

Trust Fall

Rubbing rocks and the irreconcilability of objects

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A gloomy landscape frames a worn yet charismatic stone, carried to the Alberta foothills centuries ago by receding glaciers. Around the rock is a trampled path of dirt and plants that was imprinted onto the land by bison who rubbed against the rock to shed their winter coats. Hidden off to the side is an artist, patiently gathering video footage of this rock and its material history. Thus begins a relationship between a migrant stone, a herd of prairie animals and an artistic intuition about the importance of watching and listening to the environment around us.



■ Rubbing Rock, 2016.
Photo © Maria Whiteman

Bison shed their tattered winter coats by repeatedly rubbing against this glacial erratic. The Rubbing Stone came from Mt. Edith Cavell near Jasper during the last glaciation surge which began retreating 15,000 to 12,000 years ago. A landslide probably thrust a chunk of the mountain onto a south-moving valley glacier. Today a trail of glacial erratics extends past Nose Hill through the town of Okotoks to Northern Montana. (Hallworth cited in Flynn-Burhoe 2007)

A video of this stone is the centrepiece of a recent project by Maria Whiteman that examines questions of geological time and tells (or re-

tells) the stories of the lands she encounters. The project—*Anthropocene*—is one in which the artist builds visual comparisons between geological and temporal scales. In the installation the stone is juxtaposed with videos of bison, of other environmental sites and of close shots of grass, ice and water. One might read in this another form of rubbing—not this time the desire to remove a winter coat but rather to contrast the speed of various environmental vitalities. In Whiteman's work the stone is not just a stone but a metaphor—a 'rubbing rock' that is also about reconsidering our tactile and kinaesthetic relationships with the landscape. At the same time, the stone is not a metaphor at all—it is actually a stone, and to put poetic elaborations aside is ultimately what grounds the very gaze the poetic intervention seeks to raise. And to make matters that much more complex still, if we are to talk of materiality in this way we must admit that the stone is not even a stone—it is a video. And while it is not always fashionable to leverage the medium against its subject, in this case it is the medium itself that completes the loop, returning us to the metaphor that is itself while at the same time being something quite distinct.

It's not a trivial thing to assert that a video can also be a stone; that captured representational time can be a portal to imagining at otherwise unimaginable temporal scales. It takes an act of artistic intuition to hold together these forms of seemingly incompatible engagement, an act in which a stone becomes a node in multiple forms of incommensurable history: a piece of the earth itself; a 'rubbing rock' for a herd of bison; a temporal voyager travelling on the back of glacial melt; an art installation; a talking point; a video. This essay meditates on the use of the rubbing rock in and around Whiteman's work, as a method for thinking about the meeting points of artistic and environmental complexity.

TRUST FALL

What would it mean to think about things from a perspective one might not normally adopt—say, for example, the perspective of a rock? Would it be anything more than a bad joke to suggest that, in this attempt, one might find a sense of solidity, of groundedness, that one might not otherwise have? Can thinking about a rock be transformative for a human?



■ Tunnel Mountain, 2018.
Image credit: Wikimedia Commons

Imagine: There is a rock perched indiscreetly somewhere in a prairie field. It is not a large rock if compared to mountains; but compared to its surroundings it stands out. There is nothing around it, barely anything even on the horizon. Though by nothing, of course I do not actually mean nothing, just sameness to the rock's difference. Grass, bushes, dust and dirt, and flat but sometimes rolling terrain. If one was to run a marathon one could simply pick any direction and already see the ending point. At the same time, however, in the farther distance one can make out the cloudy shapes of hills and behind them a mountain range. They are distant, but geologists say that this is where the rock came from, transported down to the prairie ground by environmental acts of glacial expansion and melt. Carried on the back of global warming—the last time it happened. This rock is a residue from history warming up.

But one could put this differently—even if it seems indulgent to do so. This rock rubbed up against the Earth, grinding the ground as glaciers relentlessly pushed it forward. Have you ever been pushed? It's not always pleasant. Unless it's a 'trust fall', I suppose. But I'm not

sure the dislocation of this particular rock has to do with a trust fall, unless it's a trust fall gone wrong, a slow trust fall, one that took hundreds of years. When a human falls like that, it is said that we see the 'world' flash before our eyes. So, what happens when the world falls? Or a rock, as representative of a world that happens at a different pace than our own? A certain alienation. A certain disenfranchisement. A certain freedom. This may be one version of the story of how a rock becomes an individual. Maybe the prairie was there to catch it? Maybe in some way the rock is there to catch us?

