is a subset, is subject to deletion in the wider consciousness. And given that being transitory could be seen as a characteristic of “minor” (in the Deleuzian sense) practices, there is a case for a different sort of art history that serves these practices that take flight from dominant positions to develop new ways of living, thinking, being, affectivity. When I learned of a German commune where they kept a communal diary, I thought that art history might, rather than aim to generate knowledge, be skewed to become a project of increasing intimacy.

In the mid-1970s, Christchurch artist Rosemary Johnson made a body of cloud sculptures, their large fibreglass forms first appearing in 1975 in an architectural commission for the newly developed Christchurch International Airport. The clouds reappeared in a light aluminium frame in a temporary habitation-type work Johnston made for Cathedral Square crowds as part of the 1975 Christchurch Arts Festival that also gave a brass band and the magical release of birds to passers-by. There was also a work at the Women's Gallery in Wellington offering cloud sculptures, and a performance at the CSA in Christchurch that made the brutalist gallery space over as a container for mist, both in 1977.

At the airport, Johnson took an out-of-the-way internal stairwell courtyard space and inhabited it with a garden with alluvial shingle floor and rounded, silvery water-features over which plump clouds were floating. Not an odd thing to do topographically as the airport is on the site of an old river-bed, but odd in that one does not normally encounter gravel or softness in an internal floor. The region's luxurious artesian

water supply involves the mountains making the clouds break, and the rain that falls is then filtered down through miles and miles of shingle, leaving all impurities behind and keeping in the snow coldness that made it condense in the first place.

After geography classes about ribboning, braided river forms, Johnson's installation seems like a small version of such a closed system. Perhaps the work could be seen, more generally, as having a tropic relationship to a closed-circuit quality that characterises Christchurch even, to an extent, today. The opening of the Christchurch International Airport in 1975 was an important event, implying, to residents, some sort of arrival, a coming of age, a step in the desired transition from insular rural service centre to small, sprawling city of suburbs. This happened along with the adoption of colour televisions, 'contemporary' furniture and the attendant domestic party scene, and odd pockets of architectural whimsy. Having grown up in Christchurch's north-west myself, I am all-too aware of the looming presence of the airport as some sort of Magician's Nephew-type beginning and end of the world portal into which one can plunge, then emerge in another world elsewhere, checking to see if all of one's parts have achieved transmission.

The airport sat spectrally, pool-like, at the edge of town, its gravitational pull drawing in not just people flying, welcoming or bon voyaging, but people who went there solely to watch from observation decks (things that no longer exist). When we would go out that way to pick raspberries, or to collect water-weed and snails for our porthole Perspex fish tank, the road at the back of the airport would be lined with cars containing people, often alone, sometimes amorously paired, sometimes smoking, sitting there watching the planes take off with the prevailing north-west wind over the tops of their



Rosemary Johnson, *untitled airport sculpture and fountain*, detail, stainless steel mountains, Christchurch International Airport, 1975.



Rosemary Johnson, *untitled airport sculpture and fountain*, detail, fibreglass clouds, Christchurch International Airport, 1975.

cars. Younger people sometimes lay on the roofs or bonnets of their cars and thrilled as the very low planes roared above them, just clearing the fence at the end of the runway.

Other things would bring people to the airport and its network of facilities. For example, the US Operation Deepfreeze base based there has been credited with introducing the idea of recreational drugs to Christchurch, it being a method by which hallucinogenics and marijuana (both the drugs and the concept of drug-taking) were imported and shared. Children stared awe-stuck at the huge Starlifter carrier planes whose noses tilted up to form the loading tunnel for these spirit-of-Howard Hughes monsters. The recreation centre nearby was also the first place in which we could play Space Invaders or Galaga, while random adults played squash.

The whole airport really became a place where one could, as a child, go, on one's BMX or ten-speed if you were tall enough, to while away nothing weekends roaming, having your sort of adventures while travelling grown-ups had theirs. The only other alternative really, in my mind, was De Larno's magic shop in Chancery Lane, off Cathedral Square by the picture theatres and bus stops. This sort of roaming freedom is unthinkable today, as children seem to be supervised at most times, and if not, parents are frowned upon if the children venture up the street away from any protective surveillance. Joke shops don't even exist any more in New Zealand, probably because they promote the sort of freedom, abandon, "delinquency", the pure, destroying happiness encapsulated in gag props. Two dollar stores are the new joke shops, a truly lamentable fall from the paper bag to the plastic.

