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# Autoscenography:
# The intersection of a scenographer's story with her practice

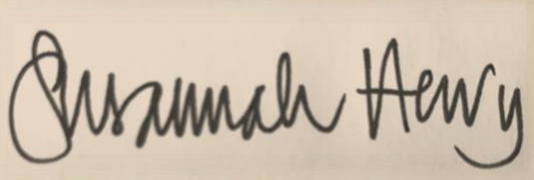
**Susannah Henry**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**

**Guildhall School**
**September 2022**

## Author's Declaration

I, Susannah Henry, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.





# Abstract

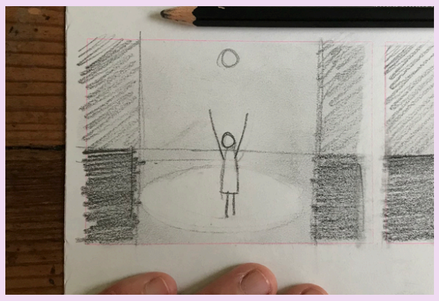
This practice research project introduces the neologism *autoscenography,* to identify the place where the lived experience of the scenographer intersects with their practice. Drawing on theories of feminist building, place orientation, and calls for greater agency in the field of 'expanded' scenography, autoscenography is proposed as a nourishing, fruitful parallel practice to the prevailing ways one might do the work of scenography. The practice is contextualised by a broad spectrum of references, congruent with a feminist approach to research methodology. The thesis details four practical *autoscenographic* projects, foregrounding the originating scenographer's focus on performance space and evidencing different dimensions of the practice. A walking project explores the embodied, felt experience of being a scenographer with landscape. A second project re-stages family photographs, drawing on the family history of the scenographer and making her a part of the picture. Project 3 sees a feminist strategy of 'breaking-up' with theatre design enacted through the writing of a 'Dear John' letter. A final project explores the time-space potential of autoscenography and the role of the personal in research, through the scattering of a bespoke bookmark in borrowed or second-hand books. Autoscenography emerges as a space to consider the subjectivity of the scenographer in relation to their practice, and points to a range of possible directions for this work from self-reflection, through critical appraisal of the scenographer's working environments towards new directions for - or an alternative to - professional practice.



# Susannah Henry: Autoscenography



Autoscenography:
The intersection of a scenographer's story with her practice



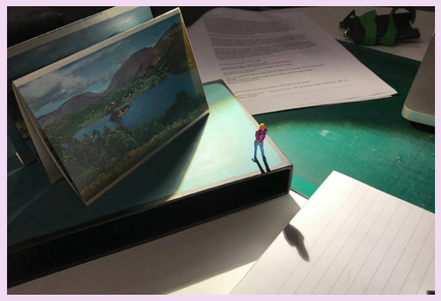
Autoscenography: A Project Storyboard



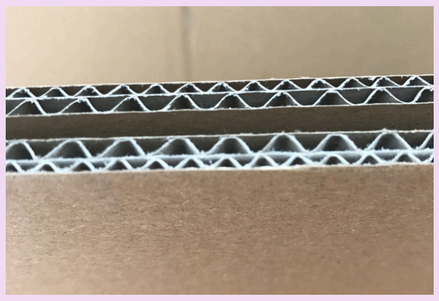
Autoscenography, She Wrote



My Approach



Project 1: A Scenographer Walks



Moving House: Practice Review Part 1



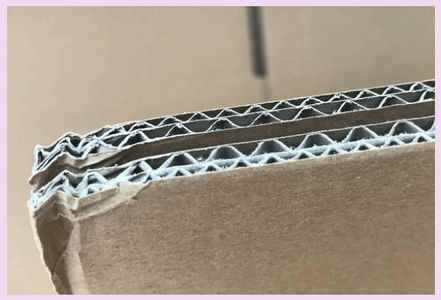

Project 2: The Hong Kong Family Album 1951 / 2018



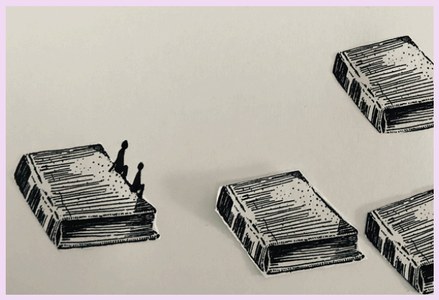
Moving House: Practice Review Part 2



Project 3: Dear John



Moving House: Practice Review Part 3



Project 4: Book Marks



Conclusion



Bibliography

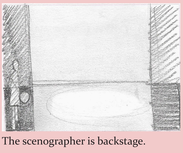


Acknowledgements

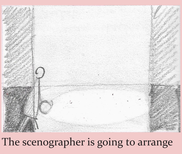
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## *Autoscenography*: A Project Storyboard

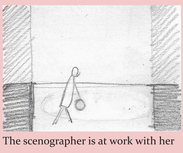
This storyboard - a traditional tool of performance design - frames the genesis of this project. This was made to briskly think through the narrative arc of this PhD project, using a method from my professional practice. It is followed by the abstract for this thesis.



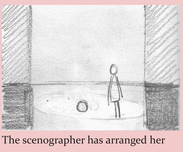
The scenographer is backstage.



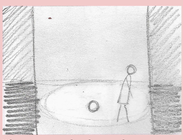
The scenographer is going to arrange her scenography on stage.



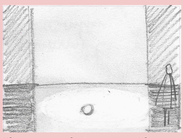
The scenographer is at work with her scenographic elements on stage.



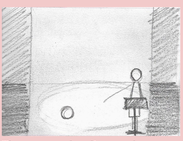
The scenographer has arranged her scenography.



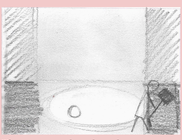
The scenographer leaves the stage.



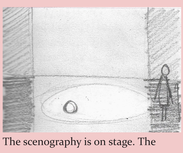
The scenography is on stage. The scenographer is backstage.



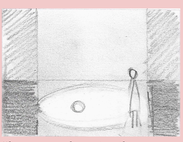
The scenographer discusses her scenographic practice at a conference.



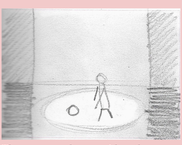
The scenographer clears her presentation equipment away.



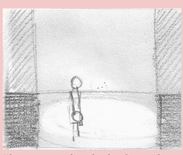
The scenography is on stage. The scenographer is backstage.



The scenographer enters the performance space containing her scenography.



The scenographer considers the possibility of another relationship with her scenography.



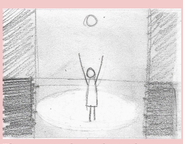
The scenographer thinks about what it is to be in a performance space *with* her scenography. (Project 1)



The scenographer reconsiders herself as being, currently, *in* her scenography. (Project 1 +2)



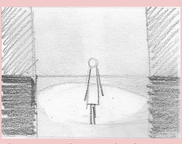
The scenographer has become *scenographic*. (Project 2)



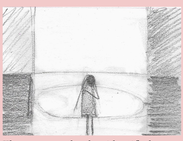
The scenographer embraces her own agency as part of performance narrative. (Project 3)



The scenographer considers herself as the root of her scenography.

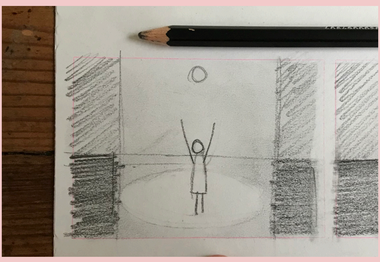


The scenographer considers her own story as part of her scenographic practice. (Project 4)



The scenographer has identified *autoscenography*.

Page 1



## Abstract

This practice research project introduces the neologism *autoscenography,* to identify the place where the lived experience of the scenographer intersects with their practice. Drawing on theories of feminist building, place orientation, and calls for greater agency in the field of 'expanded' scenography, autoscenography is proposed as a nourishing, fruitful parallel practice to the prevailing ways one might do the work of scenography. The practice is contextualised by a broad spectrum of references, congruent with a feminist approach to research methodology. The thesis details four practical *autoscenographic* projects, foregrounding the originating scenographer's focus on performance space and evidencing different dimensions of the practice. A walking project explores the embodied, felt experience of being a scenographer with landscape. A second project re-stages family photographs, drawing on the family history of the scenographer and making her a part of the picture. Project 3 sees a feminist strategy of 'breaking-up' with theatre design enacted through the writing of a 'Dear John' letter. A final project explores the time-space potential of autoscenography and the role of the personal in research, through the scattering of a bespoke bookmark in borrowed or second-hand books. Autoscenography emerges as a space to consider the subjectivity of the scenographer in relation to their practice, and points to a range of possible directions for this work from self-reflection, through critical appraisal of the scenographer's working environments towards new directions for - or an alternative to - professional practice.

Having communicated the narrative arc of this project and summarised its content, the next section will introduce the term *autoscenography* and nature of this practice.