It is not always considered fashionable to anthropomorphize in this way. But it is worth asking why not? Is there a danger that in anthropomorphism (an act of imagining if it is anything at all) one might lose track of the difference between what is real and what is not? Or worse: that one might lose track of the *distance* between reality and its proverbial double? Much hyped has been 'critical distance' as a tool of the careful analytic, and yet there remains something a bit too clean about such distance, a bit antiseptic, a careful separation of oneself from one's object of study that—as a result—creates a (supposedly necessary) distance between us and whatever we look at or think about. Critical distance is too clean, and clean distance has no landscape. Landscapes are dirty—land is literally dirt—and thus one must insist that to engage a landscape is *by necessity* to get dirty in the process.

Alternately, what if we understood critical 'distance' as precisely that? A rock that came from *somewhere* came from somewhere *else*. There is thus a distance that must be considered in any relationship that it might have with the landscape in which it finds itself now. And, consequently, there is also a distance from us that we might not see right away, a distance proper to the rock, a distance that can only be seen from its perspective. In many ways, this is the more important form of distance. Not *our* distance from things, but *their* distance from us. I think Graham Harman is probably right on this (though I otherwise remain sceptical of his work): the distance between us is what

guarantees a *relational* status to ontology. Harman puts it aptly in this context, speaking of withdrawn objects and the impossibility of ontological certainty (2002: 1). But withdrawn is just another word for distant, and the idea of distance can just as easily be affective as geographic. I don't assume that Harman attributes affective qualities to objects (in fact, just the opposite) but in my process of anthropomorphizing these rocks, I certainly might give them the freedom to feel, to hide or reveal histories and interactions, to share or relate. A withdrawn object is an ambassador of the geography from which it came. And this rock—deemed erratic by some—could also be seen as an ambassador sent by the mountain itself. As an ambassador, this rock would be due a certain relational acknowledgment, a respect, a gesture of interaction. Perhaps more. I am reminded of the artists Amanda White and Alana Bartol who, in discussing their collaborative project the *Deep Earth Treatment Centre*, suggest that soil (earth, dirt) has healing properties for humans and thus is due a gesture of kinship. They ask, 'What makes soil happy?' (White and Bartol 2017: 170). We might echo their sentiment and ask what might make this rock happy. It is an interesting question for the way it repositions the human in relation to the land, acknowledging the ambassadorial relationship that is to come.

Against the thesis of a rock as a withdrawn object, then, this is a theory of 'critical proximity', to use a term coined by Peter Sloterdijk in the 1980s (1987: xxxiii). For Sloterdijk, the safe distance of critical thinking creates a false sense of (rational) security, a distance from the authenticity of encounter that is not due to the withdrawn nature of objects, but rather to the insistence on (purposeful) withdrawal implicit in established forms of human criticality. Better, for Sloterdijk, is to live in proximity to the question rather than at an intelligible distance, insisting thus on a performative and relational criterion of engaged thinking. Heidegger (an important foil for both Harman and Sloterdijk) called it 'questioning', importantly emphasizing a verb-based form of interaction that does not suppose an answer but instead challenges itself to think meta-

epistemologically: 'questioning builds a way' (Heidegger 1977: 3). One might equally call it circling—or rubbing. Seen through the anthropomorphic lens, it is not just a proximity that emerges, but an intimacy—a critical intimacy—that insists on proximity as an act of rubbing. The rock rubs the landscape (literally). We rub the rock (intellectually). And thus relationships of proximity are formed.