De Larno died a couple of years ago, his passing unnoted in the main, his enormous library of magic manuals and catalogues sold, heart-rendingly, at clearance auction, and now sit, over-priced in a pile at the back of an antique shop in the city. It is the same sadness, the mourning of felled trees that Colette wrote of, that adults encounter when the open places they played in as children, collecting tadpoles, playing in mangroves, are now housing developments. Johnson's sculpture was de-commissioned in the early 90s when the airport was redeveloped and extended. The courtyard no longer exists in the material realm; but its ghost, and me and my brother's laughter haunts the duty-free and baggage claim areas.

The terminal itself, then, was a rabbit-warren of conservative-contemporary concrete spaces, good for running in; the arrivals-departure areas decorated in a strange futuristic baronial style – huge circular geometric carpet patterns in purples and reds that looked like mutated axminster, and large pendulous hanging perspex and steel light fittings both

contributed to a Tudor-moderne aesthetic. This Tudoriness relates to the more proper mock-Tudor style that reared its head at various times last century in the UK, the US and in the antipodes. Its real flash-in-the-pan came in this country in the 1970s, where it was mainly an architecture-without-architects style perpetrated by home-builders wanting to jazz up the plain box vernacular. So prevalent was this fashion that New Zealand is cited as a real proponent of the 'style'.

The implication of this airport style, particularly because of its futuristic aspects – Perspex globes, high-key chemical colours and parabolic architectural flourishes – was surely "anywhere but here, any time but now". Mock Tudor, generally, does seem to have a natural affinity with Sci Fi – also huge in this period – in that they both have the texture of flight from the present. This can be looked at in light of the fantasy-escapism of the ageing and progressively mainstream hippy movement, but also the French theory of the period, such as Deleuze and Kristeva: architecture as machine for self-transformation; the future-past as the destination of the depressed subject, run-down by the increasing pressures of the capitalist work environment, looking not just for respite, but a place to evolve.

I have started to think of this kind of architecture as Magic Brutalism, where there is a deviation from brutalist aesthetics proper and a charge head-long into a fantasy castle style. There are several similar sites of this sort of architectural yearning that remain extant in the flesh in this reclaimed swamp of a city. The Chateau, an over-the-top Riccarton hotel complex overlooking Hagley Park, and the Warren and Mahoney-designed Christchurch Town Hall are key, concentrated examples. The Town Hall, devoted to its 60s Scandinavian model, but unable to resist the lure of baronial fittings, is still today the site of whacked-out domestic institutions that are Cantamaths and the Christchurch Primary Schools Music Festival. I thought that these things, involving thousands-strong shoals of children as musical performers and cerebral competitors, happened everywhere – apparently not.

It is quite amazing how many ex-Christchurch art people were involved in Cantamaths. Or perhaps it is not so surprising. This event was geared around a schools team-relay quiz competition (of the mathlete kind, although we were not aware of this American term), but it also involved static displays where favourite aspects of mathematics, technology, science fiction – but falling short of fantasy – were acted out in expo-model type displays that involved the making of props, signage, posters, and scale-models. One year I was forced into the production of 1:1 polystyrene model of a computer processor; at this time, these things filled rooms, and so did our display. But in reality this event

was the delirious, teeming, unsupervised habitation and exploration of this architectural folly. It was never more clear that architecture is best used as if one were asleep, or with the spirit of play and being-present that only a child knows. This is the difference between real estate and architecture.

There is also the domestic architecture of now little-known architect John Waters who practised in Auckland in the 70s and 80s. There are pools of his work about still, most visibly apartment villages in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Their primary material is the white concrete block, and he combined it with mock-Tudor features such as the Juliet window, half-timbering and stained glass, and added upthrusting towers and a staged irregularity of silhouette, breaking the rectilinearity of the orthodox housing structure, with features such as the port-hole window. There are also stand-alone residences, notably along the main road to and from the Christchurch airport, and in Beach Haven, overlooking the Whenuapai Aerodrome on Auckland's North Shore.

