Title: “Burnout”: Confronting Transition through Creative Practice

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Lydia Trethewey is an artist living and working in Perth, WA. She completed her PhD in 2018 at Curtin University and works as an online tutor in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry. Her research focuses on everyday travel and suburban landscapes, and experiences of daydream, habit and “quotidian-sublimity”. She has presented papers previously at the ACUADS (2016), AAANZ (2015, 2016, 2017) and Impact 9 (2015) conferences. Selected exhibitions include Here & Now: New Photography at Lawrence Wilson Gallery (2017), The Paths Themselves Become Unstable at Paper Mountain (2017) and Slippages at Free Range (2016).

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‘Burnout’: Confronting Transition through Creative Practice

Keywords: Creative practice, PhD, Transition, Busyness, Irony

Abstract

In the months following the completion of my PhD, I was at a loss; 2018 marked the first time I would no longer be in full time study, a transitional period in which I found myself confronting instability. This paper examines the creative works I made in response to this uncertainty and accompanying listlessness, which were exhibited in April 2018 as a solo show titled *Burnout*. In adjusting to new realities, I utilised creative practice as a way to understand post-PhD life and reflect upon the role of compulsive busyness in my PhD experience. Creative practice thus became a strategy for dealing with what social psychologist Robert Levine describes as the ‘awkwardness and terror of having nothing to do’ (1997, 41). Utilising imagery of flat suburban landscapes in conjunction with semi-diaristic text, I attempted to address this unanticipated feeling of loss with both irony and honesty, negotiating complicated feelings of relief and absence. I simultaneously enjoyed my unfettering from the stress of the PhD, and found myself listless, forced to contend with my own need to be constantly busy. In this situation, creative practice became a way to endure transition but also a symptom of my inability to stop working. This paper situates such a response in relation to the pressures of working in the neoliberal university, the problems of self-help rhetoric, and the associated issues of creativity as productivity. In probing the artworks in *Burnout*, this paper analyses creative practice not simply as a means to comment on or cope with transition, but as an instinctive response which is difficultly knotted into experiences of loss, change and work-identity. In doing so, it seeks to critique some of the alienating structures of academia and post-PhD experience.

Introduction

When reflecting on my own artistic practice, I find myself slipping into an ironic mode of engagement. The term ‘irony’ functions in two distinct ways in this paper: firstly, ‘visual irony’ is used as a description of how photographic images can allude to something beyond themselves, whilst appearing to remain resolutely neutral; and secondly, the tone of the paper itself might be deemed ironic, as I play at being self-reflexive whilst avoiding making the final perceptions that could arise from this analysis. Irony, as an approach to confronting uncomfortable realities, allows for a kind of critical distance whilst simultaneously drawing me closer to otherwise nascent self-realisations. In this space between evaluation and denial, irony meanders from personal reflection to institutional critique, a vehicle for understanding the ambiguity around loss, relief and transition in the experience of post-PhD life.

In a more straightforward way, the existence of this paper is itself somewhat ironic. At a previous ACUADS conference in 2016, I presented a paper titled ‘Doing Nearly-Nothing: Alveolic Thoughts and Fermented Images’ (Trethewey 2016), in which I proposed that doing nothing could be a crucial part of creative practice, and that allowing oneself to act habitually, though seemingly counter-intuitive, could actually be beneficial. In contrast, the present paper will argue the opposite, that I don't know how to do nothing, that the act of 'doing nothing' is often ensnared within larger systems of compelled productivity, and that when faced with an excess of time I compulsively try to fill it. This paper inverts my previous position: in 'Doing Nearly-Nothing' I suggested that doing nothing is important in fuelling creative practice; in this paper, I examine how creative practice can be a way of confronting doing nothing. This change arose during a transitional phase in my life – I finished a PhD, struggled with conflicting senses of loss and relief, and made a body of work, titled *Burnout*, in attempt to cope – but it also involves a shift in critical perspective and acknowledgement of the broader context in which the works were made. Specifically, the precariousness of sessional university work, the shouldering of societal issues by individuals, and the blurring of distinctions between 'work' and 'play', all come into focus in this analysis. *Burnout* formed as a response to change; this paper examines the creation of those works in order to consider the role of creative practice in confronting transition, as well as the way it might be situated within larger systems of individualised productivity[1].

Given that this analysis is grounded in my own experiences of undertaking and completing a PhD, it's important to provide some brief background information on my research and transition from study. I began my PhD in 2014, focusing on sensations of quotidian-sublimity in everyday car travel, and how these might be alluded to through photographic-based solvent works. In general I enjoyed doing a PhD, and though it was difficult, stressful and at times exhausting, it was also largely frictionless and devoid of major setbacks. I managed to side-step imposter syndrome, though I often felt tired and at times overwhelmed. Undertaking a PhD in Australia, in the humanities, meant that there was no coursework component, little time spent on campus, and in addition I received a scholarship which eased living costs. I had fun, when I wasn't panicking about conference deadlines or concepts that wouldn't cohere. This led, perhaps inevitably, to feelings of guilt. Paula Hanasz writes about the impulse to downplay the enjoyable aspects of doing a PhD in her article 'PhD Lifestyle Guilt' (2013), in which she contrasts the flexibility of independent study with working a nine-to-five job. In order to assuage her guilt, she tried to fill her days with 'real' PhD work, not including time spent checking emails or reading unrelated papers (Hanasz 2013). Similarly, I set strict hours and arbitrary deadlines for myself, just to feel like I was working; the implication being that work shouldn't be fun. Additionally, I experienced some anxiety centred on debates around the legitimacy of practice-led research itself, and its lack of what Lucille Holmes (2012) calls 'certainty'. One effect of this was that I had difficulty articulating problems when I did encounter them, and talking about the pressure and stress associated with doing a PhD felt like privileged 'moaning.'[2] Despite this I made it through my PhD relatively unscathed, and in November 2017, I submitted my exegesis and artworks for examination.