If this feels too speculative, one could of course retreat to the established reasonability of critical distance. But one might also mediate the speculation by acknowledging it as such, affirming the temporary suspension of (philosophical) judgement in favour of the possibilities for (philosophical) engagement. One might invoke another German philosopher—Hans Vaihinger—who in 1925 proposed the philosophy of *als ob*, a form of thought governed not by fidelity to truth or established fact but instead by the relational speculations catalyzed by engaging with questions 'as if' they were viable possibilities:

An idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance. (Vaihinger 2009: viii)

The 'practical importance' of speculation in this context is relational—specifically a desire to think relationally as a retort to the implicit anthropocentric bias contained in the notion of critical distance. As Steven Shaviro eloquently insists: 'a certain cautious anthropomorphism is necessary to avoid anthropocentrism' (2014: 61). And whether one wants to see this form of speculation as an attempt to establish critical proximity or to explore the postulates of Vaihinger's 'what if?' is ultimately less important than the way such modes of thinking are able to throw the question back on *us* as the uncertain party in the relationship. The rock doesn't care if we understand it; its sense of time far out-imagines our own. So, it is not the rock that is accountable to our understanding but just the other way around. Speculation at this limit is a trust fall, and like all trust falls, it is an exercise in relationship building.

I am rubbing theories against themselves—or against each other. The rubbing is not a

competition. It's a strategy to try to tease out possibilities. Maybe even to try to create an opportunity for a metaphysical trust fall.

FRIENDSHIP

What happens when a rock finds a home that wasn't where it lived before? Or when it is set into a place from which it no longer moves? Can a rock have a memory of where it came from? One possibly etched into the surface of its ... surface? Can a surface be a skin? What would one call the public membrane of an ancient solid object? And what would be a reason to rub up against it?

Imagine: There is a rock grounded solidly in a



prairie field. It has been there a while. Estimates place its presence at this particular site at more than 10,000 years. And because it came from somewhere else, it surely be must older still. It used to be mobile; now it is not—or at least not in the same way. It has perhaps become a landmark. But it might be important to note that the rock itself had little say in this decision, deposited as it was by glacial movement. One could call this monument a by-product but that would just be a way to disempower and deflect from the agency the rock gathered in the process. Truth be told, it was the rock itself that was deposited, that still sits in this place, that persists. The glacier has long since vanished.

The surface of the rock is rough in some ways and smooth in others, like maybe only a rock can be. One might say that it is very rock-like, this rock, which might go without saying unless one was looking for a place to begin the task of forging possible relationships. This identity is only accentuated by the fact that there are no other rocks in the immediate vicinity, making

this particular rock stand out all the more. It is a feature of its landscape. It is both alien and monumental. The rock seems proud, unmovable, stoic, maybe even lonely.

But if one knew anything about this rock, one would know that its surface is smoother than it used to be. And if one were patient and in a position to watch—in a historical sense: to observe the passage of this stone through time—one would see why. Every spring, for dozens if not hundreds of years, herds of bison make an annual pilgrimage to this rock. And they circle it, rubbing up against it in a choreographed group performance, circling around and around, rubbing against the stone until their thick coats of winter hair begin to fall off from the friction of intimacy, in preparation for warmer months to come.

Rubbings of this sort require skins and surfaces, frictions and relational exchange. It makes me think of Jane Bennet's 'vibrant materialism' as a way to contemplate these forms of environmental encounters.¹ I take Bennet's theory for its resonant qualities, its emphasis on the vibrational, noting that with things 'vibrational' it is the skin that vibrates—not a phantom essence necessarily but a resonant absence based on a vibrational cavity (Bennet 2010: 111). For a vibration to resonate it is not matter that matters but emptiness. Vibrational immaterialism. It is not a counter-thesis to Bennet but simply another way to look at the same set of relationships; not as a vibrancy of matter but as the relational intensity of immaterial interactions. Resonance as rubbing. In Bennet's words, 'turn[ing] the figures of "life" and "matter" around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange ... In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape' (vii). What is so compelling about such a theory is not only its infusion of vitality into objects and relationships historically dehumanized and thus dismissed. Rather, the impact of vitalizing a question in this way is to also radically decentre the human such that Bennet's 'strangenesses' are no longer to be known in the traditional way: not possessed or operationalized, not contoured or explained,

■ Rubbing Rock, 2016.
Photo © Maria Whiteman

¹ I am attentive to Bennet's project of decentring the human while still insisting on a materiality of thought, especially insofar as she attends to strategies for engaging with 'a trenchant materiality that is us as it vies with us in agentic assemblages', a phrase I take to mean a certain insistence on a horizon of material engagement not contoured in advance by human conceptualization (Bennet 2010: 111).

not mastered or objectified. No more critical distance; in a relationship with vitalized matter one must be part of the interchange, ‘worrying’ the question, rubbing against it, vibrating. One might even propose the challenge of forming—at best—a friendship with this constellation of strangeness.