In conceptual operation these buildings, in spirit, clearly hail back to a time when magic was still possible, and forward to a time when intelligence will liberate us from drudgery and unkindness. As a nine year-old boy, the architect is reputed to have built a three-storey tower in his backyard, the tallest structure in his suburban neighbourhood. Its erection was supported by his proud parents, but the local council ordered its removal on the basis of public safety. Still today the proud complexes – for example, on Brougham St in Christchurch, east of the Mt Victoria tunnel and above the motorway in Thorndon in Wellington, on New North Road past the Mt Albert shops in Auckland, and in Silverdale north of Auckland – stand for something untrammelled by common sense, and the other forces of mediocrity of Harsh Seventies Reality.¹

Johnson's airport clouds do share the spirit of magic brutalist architecture in that, like these 70's follies, they momentarily opened up spaces in which people could escape into something in a different time register. She was interested in modifying the architectural space, but she did so in a much more expanded sense of décor, the mists she introduced italicising the horizontal plane, which is itself, as Chris Hill has put it, "a romantic one in many ways, like a fog hanging over a loch. This opening up of material is similar to words or pictures on a page..."² The cloud's forms hang as inviting figures of un-monumentality, lightness, obfuscation, displacement, envelopment, non-knowledge and gaseousness; the opposite of concrete yet implying materialisation out of thin air. What was achieved in the airport was something formative, some kind of kind of time-trap, something that people of a certain age recall hesitatingly to make sure they didn't invent it.

As a small child, I discovered this work on my own, and didn't think of it as art, but rather as something magical that had been put there for gifted explorers like me. The ground was Japanese pebbles, which made sound as I crept around secretively, and above were floating large, light cloud forms (which to an appraising adult eye would be identifiably suspended fibreglass). When people would arrive at and leave from the airport, others would climb the stairs to the observation deck and watch the plane actually go. If you weren't really paying attention you may very well have brushed past this courtyard space beside the interior open-air stairwell leading up to the deck. If anyone spent as much time exploring as a child might, they would also have noticed that from this courtyard one could see down through a window into a large dining room that had been set up elegantly for pilot silver-service dining (such was the reverence for air travel).

This wasn't a typical site for public art – this was usually at the front of something, in the open, with the appropriate measure



Rosemary Johnson, documentation of *Cloud Box* and public, Cathedral Square, Christchurch, 1975.



Rosemary Johnson, documentation of *Cloud Box* and public, Cathedral Square, Christchurch, 1975.

of authority and permanence. The stairwell itself was so difficult to find, almost to the point where there was the sense that next time you came it might not exist – the work does have the fantastic logic of the utterly pre-adolescent, the day-tripper. Beneath the clouds were also two tall, stainless steel bumps, which might have been stylized mountains, and native plants growing. The space smelled like temperate plants, and they gave the space that characteristic coolness that lowers the Relative Humidity to dew point so that damp starts to emerge out of the air. Clouds are a state of water in which the molecules are in vaporous disorder, or energetic repose; not yet condensed, not yet raining, they are a powerful figure of the potential to release something that engulfs; of rain, of immanence.

It was perhaps no mistake in the mysterious development of our language that the word cloud semantically resembles crowd. Elias Canetti wrote in his seminal text *Crowds and Power* (1960) that rain is a symbol of crowds, along with fire, rivers, forests, sand, corn, the heap, treasure, wind, piles of stones, the sea, specifically figuring what he calls the discharge crowd: "The most important occurrence within the crowd is the *discharge*. Before this the crowd does not actually exist; it is the discharge which creates it. This is the moment when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal."³ If rain is a symbol of this sort of coming-together and blowing apart, then the cloud starts to appear as a sign of potential, of contained levelling energy; something to be appealed to reverently, as a powerful, sometimes unyielding force.

A little like a cruel god: "All over the world, particularly where it is rare, rain, before it falls, is felt to be a unit. As a cloud it approaches and covers the sky; the air grows dark before it rains and everything is shrouded in grey-ness. During this moment when it is imminent, rain is more strongly felt as a unit than while it is actually falling, for it is often ardently longed for, and may indeed be literally vital. Even when it is prayed for, however, it does not always appear; magic is called in aid and there are numerous and varied methods for luring it. (...) In so far as rain has become a crowd symbol, it does not stand as fire does, for the phase of raging and irresistible increase. Nor is it ever as constant as the sea, and only rarely as inexhaustible. Rain is the crowd at the moment of discharge, and stands also for its disintegration. The clouds whence it comes dissolve into rain; the drops fall because they can keep together no longer, and it is not clear whether, or when, they can coalesce again."⁴

Johnson said, of a slightly later commission for the Christchurch Teachers' College, that she saw the function of the work as humanising the brutalist architecture. I see her work at the airport as undertaking a similarly softening, operation – providing a convivial, illogical, fantastic, time-out-of-time, even humorous, environment. Something, along with overtly making spaces, that is far more common, more valued in New Zealand art now than then. At the heart of her project there was, I believe, a radical commitment to a social art; the vocabulary for the articulation of this sort of priority has only really come of age in this part of the world in recent years since digestion of the dispersed groundswell of practices that could, would be termed relational, social, communal.