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[1] The focus in this paper isn't on catharsis, or the therapeutic benefits of making art, but on creative practice as a kind of busyness and its situation, in academia, within neoliberal structures. What is under consideration is whether making art as part of the post-PhD experience is doing nothing, a form of compulsive busyness, or both. Where this paper touches upon the idea that making art might replace seeking other kinds of help, it does so only to the extent of considering the role of 'self-help' paradigms in redefining structural problems as personal.

Having a temporary reprieve from my research, I found myself adrift in a void named 'free time'. I promptly fled the country, hoping to outrun the knowledge that my work was in the hands of the examiners, however after a few weeks I had to return. I came home tired and restless, plagued with a sense of emptiness which I hadn't yet recognised as loss. By February 2018, having completely failed to enjoy my free time, and wondering what was wrong with me, I set about making a new body of work to confront my inability to sit still. These works employed a visual language that was new to me; photography without solvent, and text printed onto calico pieces (figure 1). Perhaps I was unprepared for the transition out of study. There's a common anecdote which circulates about a particular period of the PhD journey in which a person loses sight of why they're doing it. *The Thesis Whisperer*, an online blog run by Inger Mewburn, gives this idea the delightfully scatological name of 'The Valley of Shit' (2012). She describes it as 'that period of your PhD, however brief, when you lose perspective and therefore confidence and belief in yourself,' (Mewburn 2012, para. 7). I didn't visit that particular valley during my PhD[3], but maybe I got there eventually in the aftermath of conferral; I lost perspective, I didn't know what to do, and I plunged off the precipice of post-PhD despair. This despair emerged through and was characterised by two conflicting feelings: loss, and relief. The immediate post-PhD period was one of transition, from relative stability into uncertain terrain, and I dealt with it the only way I knew how: through making art.

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[2] This was especially the case when I read about the experiences of PhD students in other countries, particularly the U.S.A. In *The Unruly PhD*, a collection of stories from recent PhD graduates, one person wrote 'In the end, the only thing that worked was eliminating every source of pleasure from my life – contact with friends and family, good food, exercise, non-academic reading, TV. Facing such a bleak existence forced me to write my way out of my self-created misery' (Peabody 2014, 57). Much of the discussion around experiences of PhD study was filled with similarly extreme accounts, which made my problems seem insignificant in comparison.

[3] This in itself gives me a kind of weird, retroactive imposter syndrome. Reading through all the blog posts and articles opining about The Valley of Shit, I feel like I missed out on something important. Perhaps I wasn't doing the PhD right.