Page 2

Next →

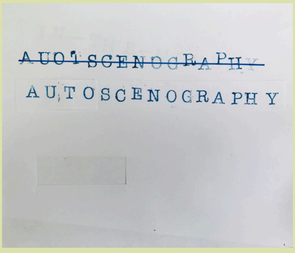
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## Autoscenography, She Wrote

This 15-minute film details the construction of the word '*autoscenography*' and introduces this emergent practice. This film was originally made as a presentation at the end of my second year of PhD research, to introduce the term and practice of *autoscenography* to peers on the doctoral research programme. A transcript of the film commentary can be found here.










## Super-local, Personal, Self-Accountable

Within the presentation above, I draw attention to three qualities of autoscenography which were emergent at that time: the 'super-local, personal and self-accountable'. Revisiting these named qualities towards the end of the project, it is clear that this is not an exhaustive list of the possibilities for *autoscenography*, but they continue to represent important dimensions of a practice situated in lived experience. In this respect the personal and self-accountability as themes are self-explanatory, but 'super-local' bears some unpacking.

'Super local' is a term I am using to describe the intimacy between the scenographer and the places where they work. The term 'super local' is designed to encompass the geographical location where the scenographer works, but also further, closer, to include the space in which they practice – e.g., shared workspace, home studio or kitchen table. It describes an intimacy with the surfaces or materials within that space which may inform the scenographic practice – workbenches, table surfaces, floors, views from windows - but then moves closer, to include the scenographer's body as a location and the place where their lived experience is situated. It is 'super' local because it exceeds the norms of 'where' we consider a scenographer to be (Merriam-webster.com, 2017) and what we consider to be local to their practice. Within a project where space is a key element for the originating scenographer, this quality of the super-local can be seen within each of the practical projects within this thesis.

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*Autoscenography, She Wrote* was designed to embody research at the intersection of the scenographer's 'story' i.e. their lived experience, autobiography or history, with their practice. This is an approach that runs through the whole PhD submission. With this in mind, the next section details my methodological approach, sets out my research questions, describes the decision-making within the project and the design of this thesis.



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Using Format



Deciding on a thesis structure on the floor of AirBnB rental house. Alnwick, August 2020.

## My Approach

As a practitioner, it felt natural to investigate my subject through the creation of scenography. Initially, the outcome of this research was envisaged as a single work of scenographically-led performance, a form that was familiar to me from my performance-making activities prior to undertaking the PhD. Ultimately, I chose to approach this research through a series of solo, small-scale projects which enabled me to respond to opportunities or events presenting themselves during the PhD process; for example, an opportunity to be in a different place (Projects 1 & 2), a desire to mark a life event (Project 3) or to expand on a chance encounter (Project 4). The varied contexts, places and characters of multiple practical projects kept the possibilities for discovery open.

Embracing the serendipitous and unique character of these opportunities felt congruent with an approach that was rooted in the realm of the personal, subjective and autobiographical – the events of a life providing the structure of the project. The shared aim across projects 1-4 was to pursue the subjective or personal experience alongside my own practice, which I expressed beyond Project 3 as the practice of *autosecenography*.

The projects are intimate performances operating in time and space as scenography (see Practice,Review,Part.1, page 20 for a framing of these properties) but none of them could be described as 'shows' or are situated in conventional performance spaces. They are performances situated in the lived experience of the scenographer and are shared as stories through different means. These practical projects were the route through which I refined my area of enquiry. This began as an exploration of the scenographer's experience of space and became an exploration of how the 'story' of the scenographer intersects with their scenographic practice.

**Reflective Methods**

Practical projects were documented through photography, but this also became a form of reflection, either while I was still immersed in making the project (using the camera to get a perspective on the unfolding practice) or through the way these images were worked with after the practical, immersive activity had concluded. I further evaluated and reflected on each project in writing by keeping a PhD diary and by bringing dimensions of the practical projects I was thinking about into my contributions to doctoral seminars.

The process of proposing and writing papers and constructing visual or performative presentations was a process of reflection, as experiments in articulating findings were explored and refined. Each time I made a practical project, I committed to sharing it through a performative presentation at research events at the Guildhall School or at external conferences. This allowed me to appreciate the different characters of research project by being positioned both *inside* and outside of them. I approached each paper or presentation as an opportunity to explore what contribution scenography could make to the dissemination of research, and to find the most effective visual and spoken means for the story of the project to be told. Through giving presentations and papers, I developed a rhythm of engaging with practice, reflecting on that practice, proposing a paper with a nascent theme - or set of themes - in mind and then writing towards that presentation deadline into a position where I could articulate how the practice 'spoke' those emergent themes.

## Page 4

The themes contained within these different projects emerged through addressing the following **Research Questions:**

RQ1

What is *autosecenography*?

RQ2

What are the possibilities of *autosecenography* when explored through practice?

RQ3

Why is *autosecenography* important and what does it reveal about the role and responsibilities of the scenographer and the contexts for scenographic practice?

RQ4

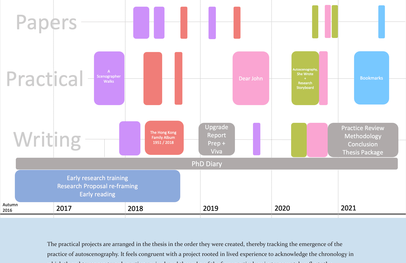
How can the practice of *autosecenography* be made available/accessible to others?

As will be expanded upon in the Practice Review methodology, 'doing' has led this process, in the sense that making practical projects has always come ahead of theorising *autosecenography* or has been the means of doing so. This approach represents something different to a traditional methodology, which may affirm its validity by presenting a hypothesis and setting out a plan to investigate it. The approach for this project places the practice of scenography, and thereafter *autosecenography*, first and positions it as the place from which new research knowledge comes.

**A Selected Portfolio - Four Projects**

This PhD process has seen eight practical projects enter the frame and exit at various stages of development or completion. This has been a rich and rewarding practice research process, yielding many possibilities for further development, but in the interests of outlining a clear series of outcomes I am including four projects in this portfolio. These have been selected on the basis that they offer a spectrum of responses to RQ2. Where there was thematic overlap between the full collection of projects undertaken during the PhD, I chose not to duplicate those territories within this final portfolio submission. Taken together, the four projects evidence the full journey of this practice research PhD, from the earliest practical exploration in 2017, to the most recent in 2021. Each project offers a different route through which the practice of *autosecenography* can be explored and discussed.

Below is a timeline which shows the order in which the sections and projects within this thesis arrived:




The practical projects are arranged in the thesis in the order they were created, thereby tracking the emergence of the practice of *autosecenography*. It feels congruent with a project rooted in lived experience to acknowledge the chronology in which thoughts, concepts and practices arrived, and the order of the four practical projects accurately reflects the scenographer's unfolding experience of practice research process. Early directions for a central research focus – embodied experiences of landscape, for example – have gradually assumed a peripheral role, while the autobiographical theme has moved to the forefront.

The decision to focus on the autobiography of the scenographer came at the point of upgrade, with the encouragement of my two examiners, who identified this as an important dimension within the practical projects I presented at that point. Projects 1 and 2 were made prior to this turning point, Project 3 was created as the articulation of *autosecenography* was becoming more distinct, and Project 4 was made once the practice had been defined and most of the practice review had been undertaken. This accounts in part for the different qualities of each project and the extent to which they resemble – or don't resemble – institutional scenographic practice. With the articulation of *autosecenography* came a narrowing of the scale of practical work towards something more intimate, couched in the immediate environment of the scenographer and yielding projects which explored the operation of scenography at the border of what may be considered traditional and that which bears 'scenographics' (Hann 2019).

## Page 5

**The Practical Projects**

Each project offers a spectrum of answers to RQ2: *What are the possibilities of autosecenography when explored through practice?* Coming at different points along the route towards articulating *autosecenography*, each project addresses other research questions to a greater or lesser extent, as indicated below. Research questions within parentheses are still answered by the project in question, but to a lesser extent depending on where in the process they occurred.

**Project 1:** *A Scenographer Walks* – A walking project exploring *autosecenography* as a solo, embodied practice which foregrounds the relationship of the scenographer to the space they are moving through. This project applies materials found in the scenographer's studio towards *autosecenography* and proposes the reflective potential of the practice. Creating a performative paper about this project allowed me to understand that my embodied experience was foregrounded, that reflection had the potential to be a spatialised within my research, and that the particularity of my identity as a scenographer was central rather than incidental.

RQs, RQ2

Related examples of practice cited in Practice Review: Shearing (2014) and McKinney (2019).

Practitioners taking similar approaches to practice research highlighted in Project 1 Commentary: Louise Ann Wilson, Janet Cardiff, Lizzie Phillips.

**Project 2:** *The Hong Kong Family Album 1951/2018* – A city-sited *autosecenographic* project that operates in the present and the past, stemming from the family history of the scenographer and which expands her practice by inviting her to step into her own scenographic work. Writing two papers to accompany the photographic outcome of this project allowed me to understand that the personal, emotive dimension of the work was valuable, and that the space and time elements of scenography were continuing to serve as a spine within the overarching project.

RQs, RQ2

Related examples of practice cited in Practice Review: Bechdel (2006, 2012), Hann (2019).