Johnson's cloud works had other lives, as already mentioned in passing, than in the airport. The most ostensibly social of these works was, most likely, the work (my "Cloud box", Johnson called it) she made for Cathedral Square in Christchurch for the Arts Festival in 1975. The unpublished documentation of this work (its clouds more confectionary, more cartoon-ish, with faceted planes, and less plump than those at the airport) is remarkably full, several proofsheets of gorgeously coloured Kodachrome stock, with its soft tangerines and aquas. The festival was not centred in The Square, so the situation of this work was an insertion into a bald, open, paved, public space ringed by traffic that was at this point a place that odd people gathered in, punks, glue-sniffers, pigeon-feeders, evangelists, The Wizard, derelicts, bunking teenagers, people waiting for others – The Square was the then hub of the public transport system, and was flanked by four movie theatres and two early opening pubs.

The cloud box structure was photographed over a period of two weeks, documenting the human use of this strange new arrival. The weather was inclement for the duration of its installation, but the show went on with a programme of activities on a small raised area between the nearby trees ("singing, dancing, puppets etc."). The New Zealand Army Band was booked in to play as pigeons were released. Because there was rain for much of the festival, Johnson decided on the last days "it seemed appropriate to have flowers grow under the clouds."⁵ Those photographed with the work are mostly those merely hanging about – band members, children of participants, those with time on their hands. Two boys with crossed toy rifles were photographed in the box from a low angle, as was a youngish Maori man in a leather jacket and no shirt, arms raised beatifically, looking very excuse-me-while-I-kiss-the-sky high.

Johnson's work at this time had an air of masses and crowds and the formation of communities via temporary projects, or architectural aesthetic modification. Photographs of the cloud work she did at the Women's Space in Wellington imply an entirely female crowd; and documentation of the cloud performance at the Canterbury Society of Arts also evince a crowd drawn into what looks like a magical rite involving not

cloud sculptures but their actual matter, mist, lit internally. It seems like she was attempting to do something fundamental to the best remaining example of large-scale brutalist art gallery architecture this country has. She is recalled in a posthumous article up a ladder, heavily pregnant, installing work, as always lending energy, catalytically, tirelessly to the community she was involved in.

Rosemary Johnson died in 1981 aged 40. Perhaps suffering that fate of being more of an artists' artist and 70s woman than a market success, in her absence, her work slipped into obscurity. The airport work was de-commissioned following airport renovations in the late 80s, there being no longer the space or time for such follies. The work narrowly missed being thrown out, but was rescued by the Christchurch Art Gallery and accessioned into their collection. It languishes in need of repairs in their Bromley store and is unlikely to be restored because its redeployment is unlikely and the conservation time-expense considerable. It is doubtful that it will be restored and re-deployed – could it work apart from an internal airport courtyard space? I had thought that the lovely old, little-known water lily pond interior courtyard of the Canterbury Museum could be a possible place to attempt a re-installation of the work, but I am told that this too has succumbed to a building project that will see the courtyard filled-in by a tall building.

Johnson's work did seem to have a symbiotic relationship with the airport site, so it would require some careful thought to find a new space so that people could chance across it rather than be inflicted with it. But perhaps away from the airport the stratospheric aspect of the work might be lost. But this isn't, I don't think, essential to the operation of the work. A reference to air travel is a bit superficial – I think it is more interesting to think of cloud as trope for something multitudinous, something tactical. I thought too that a possible site for the work could be the internal courtyard space of the Ilam art school. She did study at Ilam after all and redeployment of the work to this other fine example of brutalist institutional architecture could be very timely, given that the school is in the throes of a neo-liberalist restructuring and biopolitical slicing of fat and flesh, time and living space.