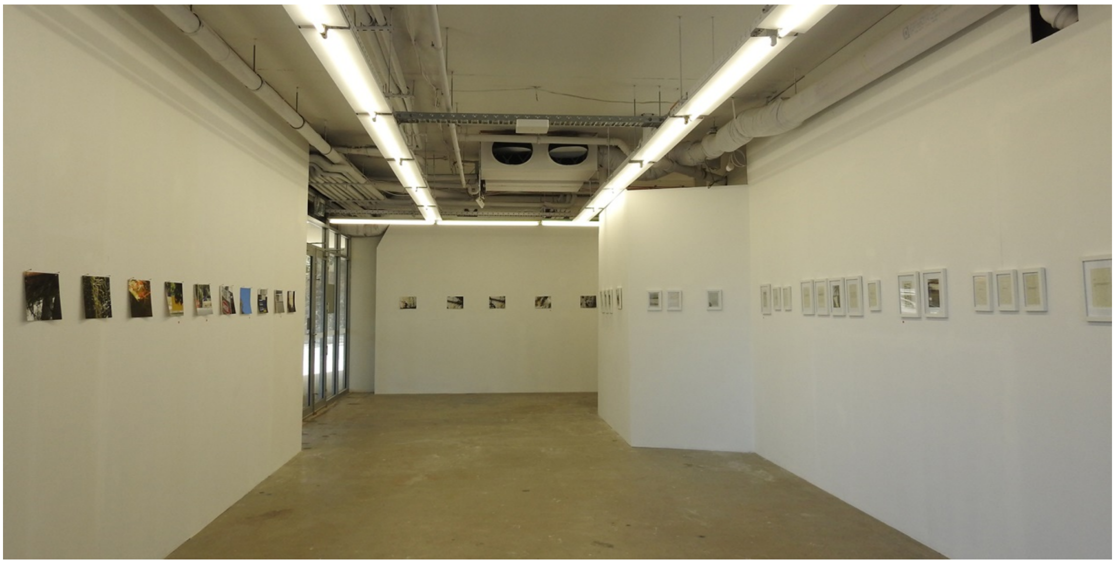

Figure 1: *Burnout*, April 2018, Wish You Were Here Gallery, East Fremantle

Irony

An undercurrent of irony runs through the works in *Burnout*, perhaps most evident in the use of visual irony in the photographs which affects a simultaneous act of revealing and withholding. This was not a specific intention or objective I had when putting together the exhibition, but arose organically through the subject matter I'd chosen to work with. Half of the exhibition was photographic images, and these, similar to some I'd made during my PhD, were snapshots of my suburban surroundings (figure 2). During my PhD I'd found the everyday quotidian intriguing[4], however when I became mired in it, without a project to frame my experiences, suburbia decomposed into a series of mundane, frustratingly anonymous landscapes in which I became trapped. I could no longer penetrate the meaning of my surroundings as I had before. Suburbia was emptied of what had initially fascinated me, and so I used it as a parallel for the emptiness in my interior landscape. Thus irony plays out in the artworks as a simultaneous act of revealing and concealing; the flat suburban landscapes, unselfconsciously composed, don't seem to convey anything about me personally, and, presented as personal statements they serve to conceal the reality of my experience through innocuous subject matter. Yet, this concurrently means that they do reveal something of the underlying situation, as via their very emptiness they hint towards a particular flatness of experience. Imagery of road surfaces, chain link fences and palm trees thus reveal and conceal simultaneously, using irony as a mode of tentative honesty. These photographic works were paired with semi-diaristic text prints on calico, and therefore were read in conjunction with more explicitly personal expressions. As a visual counterpoint to the downbeat revelations in text, the photographic works seem obdurate in the withholding of information, a surrogate for my own reluctance to open up.

A perhaps unexpected derivation of this visual irony is the work of 1960s photoconceptual artists, such as Ed Ruscha. In photoconceptualism, there is a tension between concept and image that is often productive of irony, for example in the suggestion of suburban aspiration through flat, unremarkable planes in Ruscha's *Some Los Angeles Apartments*. These works are 'ironic' in the way they form a hinge between boredom and interest. As Sylvia Wolf notes, in Ruscha's photobooks there is an accumulation of typical street vernacular without visual hierarchy, such that nothing – palm trees, parked cars, street lights – stands out as the sole focus. This is not simply a presentation of the everyday but a hint towards the vastness of a city as an immensity of the unremarkable. Thus the visual irony: alienation suggests aspiration; ordinary alludes to immensity; ontic produces ontological. As Jon Leaver (2004) posits in his essay 'Urban Sublime: Visualizing the Immensity of Los Angeles' the mass of typical detail in Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* seems to suggest that the rest of the city is much like the view of this one street, that the immeasurable complexity of L.A. is in essence made from the humdrum detail of utility poles and vacant lots. In Ruscha's work ordinary minutiae approach a kind of sublimity, becoming visually ironic. Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category of the 'interesting' might also be applied here. For Ngai, an image is interesting when characterised by indeterminacy and capacity for duration, and can be said to begin in uncertainty, with the viewer unsure of their exact feeling. The visually ironic nature of many photoconceptual artworks provokes this response, which is necessarily steeped in indistinctness. The photographic works in *Burnout* seek this same effect on the viewer, offering an ambiguous understanding of the ambivalence of suburban experience, in the aftermath of a PhD. The superficially 'neutral' appearance of the photographs sets up this pivot between boredom and interest. Thus despite the radically personal nature of the works, which depart from photoconceptual concerns with concepts, the visual irony in *Burnout* finds its lineage in artists like Ruscha.

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[4] Sublime, even.