In a beautiful essay on her personal relationship with a horse, Johnny Golding meditates on what it means to construct friendship across species boundaries, emphasizing that relationships of this sort are built on a form of engagement that unseats the dictates of logic and common sense in ways that—at times—can seem almost magical. Friendship, for Golding, involves (among other criteria) a ‘certain kind of attunement, a certain kind of reaching out, a certain kind of response, a certain kind of respect, and a certain kind of play’ (2018: 262). I am less concerned here with the details of a relationship between a human and a horse, and more concerned with those between a rock and a herd of bison—but I think certain key concepts apply. I imagine these categories of attunement, respect and response in the activities of the bison. I imagine Bennet’s work on turning figures ‘around and around’ and consider that hands might not be the operative agents here—that bodies can turn themselves around and around as well—like bison on a rubbing rock. There is a psychogeography to this meditation—a key concept because of its insistence on the irreducibility of place to geography, and the concomitant insistence on the psychological experience of being (affected by, but irreducible to, place). It is more than phenomenological, though it is that too—more because, in this case, phenomenology doesn’t matter, disappearing (as it must) into the experience of itself. This is philosophy that rubs itself against an encounter until it sheds its old skins and forgets itself in proximity to another.² Golding calls it ‘radical mattering’ (ibid.).

For friendship and philosophy the same: the true destiny of engagement is to forget that it is philosophical (since it is motivated by the pragmatics of proximity). This could also, strangely, be seen as a resonant paraphrasing of François Laruelle’s concept of non-philosophy. As Laruelle declares, ‘The question of “what is

non-philosophy?” must be replaced by the question about what it can and cannot do ... [N] on philosophy is “performative” and exhausts itself as an immanent practice’ (2012: 207). The only purpose of philosophy thereafter is to assuage insecurities about the philosophical merits of not caring about philosophy. In a strange way, it is decidedly pataphysical—invoking here Alfred Jarry’s ‘science of imaginary solutions’ that is also an examination of ‘the laws governing exception’, with a focus in particular on the particular (1996: 21). Against the idea of a generalized science, for pataphysics (as for Laruelle) every moment is purposefully exceptional because there can be no overriding principal, and every moment reinforces the overriding principal of exception because there is no other purpose uniting them. The Collège de ‘Pataphysique has a set of terms to help with this distinction: those of voluntary and involuntary practice—insisting that one can practice an activity or a philosophy without necessarily knowing that it is what one is doing.³ It might be called accidental philosophy. Similarly—ostensibly—one can act (and perhaps always already is acting) phenomenologically without necessarily knowing that this is what one is doing.

Actually, better than pataphysical would be to call it ecological. Like the buffalo. They are, by definition, part of the prairie ecosystem in a way that humans are not (anymore). For them, a once-transient rock becomes an instance of social architecture. Collectively polished by their bodies. The rock itself is impacted, too. Like the old stone steps one might see in churches or medieval castles—the stones worn by passage. Like Robert Long’s field drawings, lines etched into the earth through dedicated acts of walking. Like rivers cut into the body of the earth by glacial melt, gradually wearing out a pathway downwards for as long as it takes to consolidate momentum. Like a rock moved (in all senses of the word) by an act of glacial drift.

I am rubbing theories against themselves—or against one another. It’s not a competition. It’s a strategy to try to tease out resonances. To create echoes or relationships or vibrancies or friendships. The materiality of such a strategy is immaterial.

SUPERSTITION

If bison can rub against rocks can humans do it too? We might lose a different layer of skin, rubbing off skin itself—or its metaphor—in the process of establishing closer proximity. With less skin between us, we are closer together. But that’s a bit creepy. Maybe better to rub up against the story rather than the rock—the story of the bison perhaps, vicariously rubbing the rock by imagining the experience of the buffalo themselves. It’s an interesting idea to rub up against.