In any case, Johnson's cloud works were important experiments, an as-yet unwritten early episode in the history of social sculpture in New Zealand. Even if things stay as they are, and Johnson's cloud works never appear again in public space, they stand as an important experiment, an early, under-recognised episode in our national art history. Even just documented in photographs, their passing clouds could be seen as representing thought bubbles, mental explorations of the potentials of public space to be gleefully altered, to provide time-traps for free play and the daily, kindly reinvention of the self. Recollecting works that simply no longer exist in habitable physical space makes the act of dwelling in them very different. The tension is not that of the past pulling against the present in experience of a physical space as one stands in it later on, but rather a much more temporally present inhabitation of a space that is retained internally and reconstructed each time it is recalled.

There is a very full, well-organised (she did it herself) Johnson archive in the Christchurch Art Gallery. The Archivist said that no one had been through it since it was lodged with them in the very early 80s, when Johnson herself was in the terminal stages of cancer. With her non-celebrity passing, she slipped off the radar, and as a result, there is virtually no art historical trace of these works: there is a passing reference to Johnson in Priscilla Pitts' *History of New Zealand Sculpture*, a biographical entry in Ann Kirker's *Women's Art in New Zealand*, and an article about Johnson in an issue of the feminist magazine *Spiral* contemporaneously with the cloud works, but her work does not feature as part of the



Rosemary Johnson, *untitled cloud installation*,
Christchurch Society of the Arts, c.1975.



Rosemary Johnson, *untitled cloud installation*,
Christchurch Society of the Arts, c.1975.

mainstream history of art here, most likely because there is, as yet, no history of social sculpture in this country.

New Zealand's art history is far from programmatic, domestic sculpture being particularly badly accounted for, such a problem arising perhaps out of the almost non-existent late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pakeha scene for it in newly colonised New Zealand. Documentation of post-object work, installation and social sculpture, for which there were active communities in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, is, with the notable exception of Wylan Curnow's and Christina Barton's scholarship, particularly dire; so bad in relation to Christchurch, it is almost as if virtually nothing happened. Art history is constructed in a notoriously patchy way, with the unfortunate veneer of thoroughness, reflecting the interests, milieus, enthusiasms, of those constructing it, of course, but there are market forces at play that sway interest. Work that creates spaces or situations that are sets for human inhabitation and inter-personal relatedness or group activity runs up against a particular problem in art history – in that art history favours the discrete – and, as a result of being, to different degrees, ephemeral, often goes by the wayside.

This sort of art historical blind-spot manifests in an abiding interest in easy figurative hooks, and in straightforward, self-announcing, language-based conceptual premises. There is a tendency, in art historical writing, to truncate discussions into summaries designed to be useful and easily and quickly digestible, but the consequences of such brevity is that the means of a work is shut down with the goal of emphasizing, even manufacturing an end. This narrowness

of focus is one thing, but, on top of that, within that focus itself is a misunderstanding of the complexity of the image's somewhat tautological nature and its status as event. This is the challenge of the person about to experience acid, and also for the person habituated to always analyse what is going on to suspend thought and submit to immersion in an engulfing super-differentiated present. A more charitable reading of this would be, as Allan Smith pointed out, that an uncertain silence could be taken as some form of respect; a hesitation in the historical project.⁶

E.L. Doctorow in *The Book of Daniel* spoke of the complexity of the image in a way that may as well hint at cloud forms; things that break and float gaseously but with prismatic capabilities, that seem to transcend but then fall again to earth; things that are at odds with simple textual reductions (art history is so unbearably truncated in the main): "I worry about images. Images are what things mean. Take the word image. It connotes soft, sheer flesh shimmering on the air, like the rainbowed slick of a bubble. Image connotes images, the multiplicity of being an image. Images break with a small ping, their destruction is as wonderful as their being. They are essentially instruments of torture exploding through the individual's calloused capacity to feel powerful undifferentiated emotions full of longing and dissatisfaction and monumentality. They serve no social purpose."⁷

This art history focus-problem has perhaps been best articulated by Agamben in his "Notes on Gesture" in *Means Without End* in which he writes that the project of art history, myopic and psychologising, is to establish the science of the image. Art history's error is not just to focus on images primarily, but to try to singularise and define their operation, to keep them static. Gesturality exists, according to Agamben, for a society to reclaim what it has lost – its gestures, its pure means: "And it is so because a certain kind of *litigatio*, a paralysing power whose spell we need to break, is continuously at work in every image; it is as if a silent invocation calling for the liberatio of the image arose from the entire history of art. (...) What characterises gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but endured and supported. (...) The gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a medium of human beings, and it thus opens the ethical dimension for them."⁸