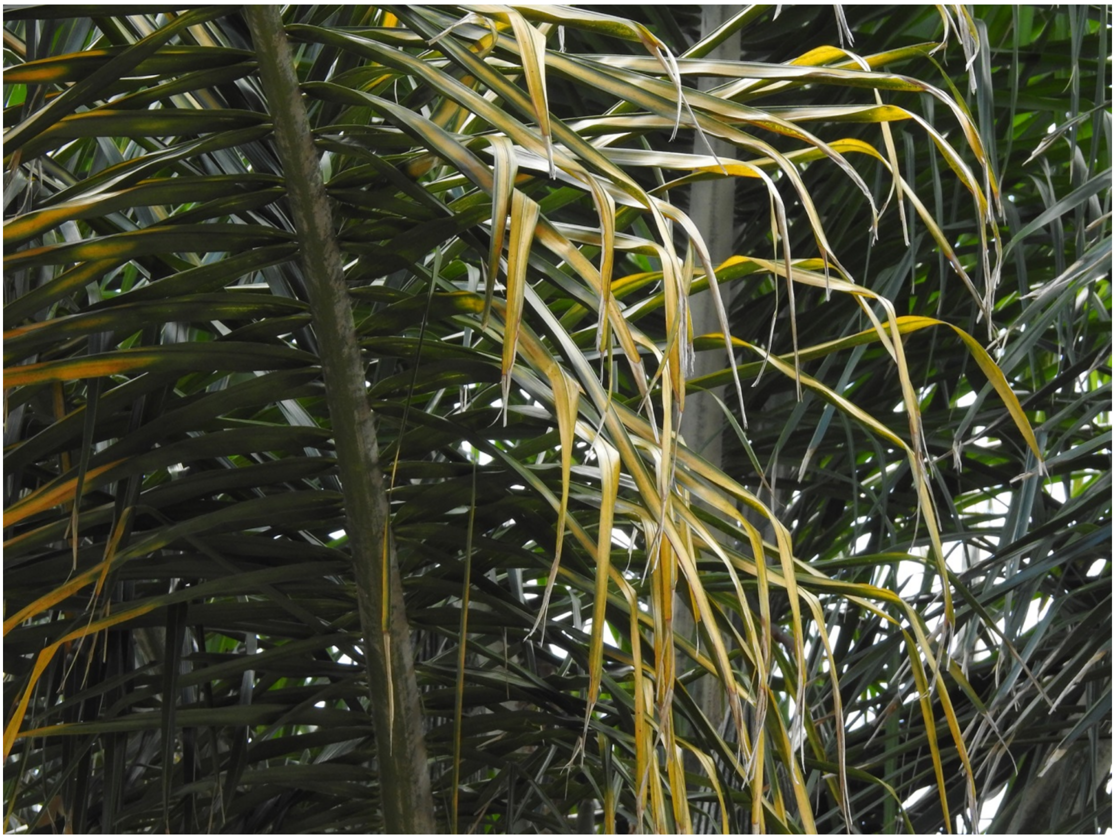

Figure 2: *Forty-Nine*, 2018, Lydia Trethewey, digital print, 20 x 26.7cm

The re-evaluation of my post-PhD life in suburbia also found a somewhat ironic expression through a contrast with the content of my PhD research. Part of my research had involved examining Marc Augé's concept of non-place. In his book *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2008), Augé posited that there are anthropological places in which people can engage meaningfully with their surroundings, and there are non-places which are sites of transit like shopping malls and airport lounges, in which a person can't recognise their own presence. In my exegesis I argued that non-places didn't exist as Augé conceptualised them, and that in setting up a dichotomy between place and non-place he overemphasised the paralysing and homogeneous elements of the latter[5]. At the same time, I'm undeniably attracted to the idea of non-places, and wish they could exist so that I might visit one and disappear from my thoughts for a while. I'd wrestled with this conflicted interest throughout my PhD, knowing on the one hand that non-place was not applicable to my research, and on the other pining for a way to numb my obsessive thoughts, to exist in transit. In the work *Anonymity is a Kind of Liberation,* 2018, (figure 3) I extracted text from a paper I'd written during my PhD, 'Liminal Zones and Interstitial Practices' (Trethewey 2017), and printed it over one of the bland, suburban landscapes I'd photographed. The text reads: 'Living in the suburbs now, I experience a simultaneous feeling of possibility and alienation, what Augé identifies as the way anonymity can be felt as a kind of liberation'[6]. Here, my conflicting ideas found uneasy expression, my PhD research re-contextualised through the post-PhD experience. I further expressed this through the metaphor of the ellipsis, in the work *Ellipses,* 2018, (figure 4) in which the text reads: 'I want to be suspended between existences, like an ellipsis'. The ellipsis here becomes a literary non-place, a transit between meaningful words. Ellipsis longings become a synonym for non-place, an in-between existence emptied of meaning, and yet pregnant with meaning through the ironic evocation of the pause. The works in *Burnout* might then be read as a manifesto for disappearing into suburban banality as a way to escape post-PhD despair, and embrace non-place. The overall irony is that in wanting to disappear, to be anonymous, I printed my innermost thoughts and put them up on a gallery wall; in trying to evoke the flatness of existence, I inadvertently drew attention to its contours, and exposed myself to anyone willing to look.

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[5] As Peter Merriman (2004, 148) points out, if a non-place necessitates detachment and lack of presence, observation and analysis of a non-place is rendered impossible.

[6] For context, the longer passage reads: *If I weren't being cynical though, I would trace the origins of my fascination for edgelands to having grown up in the Perth hills, which have a different kind of environment, lacking the labyrinths of housing estates and sentinel palm trees that so afflict my practice. Living in the suburbs now, I experience a simultaneous feeling of possibility and alienation, what Augé identifies as the way anonymity can be felt as a kind of liberation (Augé 2008, 81).*

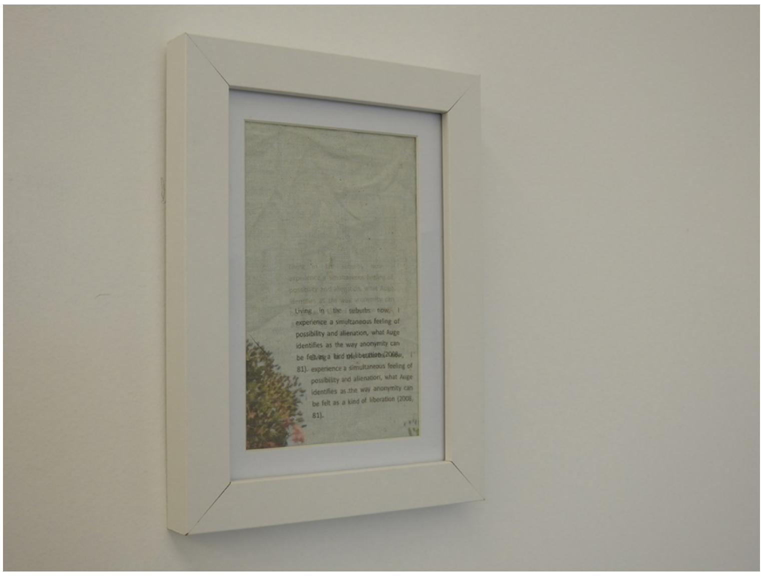

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Figure 3: *Anonymity is a Kind of Liberation,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm

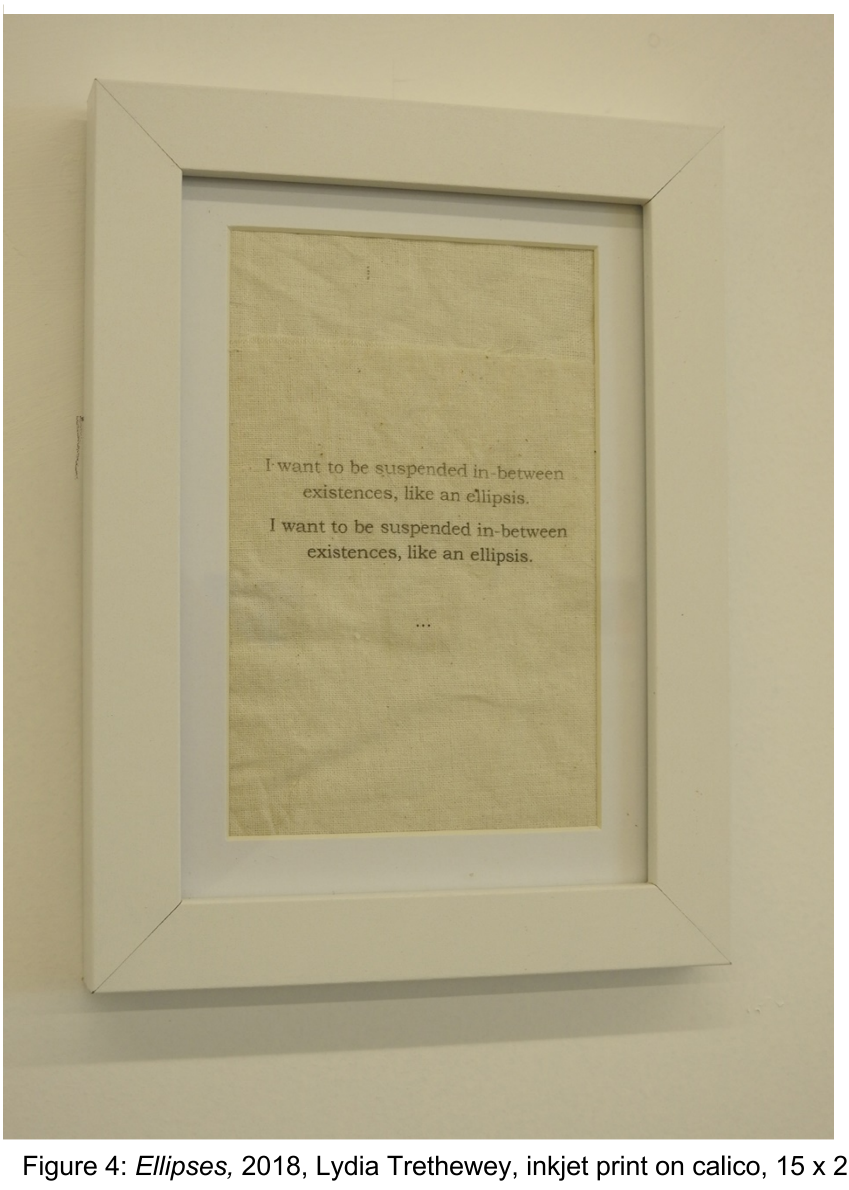

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Figure 4: *Ellipses,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm

Loss and Relief

Central to the text works in *Burnout* was the probing of loss and relief in relation to transition and passing time, and the use of calico was one way in which this manifested. The ideas of relief afflicted by loss, and of the material specificity of calico, can be analysed through a series of three works titled *What Hayley Told Me*, 2018, *What Nat Told Me*, 2018, and *What Brie Told Me*, 2018, (figure 5). These consisted of quotations from people I know who hadn't done a PhD but were lending me perspective on loss and transition from the substance of their own experiences. The quotes were distilled from longer conversations, in person and online, and printed onto a piece of found calico. The calico itself became resonant for me, as a meeting point of physical and conceptual senses of passing time. I'd bought the calico at the end of 2013, when I finished my undergraduate study, with the intention of painting on it. This project never materialised however, and instead the fabric drifted with me between houses, into new studios, gathering dust and becoming dirtied with the surrounding projects I worked on. I'd originally chosen calico for its rawness, and I got to thinking that somehow in its warp and weft were collected the memories of the intervening years. I started to cut into it, taking out chunks from all four edges, working towards the centre, thinking that when it had all disappeared the project would be over, and I'd find in that absence some kind of peace. Which of course isn't how it eventuated, but it was a comforting idea at the time. In printing words on this particular piece of material, I drew together the two ends of my PhD, the beginning and the terminus, experienced as two gaps; one coloured by anticipation of something new, one a mourning of something past.

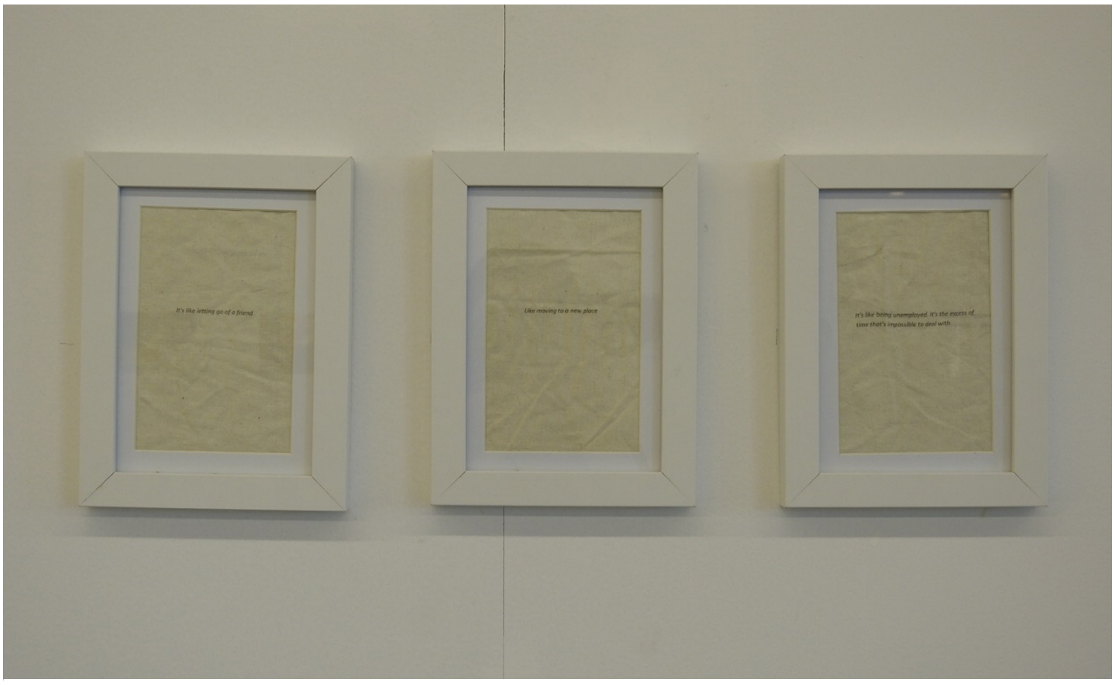
It's like letting go of a friend
Like moving to a new place
It's like being unemployed. It's the excess of time that's impossible to deal with