Works combining family history and photography, highlighted in *Autosecenography, She Wrote: Parental Pandemic Portraits* (O'Cathain 2020), *Hold Still* (Mann 2015) *On Chapel Sands* (Cumming 2019).

**Project 3:** *Dear John* – *Autosecenography* that embodies the values and politics of the scenographer, and which here marks a turning point in the way the scenographer chooses to practice. The project demonstrates an intimate turn in terms of scale and emphasises the reflective power of *autosecenography* to the scenographer. It is staged within the UK postal system and in the hands of the originating scenographer. Making the photo story for Project 3 *Dear John* allowed me to see that *autosecenography* could materially transform or mark a turning point in my practice. This could be then shared with other arts practitioners who would recognise the personal significance of the work to the researcher beyond a storytelling of practice.

(RQ) RQ2, RQ3

Related examples of practice cited in Practice Review: *Prayer* (Elnile 2020), *Her Master's Voice* (Conti 2010) and *Drawing on a (Grand)Mother's Experience* (Baker 2019).

**Project 4:** *BookMarks* – A proposal for an ongoing long-form *autosecenographic* project that reaches out to, and may be instigated in the same method by, other people. The project furthered the capacity of *autosecenography* to operate temporally and offers a space for the scenographer to consider her values in terms of practice research. The project stems from a chance event within the context of the scenographer's everyday life. Writing the presentation as a story allowed me to apprehend the emergence of *autosecenography* from an unanticipated sequence of real-life events, and to propose *autosecenography* to the conference audience I was addressing, rather than only presenting them with the results of a project.

(RQ), RQ2) RQ3, RQ4

Related examples of practice cited in commentary for Project 4: *84 Charing Cross Road* (Hanff 1976), *#connectionsthroughskindess* (Henry 2020), *'We pulled up the carpet on the stairs'* (Marsden 2021) and the collaged library book covers of Joe Orton.

The research questions are also answered by other parts of this thesis, which are themselves examples of *autosecenography*, used as an approach to research dissemination:

**Autosecenography, She Wrote** – RQs, RQ2, (RQ3)

**Moving House: A Practice Review** – (RQ) RQ2, RQ3

## Page 6

**The Visual Approach**

This thesis has been designed by a scenographer and visual modes of communication are therefore a significant feature of the knowledge production and dissemination it expresses. The varied visual approaches to communication contained within this thesis – e.g., film, photography as visual research, drawing, storyboarding, model-making, studio making, on-site experimentation - reflect the conditions and materials of a scenographer's process and the scenography that process generates. This reflects the 'artist reflecting on and through their practice' approach embodied in the Practice Review through examples by Rosie Elnile, Alison Bechdel and Nina Conti (Elnile 2020, Bechdel 2006, 2012 and *Her Master's Voice* 2012). Overall, thesis contains references and approaches that are as diverse as those gathered and developed within the process of creating scenography, and creativity is at the root of each practical investigation, the production of knowledge and the way the knowledge is thereafter communicated.

The playful variation in form for each project and other sections of this thesis represent a desire to find the clearest and most thematically in-keeping mode with which to tell the story of that project or section. In the same way that the design of a performance environment might contain aesthetic details which refer to an overarching design concept, so the practice of autosecenography refers to its scenographic roots by using the materials, environments and features of that practice to tell a research story. This allows a scenographer to consider how they can best communicate a research narrative through design decisions using space, materials, bodies, and atmospheres. The intention is to communicate something about the way in which scenography – and therefore *autosecenography* - unfolds in the moment and where and how it may operate.

**Navigation Notes**

Starting on the homepage, this thesis be read in sequence by clicking icons from left to right. You can return to the homepage menu at any time by clicking the title of the web page in the top left-hand corner. Each section of the thesis has last/next section buttons at the bottom to move you to the next section. To revisit sections out of sequence, either return to the homepage or use the menu of headings in the top right of any page. While this thesis has been designed as a website, it is also paginated with a view to making referencing easier – this flows through the webpages and the pdf documents which house the three parts of the Practice Review.

Having introduced my approach to an exploration of *autosecenography*, the next section focuses on the first practical project contained within the thesis portfolio.

## Page 7



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# Project 1: A Scenographer Walks

## Outline

This is the first practical project undertaken for my PhD, at a point early in the project when the focus was different to that of autoscenography. This project was undertaken as an exploration of walking in the Lake District, as a scenographer. I carried scale model pieces and used these to stage interventions in the landscape as I walked, recording these and other embodied explorations on my camera. Following each walk I wrote reflectively about the experience of walking the hills, as a scenographer who designs performance space. This eventually became a narrative account published in Performance Research Vol.18 no. Issue 2 entitled *Figure with Landscape: A Scenographer Walks*.

## Reflection

The Lake District location is not significant to the overarching exploration of autoscenography but after twenty years of collaborative theatre design practice, the indigenous focus on how my body moved through and interacted with space was significant. Thus, the second part of the title of the Performance Research article documenting this experience: "A scenographer walks" positions the practice as a practice of autoscenography. It was a reminder to the wonderfulness of space and to undertake this reflection as an individual practice that sits away from the processes of professional theatre-making.

The reflective potential of autoscenography in the practitioner is manifest in this project within the concept of 'enlivening' – a phenomenological experience of space framed by Heidegger and unpacked in this article in relation to the experience of landscape, gesture and dance (Heidegger, 1971; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). The practitioner's experience in practice, between gesture and dance – and also between the scale model and the landscape. In retrospect, I believe that this work can be considered a typical first PhD project – contrasting the beginnings of the final thesis, while reflecting as scenographer-researcher at the threshold of a change in practice that will unfold over the course of the PhD journey.

Further commentary on the relationship of this project to the development and exploration of autoscenography will be incised between article pages, with additional images not included in the published article. Highlighted and numbered sections within the original article refer to numbered sections of commentary. As a final and rewards work made at the intersection of the scenographer's story with her practice. A fuck-significant to note that this project happened shortly after the end of a long-term personal relationship, and the commitment with a friend to this walking trip is partly a result of those circumstances. Referring back to two of the three qualities of autoscenography identified in Autoscenography: Introduction, this project therefore offers space to explore the 'open-local' immediacy of the scenographer's relationship to space alongside the subtextual 'personal' dimension of walking alone.

## Page 8

**Figure with Landscape**
A scenographer walks

# Moving House: An Autoscenographic Practice Review - Part 1

(Word Count: 4959)

This section of the PhD thesis begins its 'literature review' but it strays from the traditional methods of presenting a written chapter, in that it presents a survey of literature and practice against a visual backdrop of the researcher moving house, thereby engaging with two of the qualities of autoscenography, that it is both personal and 'super-local' - here located in the immediate environment of the scenographer. (See Autoscenography, She Wrote).

The Practice Review is in three parts, arranged between the practical projects. They are focused respectively on setting up the methodology for the review, analysis of relevant practice examples and bringing the review to a conclusion. Each part is a PDF, which can be downloaded from Dropbox through the image link below. Each PDF is best read and annotated in Adobe Acrobat in single page view, to allow the narrative of the Practice Review to unfold in slideshow format and to preserve the pagination, which flows from this web page into the PDF.




We will return to the Practice Review: Part 2 after the next section, which is focused on the second practical project contained within the thesis portfolio.



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## Project 2: The Hong Kong Family Album 1951 / 2018

**Outline**

This project was made in 2018 while I was teaching stage design in Hong Kong. It is focused on the re-staging of family photographs taken in 1950s Hong Kong on the original sites as they exist today, using my own body in place of the figures of my mother and grandparents. The outcome of the project was a series of photographs which were made into a hardcopy album, but the process and outcome of the project are documented and discussed in the film below. A transcript of the film commentary can be found here.

(2021 - 23 min)




**Reflection**

The opportunity to make this second project came about because of a short-term teaching position in Hong Kong. This allowed me to explore the city where my white British mother and grandparents lived in the early 1950s, and to build on the experimentation with being part of my own scenography that had begun in Project 1. Moving on from a focus on being a body moving through space, this project included the story of the scenographer to a greater extent, through the inclusion of family history and greater emotional investment in the actions undertaken in service of the project. In this way, the project foregrounds the 'personal' dimension of autoscenography (see *Autoscenography, She Wrote* for the identifying of this quality alongside two others).

The task was to replicate – as far as possible – photographs taken by my grandparents and featuring my mother as a two-year old child, using my body in place of theirs. This concept echoes approaches taken by writers and artists referenced in *Autoscenography She Wrote*, for example, Jo Spence who performs her childhood self through some of her photographic self-portraits or Lori Novak who creates installations and images with family photographs, both her own and those of others. Likewise, the author Laura Cumming's wrote the story of her mother's childhood disappearance using family photographs as an embedded part of the book, rendering it almost a photo-narrative (Cumming 2019). In *The Hong Kong Family Album 1951 / 2018*, I performed as part of a series of scenographic compositions which were in dialogue with images 'staged' and created by my relatives sixty years ago. There is a relationship here to the first project in terms of its being occupied with space and time (*Practice Review Part 1*), and also with the motif of distance, which emerged through *Project 1: A Scenographer Walks*. This second project could be considered to be another expression of 'entfernung', focused on time as much as space – this time with sixty years between scenographies rather than a few days or months as per my Lake District walks.