Having no emphasis on an end product is of course like market kryptonite, but it was more likely the change of fashion in the 80s that precipitated Johnson's clouds' non-appearance in art history. Johnson's involvement in the women's art movement, with radical feminism, would have pegged her for *passé* unless she had reinvented herself for the new environment. This is a huge leap for anyone to make, perhaps impossible when involvement in the concerns of the WAM was so sincere: breaking out of the confines of the self into community for the work of women. Gentle human qualities were not virtues in the self-conscious sophistication-oriented provinces in the 80s – frankly, her feminism was just too first generation than second, the former outmoded savagely by the latter, which was more literary than interested in staging simple expressions of female *jouissance*. Hippy-ness in any shape or form was just so terribly undesirable (traded in for an acutely individuated, powerful, chemical subjectivity) that many babies were thrown out with the bath water in terms of what was radically valuable.

By the time the 80s rolled around, the airport work was perceived by a younger generation of artists coming through as too simple, too based in the local landscape and therefore as too provincial, and too generally cheerful at a time when seriousness was *de rigueur*. There was also a discomfort with a certain camp quality in the clouds that had not yet become acceptable or interesting critically. Eu Jin Chua referred interestingly, in a recent essay about moving image on the



Rosemary Johnson, proof sheet of documentation of Cloud Box and performances, temporary sculpture commissioned for the Christchurch Arts Festival, Christchurch Square, 1975.

internet in Aotearoa, to Eve Sedgwick's idea that "campy" objects aren't simply subversive (which is the way that they are usually interpreted via the tools of negative critique) – they are also the products of an intensity of affect and feeling, even love, directed towards neglected or hostile materials which are therein reconfigured and refurbished."⁹

Chua continued in his discussion to raise Sedgwick's account of reparative practices which, to me, resonates with the humanising ambitions of Johnson's aesthetic modification: "Reparative practices are minor, local acts of art and thought that suggest that effective critique may be possible without a sense of paranoid and antagonistic – or if you like, exterioristic – negativity. Reparative practices are temporary and local rather than totalising or encompassing; they are enfolding and assimilative rather than merely antagonistic; they are responsive rather than reactionary..."¹⁰ Perhaps it is this amicable tone that made Johnson's work so unfashionable in the 80s, yet makes this body of work seem an antecedent to the more affirmative social practices of the late 90s?

For example, bemoaning the relative invisibility of Johnson's clouds might be inconsistent with the possible, even latent politics of the work. Given that Radical Feminism's project was not to storm the cannon as much as establish alternative structures, what attracts me to Johnson's clouds is that they might symbolise cover from behind which freedom from the controlling gaze of power can be enjoyed, clouds being the very figure of obscurity. There is a very good argument advanced in Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* that one of the best methods

of revolution is to remain unseen, unidentified, amorphous, not understood. This anonymity is a method, they write, that is suited to our present hyper-surveilled time, in contrast to the Black Panther-style, form-a-group, publish-a-manifesto, appear-in-public-threateningly model of Johnson's time. Perhaps, in this way, her work was futuristic?

Clouds might propose a sort of radical invisibility that has precedent in feminist discourse, featuring, at times, a fierce resistance to language in the attempt to protect the female self from forms of patriarchal dominance or inscription. This forms part of an over arching pursuit of understanding the care of the self – something not separable from the care of others. Johnson's cloud works may have been intended as lighthearted in some regards, but they can also be seen as quite hard-core: for happiness, against assimilation, examination, even contra-language. In feminisms, the personal may have been/is political, but it also may be private. It is argued by Kristeva, for example, in her exploration of *L'écriture féminine*, that one of the characteristics of patriarchal culture is a will to disclosure, to appear, to register, to draw all into knowledge.