Figure 5: (left to right) *What Hayley Told Me,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm; *What Nat Told Me,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm; *What Brie Told Me,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm

The text in these three works also reflected intertwined senses of loss and relief in a way that connected my post-PhD despair to other experiences of transition. In *What Hayley Told Me,* the text reads: ‘It’s like losing a friend.’ This became for me the closest articulation of what finishing a PhD felt like. It wasn’t like losing a job, or a purpose, though aspects of each might have been in play. It was the loss of something that I’d been with for a long time, not simply a way of passing the day or a fragment of my identity, but something that I’d come to think of as being outside of myself; a familiar; a friend. In making this work, another person’s words came to be a point of entry into my own sadness, and allowed me to frame my experience as one of loss. Further, it enabled me to be comfortable with my feelings, because it’s ok to feel sad when you lose a friend. Similarly, the text in *What Nat Told Me* re-framed the completion of a PhD in terms of transition. The text reads: ‘Like moving to a new place’. Whether this was intended metaphorically or practically, this was useful in positioning the completion of a PhD as a change in the everyday experience of habitation. Beyond the PhD, I was in unfamiliar terrain, and my daily existence was inflected by a sense of dislocation. I no longer knew where I was. The evocation of a new place fit with my conflicting senses of disruption and anticipation, and allowed me to consider doing a PhD in terms of home, belonging and displacement. In the gallery, the visually concise language of calico and text sought to convey these realisations to the viewer. Through these two works, and the extended conversations that surrounded them, I thus allowed myself to think of a PhD not as a project or occupation but a place, a friend; it therefore made sense that letting go was troubled by senses of apprehension and abandonment.

Self-Help and Privatising Stress

The sense of loss I experienced at the end of my PhD, compounded and complicated as it was by the ingrained idea that I should be experiencing relief, is also associated with a pernicious drive for continuous productivity. This tension raised what was perhaps the core question of the exhibition: is creative practice a tactic for dealing with transition, or is it a symptom of an instinct to keep busy? Again, this can be contextualised both in terms of my own experience, and more broadly in relation to the structure of the neoliberal university. Finishing my PhD marked the first time I hadn’t been a student, which meant I was twenty-five before I found myself in a world without the structure provided by full time study. This wasn’t as scary or disorienting as I had anticipated, but I struggled with a paralysing excess of time, and the accompanying feeling that I should be doing something more[7]. The work *What Brie Told Me* addresses this listlessness through the parallel of unemployment, with text reading ‘It’s like being unemployed. It’s the excess of time that’s impossible to deal with.’ It’s hard to do nothing, if you think you should be doing something. Relief and potential leisure become easily contaminated with guilt at being idle. In ‘Doing Nearly-Nothing’, I’d claimed that ‘in a productivity-oriented society, it is difficult to do nothing’ (Trethewey 2016). At the time, I wasn’t fully aware how applicable this would be to myself. Robert Levine in *A Geography of Time* points out that we tend to think of inactivity as a waste, dead time, which he describes as the ‘awkwardness and terror of having nothing to do’ (1997, 41). By contrast, he suggests that keeping busy is thought of as good, so that even so-called leisure time is planned and eventful.

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[7] At this time, I was teaching at the university.

Similarly, Ivor Southwood in *Non-Stop Inertia* makes the pessimistic proclamation that work-life balance is an oscillation between 'mindless drudgery and equally mindless leisure' (2011, 45). In both cases, there's an emphasis on the impulse to fill time, whether with worthwhile pursuits or not. Rebecca Solnit, in her history of walking, *Wanderlust* (2002), highlights this as a tension between being productive and being free, contending that out constant bid towards efficiency ultimately means that free time itself is eradicated, as we maximise productivity instead. Therefore in a productivity-oriented society, it's difficult to do nothing, to feel relief at having spare time, as we feel a constant pressure to keep busy.

Criticisms of productivity in the context of post-PhD experiences might be further considered in relation to the idea of 'self-help'. Southwood (2011) addresses the issues of self-help mentalities in relation to looking for work, writing that unemployment is increasingly fashioned not as a societal problem, but an individual one; if you can't find a job, it's not because there aren't enough jobs, but because there's something deficient in you, e.g. you're not outgoing enough, hardworking enough or positive enough. The logic follows that, to get a job, all that's needed is to work on such issues on an individual level. Finding a job is thus re-framed from a structural issue to one of self-help and self-improvement, and the onus of unemployment shifted from societal circumstances to personal ones. As a by-product, 'jobseekers' feel as if it's their own fault if they can't find a job: self-help quickly becomes self-blame (Southwood 2011). This paradigm of self-help can be extended to experiences of post-grad study. Catherine Oakely, writing about her own experiences in *High-functioning Depression and Anxiety and the PhD* contends that:

> A disabling emphasis on individual responsibility shifts 'blame' for mental illness onto the sufferer. The nature of depression and anxiety, compounded by the rhetoric of 'self-care' mean that we heap opprobrium on ourselves for 'not coping' with the demands of our work, and conclude that we may not be 'cut out' for an academic career (2016).