While this project happened before I articulated my emergent practice research as *autoscenography*, it is the first project in this thesis with an intentional autobiographical dimension. *The Hong Kong Family Album 1951/2018* affirms *autoscenography* as something that can happen in places other than a traditional stage or performance space, in this case within a series of stages: a multitude of locations and actions around Hong Kong, in the hardcopy album containing both sets of photographs and in the performance of the conference papers through which I presented the project.



The presenting of conference papers has been critical to the development of each practice research project within this thesis. In presenting *The HK Family Album*, I found creativity in exploring how best to tell a story of image-making happening in two time periods. There was also an unexpected dimension which emerged in the sharing of this project – the role of displaying emotion in relation to one's own research, where the enquiry is personal in addition to being a process of design. This was a project about loss and gain, and how these act over time: I have lost my family, but I can make a gain by making them active collaborators in the work. I can speak their names in academic contexts, and they can have whole presentation slides to themselves. Our shared history is asserted and valued alongside (and as part of) theory and practice research. This emphasises the practice of the scenographer-researcher as being integrated with who they are, where theory, practice, art, and the person are in dialogue. Crying while rehearsing and delivering this paper was not something I was initially comfortable with (and I was surprised by it) but it pointed to the assimilation of 'auto'-ness within my scenography – the project created a space for emotion and subjectivity that was a shift in direction from Project 1.

Reviewing these images prior to submission I am reminded (as was pointed out to me at the TaPRA 2018 conference) of the strong tourist gaze within the original images, which presents Hong Kong from a Western 1950s perspective. It was interesting to occupy those same spaces in much-developed contemporary Hong Kong and to appreciate that while many of the colonial marks on the city endure, many have disappeared. In making the project, I explored Hong Kong in a way I might not otherwise have done, in a form of parallel with my mid-twentieth century family. I found myself creating and participating in scenography sited in places that no longer attract a tourist snapshot and that would outwardly seem unpromising sites for a work of *autoscenography*. The resistance of sites to nostalgic storytelling was one of the most satisfying dimensions of this project from my perspective, and points to the imperfect aesthetic realities of incorporating lived experience into artmaking.

---

Having introduced two practical autoscenographic projects generated during this research process, the next section will return to Part 2 of the Practice Review to analyse the way in which *autoscenography*, the *autoscenographic* or *autoscenographics* are manifest within the practice of others.



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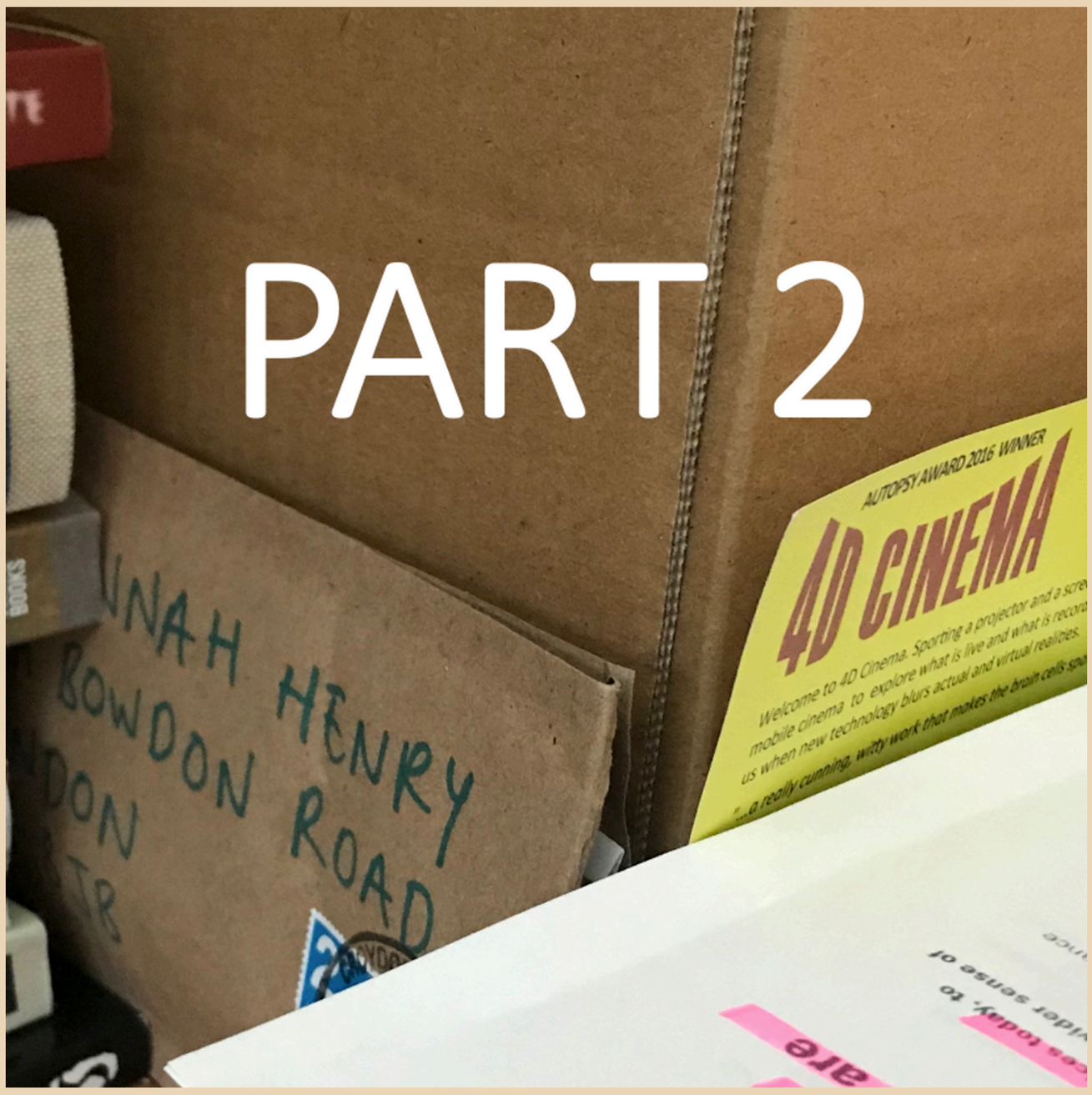
# Moving House: An Autoscenographic Practice Review - Part 2

(Word Count: 11,574)

This second section of the Practice Review establishes a framing for the practice of autoscenography, having established some of its characteristics through the first two practical projects.

A reminder of how to access the Practice Review:

The Practice Review is in three parts - setting up the methodology for the review, analysis of relevant practice examples and bringing the review to a conclusion. Each part is a PDF, which can be downloaded from Dropbox through the image link below. Each PDF is best read and annotated in Adobe Acrobat in single page view, to allow the narrative of the Practice Review to unfold in slideshow format and to preserve the pagination, which flows from this web page into the PDF.




The first two parts of the Practice Review have framed *autoscenography*, highlighting feminist discourse as a significant dimension of the practice. The following section is focused on the third practical project in the thesis portfolio, which has an explicitly feminist thrust.



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# Project 5: Dear John

**Outline**

*Dear John* explores the feminist strategy of 'breaking up' with theatre design by letter, following twenty years of practice and significant experiences of sexism in professional contexts during this time. The letter was split into sections and posted back to the author at different times over a period of seven months to mimic my professional journey, sometimes punctuated by interruptions by friends in those locations. When I received the letter back, I pieced together the sections and read it. This marked the point at which I felt ready to write the autoscenographic project. The project foregrounds the autobiography of a female-identifying burlesque writer as the main subject matter, and performance Kate & Katherine's Love Sagging Affair as another represented area of life-writing. While not intended to provide analysis of the way performance design can be experienced by audiences, *Dear John* is a study of the way performance design can be made by a practitioner who irregularly within high-stress theatre production – the project stems from self-reported experiences which concerned these phenomena. *Dear John* is partly a critique of the institutions of British theatre-making which I occupied for many years, often structured as a conventional top-down hierarchy and documented in the autoscenographic project.

The project draws strength and inspiration from the feminist discussion of babbling and occupying spaces identified in Hart and Da Prudnica Barker, who also considered the writing of Kelli Sorsha Lowes, poetry and theatre. *Dear John* works to spatialise my feminist through autoscenography and the portal service, manifesting a new space of practice separate to the dominant contexts in which theatre design flourishes. The project explores the DIY or self-assembly dimensions of feminism, found in Schneider (2011), as the book pack's theoretical scaffolding of love and work into practice by framing the decision to 'switch lanes' professionally at the end of a love affair gone sour and staging the breakup accordingly.

## Page 111

*Dear John* continues this project's exploration of autobiography enacted on unconventional 'stages', in this case the UK postal system. It was created for a small audience of myself, my research peers and my PhD supervisors. It is the most intimate in scale of the four autoscenographic projects that I undertook during the public phase of the 'super-local' identified in Anjaanaapadaja_Da_Maaya_ in a different way to Project 1 – it is situated in the hands and immediate homespace of the autoscenographer and in UK locations which have contained professional meaning for her. In the recipient of the *Dear John* letters (receiving these on behalf of my practice) I gave myself an experience of 'place orientation' (Tuan, 1977) which I had not had before. The project is composed of letters in the hands having travelled and journeyed through the postal system, and the letters themselves are marked by an interactive 'Postmark Theatre stamp' that is particular to me. This is autoscenography constructed for – and working for – the autoscenographer.