Mary Shelley wrote that there is "nothing I shrink from more fearfully than publicity. (...) Now that I am alone in the world, I have but the desire to wrap night and the obscurity of insignificance around me..." She writes of "a love of that privacy, what no woman can emerge from without regret... But remember, I pray for omission – for it is not that you will be too kind, too eager to do me more than justice – but I only seek to be forgotten."¹¹ Shelley calls it a weakness that she has to be in print. Cloud figures stand mutely, potently as

detonations, dematerializations, figures for non-knowledge: joyous things watched on hills they also assist in understanding of pure happiness and its relationship, or antipathetic non-relationship to language.

If you will forgive recourse to the world of men again – but to the excellently oddly feminine men's theory that shows hope for philosophy – to Agamben, gesture is silent, as it has nothing to say.¹² Perhaps gesture is too busy in the pursuit of pleasures of a kind that mobilises the spirit. Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality III: The Care of the Self*, argues that the pursuit of pleasure has been systematically, politically, discredited, as if it poses a huge threat to the strength of the individual. This strength is quite distinct from the overall care of the self, from the craft that is *techne*, the technology of the self, which is analogous with the radical becoming proposed by which people can save themselves from the oppressive biopolitical conditions we experience. In silence, there is the complicity necessary to become with others, and in solitude, to transform the self, engaged in the event's present which necessarily precedes thought.

Barthes put forward a theory of pleasure that speaks of a drift characteristic to clouds: "The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. Drifting occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, limitations, like a cork in the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world), Drifting occurs whenever social language, the sociolect, *fails me* (as we say: *my courage fails me*). Thus another name for drifting would be: the Intractable – or perhaps even: Stupidity.

However, if one were to manage it, the very utterance of drifting today would be a suicidal discourse."¹³

Bataille, under a sub-heading "suicide" starting his essay "Pure Happiness", puts forward so well the reason to be careful, suspicions, measured, with language, linking nonknowledge with a drifting happiness:

"Pure happiness is in the moment, but pain chased me from the present moment to waiting for a moment to come, when my pain will be relieved. If pain did not separate me from the present moment, pure happiness would be within me. But presently, I'm talking. In me, language is the effect of pain, of the need that yokes me to work.

I want to, I must, talk about my happiness: from this fact an imperceptible misfortune enters me; this language – that I speak – is in search of the future, it struggles against pain – be it miniscule – which is the need within me to talk about happiness. Language never has pure happiness for its subject matter. Language has action for its subject matter, action whose goal is to recover lost happiness, but action cannot obtain this goal by itself. If I were happy, I would no longer act.

Pure happiness is the negation of pain, of all pain, even of the apprehension of pain; it is the negation of language.

This is, in the most senseless sense, poetry. Language, stubborn in refusal, is poetry, turns back on itself (against itself): this is the analogue of suicide.

This suicide does not reach the body: it ruins effective activity, it substitutes vision for it."¹⁴

I am left with an impression of clouds as representing a continual process of sublimation and condensation and falling and evaporation and rising again; a constant cycle of knowing and not knowing, of silence and language, signal and noise, of birth and death that is required to be living, growing – in the sense of dying (change) often enough to be re-living daily. I would love to see these forms again in the flesh, in the company of others, to contemplate in real rather

than recollective space what the cloud has to say or not say; or to enjoy a day cleared to play in sight of the cloud box's imperative to lighten up, to be vulnerable. Perhaps I don't need them. I could just lie on the side of a hill with another and look up, together, high (clouds are the very figure of highness) above what Lingis calls "the rumble of the world." The recalled scrunch of shingle reminds my thinking to degrade the concrete with unattachment, and to do so fearlessly, as my higher self might if I would let it.

Notes

1. Ref. The Dead C, Harsh Seventies Reality (2LP, Siltbreeze, 1992).
2. Chris Hill, as yet untitled, self-governed thesis project, unpublished, 2008, n/p.
3. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1984, p.17.
4. Ibid, p.81–2.
5. Johnson is here quoted from her own hand-written notes about the work in the Christchurch Art Gallery archive.
6. Allan Smith, from correspondence, January 2009.
7. Cited in WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.35.
8. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.54, 57–8.
9. Eu Jin Chua, 'A Minor Cinema: Moving Images on the Internet' in *The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader*, Auckland: Clouds / AUT, 2008, p.141.
10. Ibid.
11. Quoted in Jacques Khalip, "A Disappearance in the World: Wollstonecraft and Melancholy Skepticism", *Criticism* 47.1, 2005, p.85–106.
12. Agamben, op. cit, p.59.
13. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975, p.19.
14. Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, p.224.