Imagine: There is a rock in the centre for a prairie field. The day is cold—or at least that’s how I imagine it. But the rock would feel none of that—not because rocks don’t feel but because the idea of a day would almost certainly be foreign to a rock, and to this rock in particular. To a human who has lived less than fifty years, this rock seems ancient. To a rock who has existed for hundreds or thousands of years, this human must seem ridiculous, fleeting, perhaps even ephemeral.

This day is conspicuous however, for on this day it is not a herd of bison come to visit the

rock, but a human—an artist—rubbing up against its surface in very different ways. In the lifetime of a rock, this visit may have gone entirely un-noticed, and indeed it is quite possible that the artist had little intention of changing the rock. She was just taking its picture, indulging a moment of respect, meditation or representation in order to share the experience with others. But in this fidelity to a system of representation, it is not the rock that is the subject of the artwork but the artwork that is subject to—or that subjects

itself to—the rock. That is how representations work—especially that kind where you hold a piece of paper onto the surface of the rock and rub with a piece of charcoal. But in this instance a photograph would be allegorically similar (even while technically different, still registering the surface as it reflects light into the camera lens). And seen on a geological scale (from the perspective of the rock, who is the subject after all) all videos are photographs: too short in the larger scale of time to be anything more than an instant themselves. Honestly, lives are probably like that too, though it takes a certain feat of imagination to conceptualize it in this way.

■ Touching Rubbing Rock, 2016. Photo © Maria Whiteman

³ In their book of pataphysical keywords, the Collège de ‘Pataphysique (2016: 25) define ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ forms of engagement, characterizing the latter as a form of ‘beautiful ignorance’.

² I’m thinking of Laruelle’s insistence that the non-philosophical must go beyond philosophy to a point of engaged action and performance (2012: 219). While he doesn’t go as far as calling this a disappearance, the phenomenological destiny of such engagement seems to demand—at a certain point—exactly that kind of proximity from which a distanced contemplation becomes impossible.



■ Touching Rubbing Rock, 2016. Photo © Maria Whiteman

Not that life is flat, but that photographs and drawings and videos are deep—and that stones are deeper still, even though they seem to not refer to anything at all. Until one takes the time to rub up against them.

When he was a graduate student, my father specialized in the study of stress control and relaxation. As a result, I grew up in a household filled with what seemed to me, as a child, strange and wonderful contraptions. There were machines that could read and interpret one's heart rate, breathing or brainwaves; there were thermometers meant to be held and interacted with; there were little black dots that changed colour when placed on one's hand; and there were small stones whose purpose was to help control anxiety. They worked by rubbing; my father called them 'worry stones'. I haven't done the research to know whether they are legitimately therapeutic, in part because I want to preserve the psychosomatic relationship I already have to these little rocks. To preserve a superstition, even if it's not a superstition—to choose superstition as a productive modality of

encounter. And to my superstitious mind, these worry stones work—against them one rubs away worries, soothing anxieties, shedding the old psychological coats grown from the simple acts of living. This is the sense in which superstition is a trust fall—an act of suspended disbelief, conducted for the sake of sustaining another form of relationship. This is not Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1907: xiv) 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith' but an extrapolated version of aesthetic logic brought into the material world. Suspended disbelief as itself a form of trust fall, into the artwork or poem—or indeed, into the orbit of a rock and its story.

To update Coleridge's theory for more contemporary times is to note that the challenge to move beyond anthropocentric ways of thinking requires leaps of faith in sometimes counter-intuitive directions. I think in particular of René Magritte's much-discussed painting—*The Treachery of Images*—that depicts a pipe with the words beneath it that say, 'This is not a pipe.' The deceit of representation is, of course, that it portends to be transparent—invisible in the sense that we see through a representation,

often to the point where we don't even acknowledge it as such. That is Magritte's complaint. Except that in the twenty-first century we are well beyond such a critique, and it is established fact that representations can and do lie, and what Magritte called 'treachery' is now simply the starting point for visual culture and analysis. Hence the fashionable insistence on critical distance, so as not to be subsumed by the allure of the image.