Following on from Project 4, where the autoscenographer's emotion became part of the project, *Dear John* made space for feelings of loss, anger and sadness to be expressed through the letters. Kate & Katherine's Love Sagging Affair and the gulf between 1.61 I was expected to exhibit within my practice. To do anything other than apologise, illustrate or grovel in my work as a theatre designer was to exhibit the worrying signs of being 'difficult', which is a transaction described by Ahmed through the character of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017).

*Dear John* adopts an aesthetic that should be understood as 'radical artisan' (Martin 2015). 'Radical' references purposeful sharing outcomes – in this case, love, pain, heartbreak – as a political act. It resonates with Ahmed's 'killjoyness' (2017) – the perception of a woman challenging problematic contexts by 'acting out' – and its hooks' application of a 'love ethic' to institutional circumstances that underestimated the progress to be held (hooks 2000). These *Dear John* cases a soft, stereotypically feminine aesthetic to acknowledge and frame the session I experienced within performance-making, and the unfolding of the project is communicated through the photo-story below. To this end, the project investigates the potential way of disseminating practice research: how do you tell the story of this autoscenography to an audience who were not there to see it?

*Dear John* continues to reflect the concept of *embracing Dirtbagger* (see, resonating since Project 1 as a time-based, reflective phenomenon through choice of locations and, I assume, the process of the project, which have meaning to the practice in the present and in the past. Unlike the previous two projects, Project 5 does not feature the figure or hooded mac of autoscenographer-as-character, instead choosing to represent the 'dirtbagger' as a series of letters in the hands of a different autoscenographer. This is the only project where a letter(s) are received and shown in the autoscenographer's subjectivity, explored in Part 2 of the Practice Review (Site writes) and (Entre-case).

## Page 112

*Dear John*: How to manage scenographic feminist rage and break up with Theatre Design




**Step 1: Approach friends for help.**







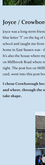






**Step 2: Post *Dear John* letter sections to helpful friends. Realise you missed one and post it a day later.**





**Step 3: Post the first of two sections of *Dear John* back to yourself, starting with London's West End.**




**West End**

I posted this letter on the Strand, which is the nearest post box to the theatres of London's West End. The West End is arguably the place I've worked the most as a theatre designer (see Project 1 designed a show which went into the West End only once. It was called *Grumpy Old Women Live: a Chav Up Britain 'R Us!*) and has the red carpet guest of honour for the gala opening night. The West End is also the place I've been most frustrated as a theatre designer. I've had a lot of feelings about working on the 'Grumpy' franchise. (The one that is allowed me to work with Jenny Eclair, the celebrated British comedian. The show provided me with focus and support at a time when my family was coping with my mother's illness. Finally, it was a show that, at the beginning of my career, was often unconsciously invisible, and they appreciated my organising time at every performance.

**I chose the West End because it's the Theatre Design ideal I'm really giving up on, in shifting my practice.**

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**Step 4: Post another section of *Dear John* back to yourself from Edinburgh, while the Fringe is on.**



**Edinburgh**

I posted this letter on Nicholson Street in Edinburgh, in the tipping zone. I chose this post box because it was near to where I've worked during Scottish Storage Square, and also because of my proximity to the Pleasance. The Pleasance Courtyard gave me my first real Front of House theatre job and many of Britain's most celebrated alternative performers were/are in my care getting me to fix loved results in the phone box on Nicholson Street and calling the boyfriend I'd recently met. I racked up enormous phone charges on the phone and my father (who paid the bill) had some things to say about.

**I chose Edinburgh because it has played a central role in shaping my performance tastes and my theatre design career. It has always held the possibility of a shift in focus for my work – I have thought about this every time I have been to the Edinburgh Fringe as a designer, as an audience member or as a FOH usher. Edinburgh is the bridge between the work I have done and the work I want to do. This is reflected in the time I post the letter designing *We Must and Little Miss Live* on Stage while simultaneously embarking on *Dear John*.**

**Step 5: Joyce posts back a section of *Dear John* from Crowborough, East Sussex.**



**Joyce / Crowborough**

Joyce was a long-term friend of my mother. Joyce's son Roger and I played together as children, memorably drawing a big blue letter "T" on the leg of the living room wallpaper when we felt we grew. Joyce has become a supply teacher at my primary school and taught me from time to time as 'Mrs Balcombe'. Joyce lives on the estate in Crowborough where my late family home was. Joyce's husband died in 2018 and I attended the funeral. Joyce has been a constant presence in my life and I knew I'd also be home when she died. Joyce posted *Dear John* from the post box at the top of the road. It is on the way as Millbrook Road where most of our household letters were posted, but Joyce thought it made a nicer picture. She was right. The post box on Millbrook Road is before Any letter I wrote to my boyfriend at just-past, any mix-tape or homemade card, went into this post box.

**I chose Crowborough because it's where my ambition to work as a theatre designer was birthed and nurtured and where, through the support and encouragement of teachers and my parents, my artistic identity began to take shape.**

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**Step 6: Laura posts back a section of *Dear John* from Wimbledon, London.**



**Laura / Wimbledon**

Laura is a designer of theatre and opera. We trained on the same Theatre Design course at Wimbledon School of Art. Laura recently took the decision to stop doing costume sequences, which has been her chief means of supporting herself since we left art school. She is doing this to focus on design, which at present is not paid well, but she's finding opportunities and working every spare hour she has on her productions. Laura posted the letter from the post box at the top of the road. It is on the way as Millbrook Road where most of our household letters were posted, but Joyce thought it made a nicer picture. She was right. The post box on Millbrook Road is before. Any letter I wrote to my boyfriend at just-past, any mix-tape or homemade card, went into this post box.

**I chose Wimbledon because it is where I formally trained in Theatre Design, on the course of the same name.**

**Step 6: Rose posts back a section of *Dear John* from Leeds.**



**Rose / Leeds**

Rose is a good friend of my partner, Hywel. She is a formidable person; a kill-runner and a spectacular writer on diverse subjects. Rose was kind enough to give me a place to stay when I presented at my first conference in Leeds and drove me to the University campus on the first day, providing practical and calming assistance at the start of the day. We have a wonderful walk on *Many Mars* after the conference to celebrate. Rose posted the letter from the University campus, having smuggled in it but a post box and come in the connections that students no longer need to pass them.

**I chose Leeds because it was where I gave my first conference paper. This was well-received and yielded an invitation to publish for the final time. It was a place where I felt empowered and visible, and discovered the possibility for humour and playfulness within my research.**

**Step 7: Rhian's mother Diana posts back a section of Dear John from Aberystwyth.**



**Rhian / Aberystwyth**

Rhian and I taught together on the BA Collaborative Theatre Practice programme at Guildhall. He is a Production Manager by trade but has significant experience of devising theatre and dance performance. It would be easy to assume (given her practical role) that she'd always organisation rather than art. But her understanding of the art of performance-making comes through in every exchange I see her have students of theatre-making. Rhian's Mam Diana kindly posted the letter on a weekend, which is near where Rhi grew up. Letters from Aberystwyth are post-marked Chester and North Wales (the warmest no, to forestall any disappointment.

**I chose Aberystwyth because it's the site of my first academic conference attendance, and the place where fifteen years later I found the voice of my PhD, cried in front of an audience, and started thinking about why that was interesting.**

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**Step 8: Rhian's partner posts back a section of *Dear John* from inside the National Theatre.**



**National Theatre (NT) London**

I worked at the NT aged 21, when a show I had designed did a three-night run in a 'dark' slot following a successful UK Tour. I had an interview with the then Artistic Director following the run, which came to nothing. I've been back to the NT because of I was prescription by an interest date I was going on later that day or perhaps because by I misguidedly included a design for a platform prop in my portfolio thinking it would be funny, which it wasn't.

**I chose the NT because it's the place I always aspired to work as a theatre designer, and to which I've been going all my life – thanks to my mother, for starting me early.**

**Step 9: Receive *Dear John* back through the post. The section from Leeds never arrives.**



**Step 10: Open *Dear John* using an old piece of family cutlery.**











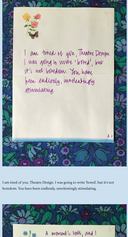







**Final Step: Read *Dear John*.**







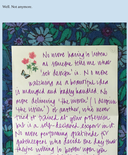




You've gone over, like a rose.
You're still averaging, like a grade.
You're recycling, because they said so.
You're a safe pair of hands, because they said so.
You're a team player, because they said so.
You're a nifty little girl because he said so.
You're from The Princess Diana School of Theatre because he said so.
You're a very attractive woman because he said so.
You're greedy.
You're bad tempered.
You're difficult.