Analysing creative practice as a strategy for dealing with transition from study, it perhaps could be argued that catharsis in art-making in this context is just another way of shifting responsibility onto the individual. Thinking that I needed to help myself, and making art to cope with my experiences, might have been a way of avoiding seeking out more professional help, or questioning the broader structures surrounding my predicament.

Within academia, the constant drive towards productivity can also be linked to a self-censoring trend in which structural problems are reframed as personal, and personal problems remain unspoken. Rosalind Gill (2009), in her paper 'Breaking the Silence: the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university' lists job casualisation, erasure of the boundaries between work and play, and the need to constantly be updating amongst the problems facing academic staff. Significantly, this precariousness is treated as an individual experience rather than a structural failure on behalf of the university (Gill 2009). This can be understood in terms of neoliberalism more generally, and the pathologising aspect of neoliberalism in particular. As Nicole Aschoff (2015, 87) points out, the locus of the neoliberal attention is the self, assumed as autonomous and independent, such that the structural forces which limit life choices are ignored.

Through appeal to popular psychology, workers are led to believe that positive thoughts and individual actions will generate positive outcomes (Aschoff 2015, 86), and conversely that problems are deserved, through lack of ingenuity or laziness. In this way the problems that Gill identifies are re-framed as personal, rather than structural. In Ron Roberts' terms, the neoliberal university model seeks to 'privatise stress' (2018, 91). In one sense, then, making art as a reaction to anxiety and alienation might function like the 'inward gaze' of neoliberal agendas, involving a tacit acceptance of the idea that the artist/academic is the arbiter of their own destiny. I make art to self-soothe rather than demand that the system change, and then try to exploit that art as a kind of research output[8]. Of course, the idea that the shrinking number of permanent positions in academia is in any way within my control is absurd, so this sense of power is illusory and fleeting. Coupled with the redirection of blame from the institution to the individual is a reluctance to criticise. As Gill (2009) states, 'hardship can be masked – and rendered difficult to speak of – by academics' educational and cultural capital'. In academia, attempting to articulate experiences of exhaustion, overload, anxiety, fraudulence, stress and guilt can be interpreted as 'moaning', rather than a demand for change (Gill 2009). Additionally, the idea that one's research is a passion or kind of self-expression is used to justify and tolerate uncertainty, self-exploitation and unprofitability (Gill 2009). The idea that academic work is enjoyable, combined with the lore of the 'intellectual', binds academics to the neoliberal regime (Gill 2009). In this context, creative practice reformulated as research, carried out in order to cope with an uncertain future in academia, might be said to function as a kind of self-censorship.

The degree to which creative practice can be a kind of self-expression, balanced against potential self-censorship, might be analysed further in the context of personal struggle and neoliberal attempts at empiricising emotion. Language plays a significant role here. The work *I had the same thought,* 2018*,* (figure 6), contains the phrase 'I had the same thought over and over today, but now I can't remember what it was,' printed repeatedly on the calico. Some of the text is layered to the point where the words dissolve into a knotty blackness, at times on slight angles, and with the letters warping and the words disrupted. Importantly, it's impossible to read the entire phrase on one line, as it doesn't exist fully anywhere in the work. The words have to be pieced together and read in a disjointed, disconnected way. I'd intended that this would reflect the experiences of disjunction which had come to be central to my daily post-PhD experience. During the first few months of 2018, I'd have the same looping thought for hours, with nowhere to direct it, yet by the end of the day I'd be so tired I couldn't remember what that thought had been. I paced a lot; in the absence of something to sit and do, I was adrift, walking back and forth through my house for four, sometimes five hours a day. I'd just walk, and try to stop thinking, but I could never escape the thought loops. Solnit poses walking as one of the few activities which brings us closest to doing nothing (2002). It feels productive, but allows us space to daydream. I don’t think she had my nervous pacing in mind, though maybe I walked as some unconscious, anxious allowance to myself. I attempted to transcribe these experiences through written language into the artworks. The idea that language can be used to express internal realities has been increasingly beset by neoliberal applications of neuroscientific advances. As William Davies (2017, 21 - 22) notes in ‘The Politics of Silent Citizenship’, developments in neuroscience have led to a situation in which inner subjective moods are treated as pre-interpretive matters of fact, with an aim to render emotions as objects of empirical knowledge. Within this framework, as Davies states, ‘the authority of language is reduced to one of unreliable reporter of some internal, non-cultural physical reality’(2017, 25). However in works like *I had the same thought* the primacy of language as an expression of feeling is emphasised, and the ambiguous nature of internal realities remains intact through layering and repetition. In this milieu, the intensely inwards-facing nature of the work might be understood as a reassertion of the ineffability of emotional experience rather than an inability to criticise, paradoxically confirmed through creative practice as self-expression.

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[8] A further line of inquiry on this point would be to consider the differences between practice-led research and creative practice. As noted by Scott Brook (2012), the term 'practice-led research' became dominant in Australia in 2005, following changes in policy agenda, and is understood to mean research *through* practice, rather than research *into* or *about* practice. The works in *Burnout* were made without a research objective, and perhaps don't fall into the category of practice-led research at all. Maybe this paper is an attempt to retroactively fit them into a research framework, in order to redefine a personal practice as one with career merit.