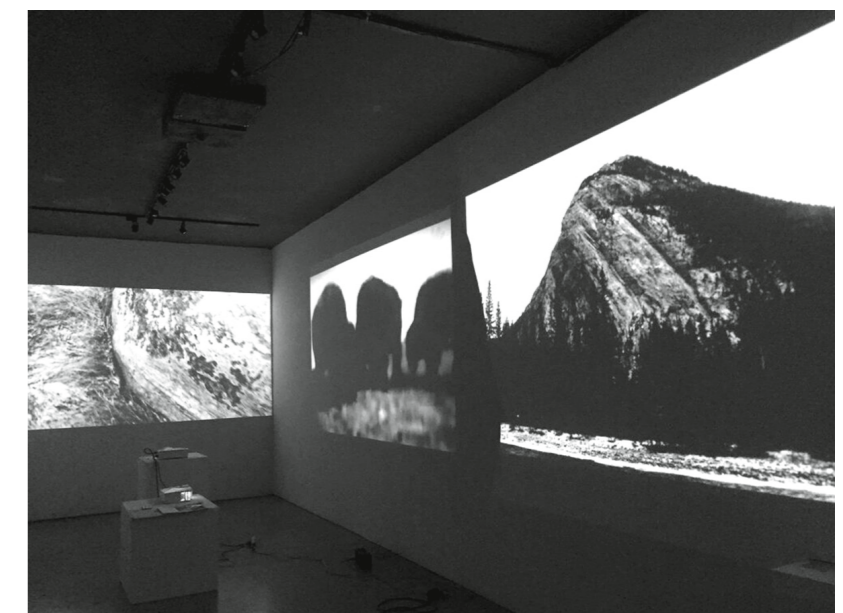
But just as a certain form of proximity might be seen as a remedy for the conceit of anthropocentric distance, perhaps a certain kind of superstition is due the image in order to fully acknowledge the charm of representation. And perhaps that is the really strange part—a place where aesthetic strategy can be a viable method for building relationships with the unfamiliar precisely because art has always required a certain kind of leap of faith (suspended disbelief). This is not to claim that everything must now be seen as an artwork (though that would be an interesting, if different, line of speculation). Rather, it is to insist that that mode of encountering the world normally reserved for looking at art (aesthetics) may be particularly relevant to the times in which we live for the very simple reason that aesthetic thinking has always been premised on building relationships with strange things that demand a certain different and equally strange mode of engagement. Let's call it curiosity, for the moment (though I might equally call it superstition, trust fall, friendship). That art demands curiosity is not to insist that curiosity demands art—though it might be to suggest that a curious way of looking at the world suspends a certain form of judgement (or disbelief). It does it even though it knows it doesn't have to. It does it even though it knows a judgement or expert analysis might wield more (anthropocentric) power. Curiosity (or aesthetic thinking) invests in the suspension of pre-established ways of looking. It is superstitious—in all the best ways, invoking the powers of interpretive engagement, making strange and making us realize what is strange already if only we bother to notice, to rub up against it, to turn it around and around (or to rub ourselves around and around it): to become

present. And that's what I appreciate most about the place from which this meditation started—Maria Whiteman's *Anthropocene* installation, in which the rubbing rock features large. A rubbing rock is a literal demand to rub up against the constellations of speculation in play. A challenge to get closer. A demand to slow down and think about the different paces of environmental, geological and animal times. An insistence that one mode of interaction does not override or underwrite others—thus geological, seasonal, human and momentary forms of time and analysis interact, supplement and expand one another's horizons of possibility. The result is an invocation of a rock—or an artwork—as an irreconcilable object, but one with which relationships are nonetheless possible.

But it is also possible that this dynamic is not located on the rock but in the action of rubbing. That is, it may not be the rock that matters (in a material sense) but the act of proximity that congeals into material manifestation. Friction is the secret ingredient in the recipe for aesthetics and superstition, alike.

I am rubbing theories against themselves—or against each other. It's not a competition. It's a strategy to try to provoke curiosities. To materialize superstition as a viable strategy for the incantation of post-anthropocentric possibility. To consider worrying as a viable method for invoking change.