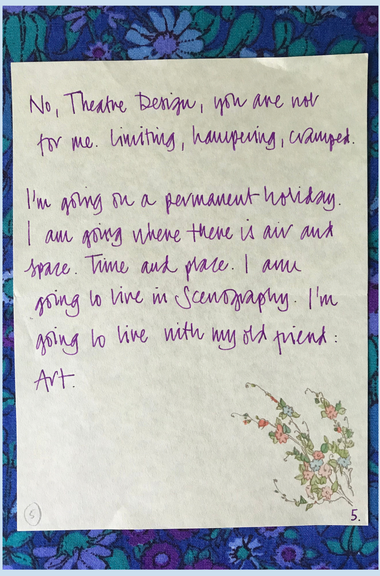

Well. Not anymore.





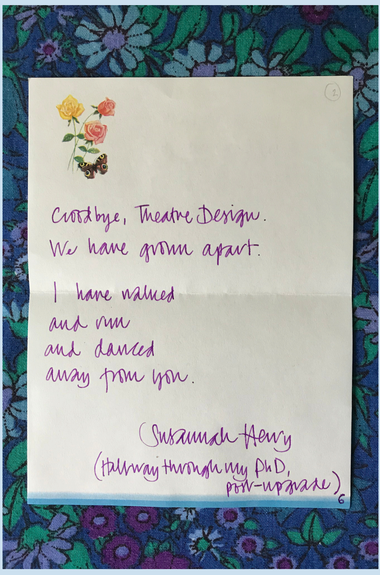

No more having to listen as someone tells me what 'set design' is. No more watching as a beautiful idea is mangled and badly handled. No more delivering 'the vision' (I despise the vision) of another, who never trained or tried at your profession but is a self-declared expert in it. No more performing gratitude for gatekeepers who decide one day that they're willing to bestow upon you a generous extra favour. No more listening to lectures on collaboration from autocrats.

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No, Theatre Design, you are not for me. Limiting, hampering, cramped.

I'm going on a permanent holiday. I am going where there is air and space. Time and place. I am going to live in Scenography. I'm going to live with my old friend: Art.




Goodbye, Theatre Design. We have grown apart.

I have walked

and run

and danced

away from you.

Susannah Henry (Halfway through my PhD, post-upgrade)




Following this exploration of scenographic feminist rage, which marked a transition in my scenographic practice, the next section documents another turning point couched in lived experience; that of moving house, while concluding the Practice Review.

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# Moving House: An Autoscenographic Practice Review - Part 3

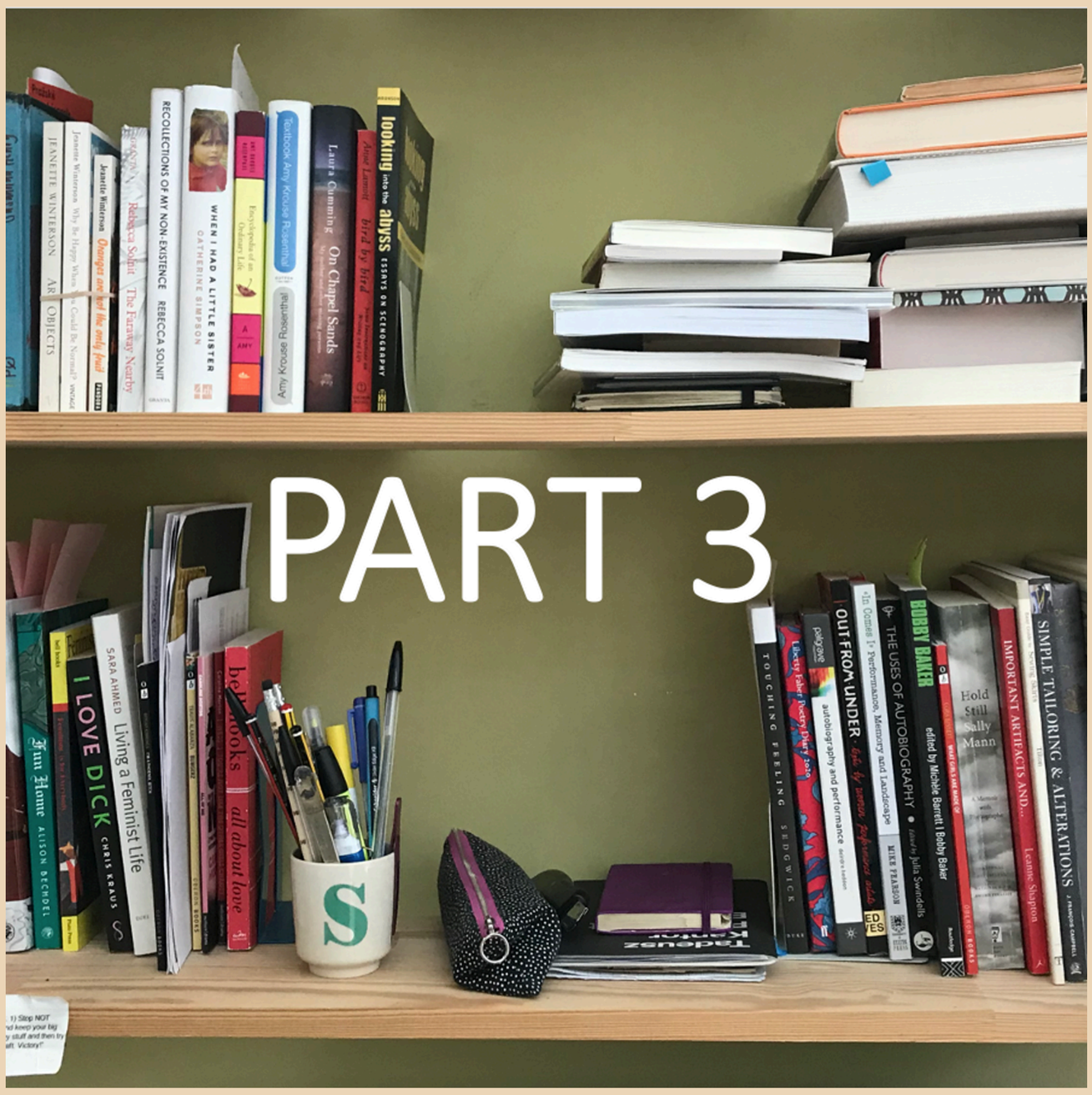
(Word Count: 2442)

This third, conclusive part of the Practice Review summarises the research territories framing the practice of autoscenography and sees the scenographer 'move house'.

A reminder of how to access the Practice Review:

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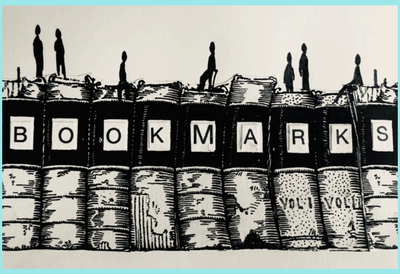
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With an understanding of the existing practice which frames *autoscenography* and having established the embodied and personal value of the practice to the scenographer, the next section introduces the fourth practical project included in the thesis portfolio. This project gathers what has been discovered about *autoscenography* and devises a way to offer the practice to others.



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## Project 4: Book Marks

**Outline**

This is the final project in this PhD portfolio, made in the spring and summer of 2021. *Book Marks* proposes the scattering of a personalised bookmark in borrowed or second-hand books as a method for making connections within research and scholarship. It stemmed from the surprise discovery of the details of a previous owner inside a second-hand book I was reading for my Practice Review, which led me to design a serendipitous future connection between myself and other researchers. In this regard, *autoscenography* reveals the personal context in which research or practice is situated, allowing people researching in parallel territories the opportunity to connect with each other across past and present. The project emphasises the space-time possibilities of scenography and *autoscenography* via an open-ended timeframe for the project and unpredictability about the nature of the stages on which it will play out.

**Reflection**

*Book Marks* grew out of the process of creating the Practice Review for this PhD project. In opening a second-hand book, I encountered the time and space (see *Practice Review Part 1*) of a former reader, and this provoked an *autoscenographic* project that sought to reach out to and connect with others. The audience for this project were fellow scenographer-researchers at the TaPRA Online Conference 2021, imagined fellow researchers in other disciplines to whom I might present the project, and an unknown audience of people who might own the books on my shelves in the future.

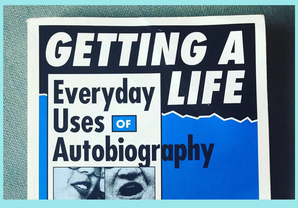
The project supports the position taken in my Practice Review (see *Part 1*) – to embrace, value – and in this case generate - a broad spectrum of references and connections for practice research (Salami 2020, Nelson 2013). As an outcome of a particular time within the arc of the PhD process, it is a clear product of the intersection of the scenographer's story, i.e., "I am working in lockdown isolation and writing my practice review" with questions from her ongoing practice i.e., "how do I wish to be a scenographer/researcher?". The project makes space for consideration of the 'institutions' of research and how the transmission and sharing of knowledge can enfold serendipity as well as more intentional network-building. It is therefore a continuation of *Dear John* and the 'radically soft' (Mathis 2015) feminist quest to challenge the environment in which one works (hooks 2001, Ahmed 2017/2021), this time reflecting on the institutional structures – i.e. universities, libraries, research territories - that hold the postgraduate scenographer-researcher.