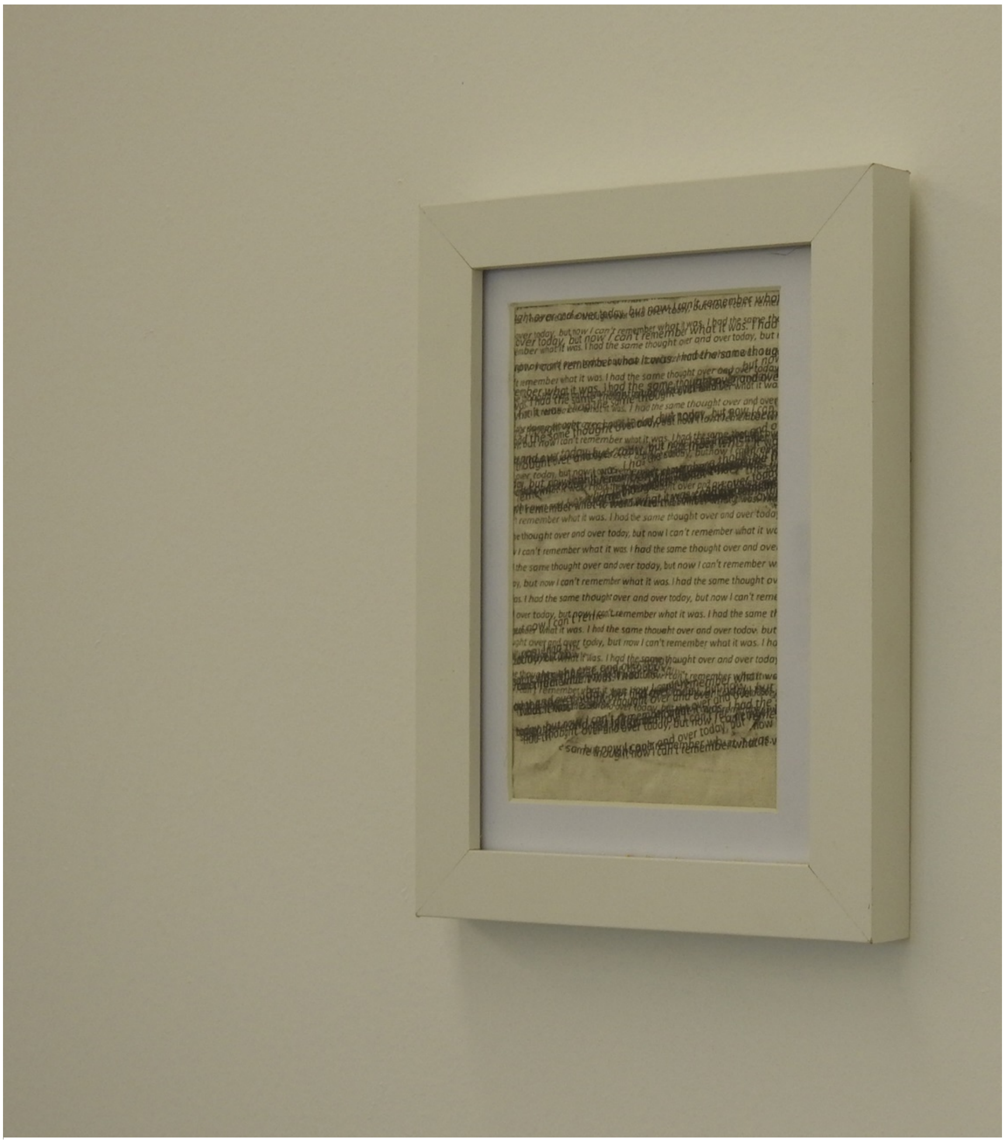

Figure 5: *I had the same thought,* 2018, Lydia Trethewey, inkjet print on calico, 15 x 20cm

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the problems with trying to fit practice-led research into models based on scientific research (with objectives and clear data outcomes) is that we forget that, sometimes, experiments fail. It may be the case that *Burnout* is a failure, that in seeking to ease my transition from PhD study through creative practice, I inadvertently reinforced neoliberal ideologies around work and productivity. Making the works, and putting them together as an exhibition, did partially alleviate my sense of restlessness by giving my something to do, but at the same time, it entrenched me deeper in an attitude of constant busyness and forced me towards admitting that I'm complicit in a productivity-oriented culture, even when I don't need to be. In this paper I tried to remain detached and ironic, to steer clear of navel-gazing and rampant subjectivity, but again, I fear that this has failed. Irony may have allowed me to confront uncomfortable realities, but ultimately has prevented me from easy solutions. As far as key realisations, the most I can say is, creative practice can be a form of self-expression, reinforcing the value of subjectivity in confronting loss, relief and change, but also the very act of making art, within the context of the neoliberal university, becomes an acquiescence to constant busyness and the blurring lines between work and play. Yet without creative practice, I wouldn't have been able to address the inherent irony of doing something in order to do nothing.

I opened this paper by asserting that it was somewhat ironic, that last time I presented at the ACUADS conference I was championing the importance of doing nothing, and then I actually experienced doing nothing, and found it was fairly awful. In this paper I've considered the role of creative practice in dealing with transition, the limitations of self-help paradigms, and the way art-making might be both a tactic and a symptom within academia. I could propose, tentatively, that what creative practice has done in this case is make apparent the limits of its own existence within broader cultural and personal structures. But instead of doing that, I'm going to end by saying, when the exhibition of *Burnout* finished I did feel a little better, not because I made art, but because I spoke to other people throughout the show, and I realised I wasn't alone. In retrospect, I could have just done that to start with, and not made a new body of work. Instead, I'm writing about the exhibition, about my brush with post-PhD despair, because distilling my experiences into a kind of creative output is the only way I know how to deal with my feelings: honestly, but from a distance, and with a good dose of irony.

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