■ Anthropocene installation, 2017. Photo © Maria Whiteman



CONCLUSION

What if an artwork was like a rubbing rock? As viewers, we rub against it until the space between us becomes a little bit less than it was before. It came from somewhere else, but it becomes part of an architecture of encounter that we inhabit too. Are we in its space or it in ours? The disorientation caused by this question is the reason why distance is not an answer. And that is why proximity is not an answer either, except that proximity does not necessarily demand an answer—being proximate to the situation and thus part of the body that would be demanded upon no less than that doing the demanding. Proximity short-circuits the mode of questioning particular to distance.

Imagine: There is a rock in the centre of a prairie field. Except that I am not in a prairie field, so I guess the rock is not there too. Or it might be, but that's not the rock I am seeing. I am seeing a rock in the centre of a wall, photographed and framed. It is not actually a rock but a representation. But I rub up against it nevertheless—well, not literally of course. So I guess I don't rub up against it, both because it is not itself and I am not talking about that kind of proximity. But what kind then? And what is it that I am actually doing when I look at this rock that is not itself and rub up against it in ways that don't require actual proximity? I could rub myself against the photograph, but that seems weird: it's not the usual way of rubbing up against photographs.

It may seem pedantic to state these obvious qualifications of my experience with the rock—or the video, or the photographs—or indeed their digital representations that promise eternal circulation at the cost of material encounter—but it's not. It's about solidifying them. If we were talking about clouds it would be the wrong thing to do (ephemerality and all) but we are talking about rocks. Shouldn't the challenge be to think ourselves as solidly in their company as they are in ours? Or to realize our ephemerality in contrast to their longevity. That it borders on a gesture towards incoherence is part of the point, or perhaps simply part of the trouble with theories of proximities and methods of anthropomorphism—ways in which, to paraphrase Donna Haraway (2016), anthropomorphism can trouble the boundaries

of anthropocentric thought and in so doing challenge us to 'stay with the trouble' we have created, in acts of critical solidarity.

A trust fall.
A friendship.
A superstition.
An artwork.

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In 2011 I found myself facing the most complex site I have ever worked in—Queen Square in Bloomsbury, London. The work made there was one of four dances, each one created especially for a public square in the centre of London. Together they made up *Square Dances*, commissioned by Dance Umbrella. Each dance was about twelve to fifteen minutes long, with the audience free to move between them in any order they wished. In Gordon Square were one hundred women; Brunswick Gardens, thirty-five men; Woburn Square, ten children; and in Queen Square—twenty-three students from London Contemporary Dance School. I wanted the spaces untouched and unchanged so that the dances flowed through them and out into the city with no trace, like a flock of birds.

For Queen Square, I decided on solos—one for each of the benches in the park. Each dancer created their own three-minute solo out of a palette of eighty tasks that we had devised, each bench witnessing three different soloists. Often used by families, loved ones and medical staff from the nearby Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery I knew that this square needed great sensitivity but did not fully appreciate—until I started rehearsing—how challenging it was going to be. There were homeless people seeking privacy, exhausted doctors and nurses in their scrubs, relatives using a bench to make phone calls and even patients in their pyjamas with their drips taking a breath of the outside. I was dealing here with a park that quietly and darkly held the weight of grief, pain and loss.

The solos were devised as a response to this site and its complexity, each task I gave them was for me relevant to the suffering I felt around me. I wanted to create an intimate work, one that touched the viewer. Though rich and intricate, these solos had periods of stillness, listening and sensing, and many sections where the dancers' eyes were closed so that the person on the bench could watch them without feeling awkward and could see the dancers' own attentiveness and vulnerability. Some of the tasks the dancers explored involved touch and imagined touch: placing a palm upwards and imagining waiting for someone's head to drop into the palm to be cradled by it; being attentive to the wind however slight, and moving with it when feeling it against the skin; waking up the skin on the front and the back of the body to a supple alertness; touching the earth with hand or the whole body.



■ Square Dances by Rosemary Lee, Dance Umbrella, London, 2011. Performers Brigit Lappin and Tom Peacock. Photo © John Mellison