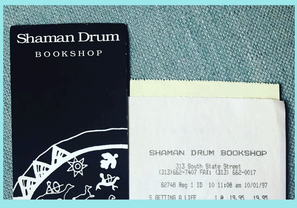


While I do not occupy the project in an embodied sense, *Book Marks* has a relationship to the feminist performance art of Bobby Baker in that it attempts to disrupt norms of research connection-making through the phenomenon of the 'happy accident', in the same way as Baker resisted her 'home' territory and training in fine art through the use of domestic materials, such as food, in her work (Baker 2019). *Book Marks* may therefore be read as a gentle provocation or protest, echoing the doctored library book covers of the playwright Joe Orton, which are referenced in the recorded presentation below. The project argues for greater space to be made for the 'who' of the researcher, as an extension of the motivation of *autoscenography* to foreground the 'who' of scenographic practice.

*Book Marks* explores *autoscenography* as a practice which happens on an intimate 'stage' of hard-copy books. The project is tangibly paper based in the same way as *Dear John* but aims to show how the intimacy and rootedness in lived experience of *autoscenography* also has the potential for significant reach in terms of the way it operates as scenography, in time and space, and with the continuing motif of distance in play. The creation of a paper artefact to be discovered in the pages of a book at an indeterminate time creates the possibility of a solo encounter with place re-orientation (Hann 2019) as I experienced on opening my second-hand copy of *Getting a Life: The Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (Smith and Watson 1996).

Like *Dear John*, *Book Marks* is a project that continues to reflect on the values of the originating scenographer-researcher, but this time in the context of practice research as opposed to the 'professional' practice of scenography. The project invites participation and shares the *autoscenographic* approach for the use and enjoyment of others, expanding the *autoscenographic* quality of the 'super-local' identified in *Autoscenography, She Wrote* to encompass the intimate physical stage of a hardcopy book, held by researchers past, present and future.




## Film

This project was presented as a paper to the Scenography Working Group at the TaPRA Conference in September 2021. It is twenty-one minutes long, accessible here as a short film. A transcript of the film commentary can be found here.



Having reached the final practical project of four, the next section will conclude this thesis by drawing together the overall findings of the project and identifying its original contribution to knowledge.



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A section of my writing-up planner - Conclusion period, Autumn 2021

## Conclusion

This thesis has presented a series of four practical projects, highlighting different - though related - dimensions of *autoescenography*.

This conclusive chapter will contain:

- The key findings from the project
- A case for the project's original contribution to knowledge
- An outline of the potential audience for this project and who it is useful to
- A delineation of the limits of the research and directions for future development
- A final summary of the practice of autoescenography

Where findings relate to a particular research question, these are indicated in brackets (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4).

As outlined in Part 1, here is a reminder of the different characters of each practical project, which predict the flavour of the overall project findings:

**Project 1 at *Scenographer, Mulks*** - *Autoescenography* as solo, embodied practice which foregrounds the superlocal relationship of the scenographer to the space they are moving through. This project explores material found in the scenographer's studio towards autoescenography and proposes the reflexive potential of the practice.

**Project 2: *The Hong Kong Family Album 1967–2016*** - *Autoescenography* that is situated in the present and the past, stemming from the personal materials of family history and which expands the scenographer's practice by inviting her to step into her own scenographic work.

**Project 3: *Post John*** - *Autoescenography* that embodies the personal values and politics of the scenographer, and which here marks a turning point in the way the scenographer chooses to practice. The project demonstrates an intimate turn in terms of scale and the interpretation of the *autoscenographic* quality of the 'super-local', while emphasising the reflexive power of *autoescenography* for the scenographer.

**Project 4: *Book Shelter*** - *Autoescenography* that reaches out to - and may be instigated in the same model by - other people. The project explores the capacity of *autoescenography* to operate temporally and offers a space for the scenographer to foreground the personal within research networks.

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### The Key Findings from the Project

*Autoescenography* has emerged as a personal, individual creative space that is specific to the practice of scenography and the unique experiences, environments, skills, and materials belonging to the scenographer. It offers an example of the contemporary tradition of scenography - and of the scenographer - as having developed a practice that is within the creation of performance work (Breuzon 2010, Staging Places 2009, Lorker & Gough 2015). It sits within a field of divergent practices which surround traditional understandings (Hann 2019) of what a stage designer might do and where they might do it. At the last sense, it is notable that *autoescenography* is made on 'stages' defined by the scenographer, which may be intimate or expansive in scale and which need not be designated theatre spaces. (RQ1 (RQ2)

Throughout the project, *autoescenography* has developed as a predominantly solo practice, that may collaborate with other people or phenomena within the making process or as part of its dissemination. *Autoescenography* can place the scenographer as the author of their own performance work and the experience of place-orientation this engenders (Hann 2019, Lorker & Gough 2015, McKinney & Butterworth 2009) This builds on the glimpses of the scenographer as receiver of the scenic surroundings, in encounters discussed within various scenic dramas spheres beyond the theatre (Arnott 2015, Hann 2019, Shearing 2015) and by those engaged in practice. (Ehnle 2020). (RQ1) (RQ2) (RQ3)

Beyond being the recipient of the scenographic experience, the body of the scenographer is often foregrounded as a part of autoescenography, whether in action, through spoken commentary, as part of a scenographic notebook, or as the route to making artefacts or as an acknowledged part of the machine of production. This connects with existing practice which merges bodies of work and scenography (Arnott 2015, Ackling Dharma), as seen throughout the practice of Louise Ann Wilson) but also highlights the 'hand' or hands of the crafting artist, as is visible through Rosie Ehnle's *Proper Loose* - discussed in Practice Review Part 2) and the autographical work of artists within other disciplines (Baker 2009, Bechtel 2006) (RQ1) (RQ2) (RQ3)

The practice of *autoescenography* can be a form of individual reflective practice sitting in parallel to other ways of 'doing' scenography, enabling scenographers to reflect on their values, professional aspirations and lived experience. This reflection can thereafter enhance the way in which they make their work. This truncation is visible in Rosie Ehnle's Project Loose), with a strong sense that scenography and practice also being visible in the work of practitioners from other disciplines (Bechtel 2006, Conti 2011, Mann 2016). (RQ1) (RQ2)

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As an adjunct to exploring the scenographer's values, *autoescenography* proposes a self-oriented practice that could feasibly be a model for engaging with larger themes within the discourses of expanded scenography. In considering their values and politics a scenographer might find themselves at the beginning of a journey with, for example, autoescenography, the ultimate result of which could be the consideration of a responsible practice in relation to social issues (Breuzon 2010, Ehnle & Hann 2020, Hann 2020 respectively). This positions *autoescenography* as being a part of the way in which a scenographer might explore or examine their work as scenographer. (RQ1) (RQ2) (RQ3)

In addition to findings related to scenographers, this project has embraced experimental visual approaches to doing and presenting practice research in scenography, offering alternatives to the traditional written thesis or literature review. (Arnott 2015, Hitzeroth & Osby 2018, Makela 2007). (RQ3) (RQ4)

*Autoescenography* is aligned with feminist strategies for plural forms of knowledge production (Salami, Nelson, Makela). It acknowledges the role of the personal in practice and builds space for practitioners whose training or work culture may propose them as thinkers rather than making artists or as those who 'just' make. Here gender may inform the experience of work within professional practice. (Brooks 2000/2001, Ahmed 2017, Baker 2017, Barnes 2018). While the original motivation for the feminist autoscenographic project (Ehnle & Hann 2020) was one of frustration, the feminist dimension of *autoescenography* is ultimately an outward rather than inward-context. Autoescenography creates a space to practice scenography that is meaningful to the individual scenographer. It does not require participation in institutional frameworks or hierarchy and resists (but does not exclude) established traditions of staging. (RQ1) (RQ2)

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## The Original Contribution to Knowledge

The project foregrounds the relationship between the scenographer's practice and their autobiography/lived experience which was formerly visible via limited example or as oblique glimpses within different modes of scenographic practice. This has the potential to enrich and extend scenographic practice, whether this lies in the production of the scenographer's own stage design or in practice research. *Autoescenography* is a practice which may encompass - but also operates beyond - autobiographical performance made by a scenographer. (RQ1) (RQ2)

The project offers the field of 'expanded scenography' a means to identify and celebrate artworks that sit at the intersection of the scenographer's lived experience and their scenographic practice. Using the model of scenography-scenographer-scenographies framed by Rachel Hann (Hann 2020) as a starting point, the project offers ways to define work of scenography that bear traces of autobiographical content, through to works of interiorised *autoescenography*, such as Rosie Ehnle's *Proper Loose*. (RQ1) (RQ2) (RQ3)

*Autoescenography* advances themes of agency present within contemporary discourse on scenography, found within discussion of the designer's role (Breuzon 2010, Staging Places 2009, Howard 2002, Hann 2019, Rayor 2009, Bryzek 2009) or within arguments for scenography as a uniquely powerful, stand-alone means of leading the formation of performance (Lorker & Gough 2015, Hann 2019, McKinney and Butterworth 2009). The project evidences a discrete strand of scenographic practice which challenges long established assumptions of stage design as a 'service' within the wider process of making performance. (RQ1) (RQ2)

The project builds on existing examples of *autoescenography* gleaned through the accounts of making, experiencing, or analysing scenography written and spoken by practitioners (McKinney 2015, Hann 2019, Shearing 2015, Herbert in Courtney 1995, Pavelka 2015, Howard 2002, Baugh 2005, Raven 2019, Beer 2020) and in the key example of *Proper Ehnle* 2020), to offer artistic references explicitly rooted in the experiences of being a scenographer's lived experience. It also aligns with practice which has been part of scenography. (RQ2)

Within a field of scenographic practice which is given a fresh example of the identified move towards creativity (Smith & Watson 2010 & 2018) by bringing together autobiographical performance and an individual practice of scenography, *autoescenography* offers a scenographer with a means to identify and celebrate their own practice as a form of autobiographical performance. The project also offers a path for established practitioners to step away from their institutional contexts and consider themselves in relation to their practice in a way that may be uncommon within their working life.

*Autoescenography* is proposed in counterpoint to the dominant mode of training of performance designers, theatre designers and scenographers, where the scenographer is envisaged as working within a professional or commercial theatre framework and is based on the role of the scenographer as a service provider. A scenographer may not have considered scenography as an independent practice because they have often been trained to serve within performance-making processes, rather than initiating or leading them.

*Autoescenography* may likewise appeal to theatre design practitioners who do not identify themselves as scenographers; but who may specialise in a particular dimension of performance design - the ethno-directors' professional disciplines of lighting or sound design, for example, or designers working within the different encodings of 'set and costume design' described as theatre, performance or stage design.

#### *Performance Design Education*

*Autoescenography* has the potential to engage students of performance design in *autoescenographic* practices to support their creative development and as part of their preparation for professional practice. In my own work, within the undergraduate programme for the conservatoire where I teach, I have included a module called *The Whole Designer* in which students have a hybrid diary-sketchbook, which is designed to sit at the intersection of who the designer is and the influences they absorb.

There is space within contemporary approaches to performance design training for projects that are self-initiated by emergent performance designers, and which might have lived experience at their core, thereby manifesting *autoescenography*.

#### *Other Design Disciplines*

*Autoescenography* potentially lends itself to other design disciplines that engage with similar elements, such as architecture, product design or fashion design, which approach scenographic themes of embodiment, space, environment, or atmosphere. It offers a way of approaching those practices that places the scenographer as a receiver of the scenographic practitioner at the centre of the work, in a way that may not be common within 'traditional' practice of the discipline.

#### *Practice Researchers*

This project offers a case study for people who may be considering a move from professional practice in the arts to practice research. This includes acknowledging the process of movement supporting future creative employment, reflecting on previous professional experience, and re-connecting with the fundamental principles and processes of their work while allowing them space to reflect on how and why they work in the way they do in their craft. The project also illustrates how professional life to practice research as one of growth and positive transformation. *Autoescenography* suggests a model for artists of other stripes who may wish to move from a system of employment for production or service, to practice for its own benefit.

For practice researchers looking for examples or models of ways to approach practice research and its dissemination, this project explores approaches that deviate from traditional, navigational modes of presentation and/or knowledge production. This project has attempted to expand the qualities and attributes of scenography into methods for practice research, and thus might prompt practice researchers of other disciplines to use scenography as a model for research enquiry or a methodology.

More generally, there are approaches within the project that are relevant to a range of artforms, including the use of conference papers as further the research journey, the blending of academic writing with the story of one's practice, and alternative formats for disseminating practice research. These methods could be adopted without committing to *autoescenography* as a practice.

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## The Limits of the Research

The project is situated in the perspective of a white-skinned, cis-gender, British, able-bodied woman in her forties, and this specificity limits the scope of any findings that are rooted in the autobiographical lived experience of the scenographer. Scenographers and their practices are plural, which means that while this project articulates and frames the practice of *autoescenography*, there will be multiple approaches to practising it that cannot be articulated by a single project driven by one scenographer.

This project errs on the side of intimacy or closeness to the scenographer, rather than expanding towards autobiographical performance made by a scenographer for a public audience. Making autobiographical performance was not a thought-map to practice research in the first place, but in examining what *autoescenography* is or can be, the scale of the work that has been made has shrunk, which naturally reflects a richer focus on what is happening when the scenographer's story meets her practice. The project has not explored public presentation of *autoescenography* beyond conference audiences, which arguably ignores the performed moment through a different lens.

The feminist response of this project to the structures and institutions that frame professional performance design stops short of a gendered analysis of the role of the scenographer, for example, how this may be read as a 'studio' wife hinting the ideas of silence or gendered assumptions about the non-scenographic responsibilities and presence, within design for space or costume. There is undoubtedly space for greater interrogation of sexism and patriarchal influences on professional performance design practice and within theatre production roles in general, but this lens has been a part of my professional experience, it is beyond the scope of this exploration of *autoescenography* to provide this analysis.

Through discussion of Rosie Ehnle's *Proper Loose*), the subjectivity of the scenographer was highlighted. The meaning of 'subjectivity' within this project is constrained by the notion of the scenographer's story, which has included personal history or lived experiences. There are other dimensions of subjectivity, sitting perhaps outside the scenographer's immediate awareness, which could form the basis for future research and analysis, such as the way that a designers' biases - beyond taste or aesthetic preference - might influence their scenographic output.

## Suggestions for Further Research

A clear avenue for further research is to explore what happens when *autoescenography* is made for a public audience. This might include exploring the effect of bringing *autoescenography* back into - or towards - the performance space or into a live performance that is theatrical rather than academic in context.

In terms of life-writing, there is space for the autobiography and lived experiences of scenographers to have greater prominence, bringing their visibility in line with the attention bestowed upon other theatre roles, such as the playwright, actor, or director. This would mean moving beyond publications documenting a lifetime of professional practice, towards understanding something of the scenographer in and between the underpinnings their work.

'Where the scenographer is' has been a significant part of this project, in terms of their location, their stage of creative development and their process. Having made more than one project in presentation which acknowledges and utilises the working space of the scenographer as one stage on which their work happens, there is more to be understood about the working environment of the scenographer and how this - as place, space, or as the scenography of the domestic or studio context - orientates (Ahmed 2006) their artistic output.

As outlined above, in the section on the limitations of this research, the theme of equity in scenographic practice glances the lived experience of any scenographer working with texts. Autobiographical projects focused on the lived experience of scenographers working within different professional and institutional contexts were likely to grow in number as the field of performance-making - and scenography within this - reflects on the different and often hidden ways in which *anti-discriminatory-an-experience-discrimination*. *Autoescenography* may have a role to play in bringing scenographers' stories into these important discussions.

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## Summary

*Autoescenography* is the scenographer-focused dimension of scenographic practice, through which the scenographer can explore:

- The nature of their training and modes of professional practice.
- Their values and accountability as an artist and practitioner.
- Their super-local, embodied relation to the materials and environment of their practice.
- The future for their professional/collaborative and independent scenographic practice.

The relationship of their lived experience and story to their practice, and the potential of these to inform and develop scenography.

*Autoescenography* is proposed to scenographers practising at all levels - including those in training, emerging into professional practice or after years of established work - as a nourishing, fruitful parallel practice to the prevailing ways one might 'do' the work of scenography. It offers an opportunity to interpret traditional forms of scenographic practice - when collaboration or design as 'service-provision' may be the habitual modes of working - by affirming the story (identity, values, history) of the artist-maker as the primary component of practice.

*Autoescenography* contributes to the discourses around 'expanded' scenography, agency, and the autonomy of the designer, by offering a route through which scenography can be framed as an artform or mode of self-expression. This could herald a transition away from unexpected contexts of performance design work towards a personal artistic practice, which may represent re-invention and re-orientation for the scenographer, enabling them to re-think their place in the traditional hierarchies and power-dynamics of theatre production. This potentially has a bearing on the values they communicate to their peers.

Rosie Ehnle's *Proper Loose*) was a rare example of a scenographer making practical *autoescenography*, through a web-based interactive experience with intimate narrative provided by the scenographer. This example offers a model - alongside this thesis - for the way in which the intersection between the life of the scenographer and their practice may be creatively explored - by scenographers, theatre designers, performance designers - through design, performance and/or scenography.

To conclude on a personal note, through autoescenography, I have been able to evolve a 'set and costume design' practice into a rewarding mode of research enquiry that has detached itself from the conditions that can make performance design feel facilitatory or disembodied. With space to consider my subjective relation to my work as a scenographer I have opened the door to a spectrum of alternative ways in which I - and now also others - can choose to practice in future.

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A PhD bookshelf in my new workroom, 2021.

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Schneeman, Carolee

Shepherd, Nan

Spence, Jo

Turner, Cathy

Wilson, Louise Ann


Beyond the writers, researchers, practitioners, artists and works cited in the Bibliography and Reference List, please see the following section for people I would like to thank for their contribution to the development of this thesis.



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Vintage transfers bought while in Cork to design a pantomime, with a view to supporting *Dear John* - unused at present.

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