



**Cairn:  
An Artist as Witness  
Catalogue Document**

**2DD008**

**Bronte Jane Hobson**



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## **Artist Statement**

As a theatre practitioner, one must play the fool and philosopher.

One must be playful yet contemplative.

I want my work to be these things.

I want to explore found texts.

I want to play the fool, adapt, contaminate.

I want to make affective theatre; the audience feeling then thinking.

Collect, contaminate, compose, contemplate.

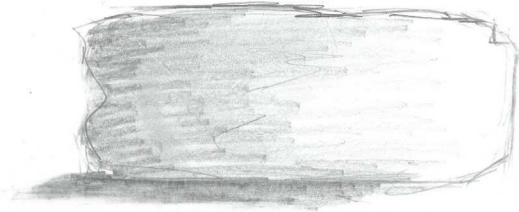
# Introduction

The word itself is a presence made of absence, for the thing is not there, the word stands in for the thing. (Howall, 1999, p. 151)

The words you are seeing serve such a purpose; a testimony to a past process and performance. These words, however, do so much more than mere documentation. Whilst this catalogue document attempts to articulate and present a project, long lost in the inevitable passage of time, it also functions as a liminal space where I can reflect, question and explore. This will be a failure; I understand that. It is impossible to recreate or to preserve a moment now inexistent. Once a word is committed to this page, it becomes obsolete; reality is forever in flux. One may ask what the point of all this is; why talk of something that no longer exists? Peggy Phelan discusses the 'impossibility of seizing the Real' (Phelan, 1996, p. 167) however she does not dismiss the existence and perception of reality. Phelan states that the interpretation of something comes afterwards; we as humans are slow in perceiving something so instant as reality. Therefore, in undertaking this constant failure, I perceive and interpret my learning. What you see is the aftermath of learning and learning itself. Whilst each word implicates the past, it implicates the present and future too. Whilst I refer to moments of learning, I simultaneously learn.

In his article *Memory is this* (2000) Matthew Goulish explores learning, stating that 'as one learns intelligence, one also learns ignorance' (Goulish, 2000, p. 10). Goulish articulates the fact that as we learn, we gain an awareness of how much we do not know. This concept was first presented to me through the analogy of stepping into water. Whilst in a synagogue, in Kraków's Jewish quarter, I learned about the Torah and Talmud. I learned that studying them is a life's work. When we begin to learn, we step into the water. The more we learn, we drift further away from the shore and in this moment, we realise how vast the ocean of knowledge is. I personally consider learning, my learning, as a hike through a vast landscape. I begin with something familiar, a signpost or a marker in the landscape, and I explore from there. As I move away from the familiar, and learn new things, new features and new routes become familiar; this is my learning. As I traverse this landscape, I realise just how much landscape is left undiscovered, uncharted. This document is one of my latest acquired features. It is a cairn on the moors. I am stacking rocks amongst the heather and I am also looking out over this moorland. Many questions remain unanswered, yet I endeavour to mark out this newly discovered route. In order to grasp some understanding of my learning, the reader must follow this narrative, this analogy. I shall begin with the first stone.

# The First Rock - Poland 2018



Expeditions embrace both the life of the participants and the creative theatrical process [...] it opens the channels of absorbing the phenomena of life, not just from other people but also from all that surrounds you. (Staniewski and Hodge, 2004, p. 39)

The trip to Kraków marked the start of our process. Whilst living and exploring this historical Polish town, we individually acquired a vast bank of knowledge unique to our subjective experience. We collectively learnt about the Shoah and what it meant for the Jews living in Kraków. We also experienced Auschwitz and the Schindler's Factory Museum. Experiences like these gave us all the opportunity to explore the Shoah in our own way. This ethnographic research allowed us to take what we wanted from the trip and to apply it to the creative process. In engaging with the theatre of witness, it was essential for us to acquire some historical insight. James E. Young, in his work *At Memory's Edge* (2000), poses the question

How is a post-Holocaust generation of artists supposed to "remember" events they never experienced directly? (Young, 2000, p. 1)

I feel that this ethnographic research of the Holocaust was vital for engaging with the act of witnessing. Whilst we did not directly experience the Shoah, our time in Poland certainly gave us some insight into the memories and witnessings of those living through the Shoah; this mixture of second-hand and first-hand witnessing allowed us to undertake this impossible task of remembering.

When talking about expeditions and their role within the creative process, Polish theatre maker Włodzimierz Staniewski states that 'there are any number of incidents that happen [...] and I insist that the actors retain them.' (Staniewski and Hodge, 2004, p. 45). Many incidents occurred on our expedition, with each one attaining a new piece of knowledge that was retained and later applied in the process.

One of the most profound things that I learnt in Poland was the dichotomy between reality and the psychic. The moment I entered Auschwitz, the reality of the camps destroyed all my psychic expectations. What I thought would be an upsetting and visceral experience turned out to be disturbingly empty and bereft of any kind of humanity. I had entered the void. In that instant, I had unknowingly learnt the relationship between the real and the psychic. Later in the process, I attached a piece of learning to this incident. When devising our piece, we read and discussed the work of Peggy Phelan. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1996), Phelan states that 'performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the "real" [...] and the psychic' (Phelan, 1996, p. 167). Having experienced the difference between the real and psychic, I found it easier to understand this suspension between both poles; performance exists in a place where thoughts and concepts interact with the reality of physical bodies in a physical space.

Nothing. I feel nothing. Should I feel sad?  
Should I feel angry? I feel nothing.  
A Void.  
Snow falls, I do not find it beautiful.  
I do not find anything beautiful, or poignant,  
or terrifying.  
This is a wasteland, a Void.  
Nothing resides here; everything is dead.  
Everything is an empty shell.  
The colours of Corruption dull everything.  
The wire enters my eye.  
The double fence, the barbed.  
Concrete posts curving like stone spines.  
Barbed wire running perpendicular.  
Iron ribs, iron stones. No more bond.  
No more prisoners.  
Absence, dehumanisation.  
A Void.  
I cannot know you, you are no more.  
Everything a dull mass.

I feel empty. What was I expecting?  
Sympathy? Empathy? It is  
unimaginable. Images of you try to  
reach out but my disgust and  
disbelief turn me away.  
I am trapped within my thoughts.  
Why am I so numb?  
Why am I here?  
Reality is bright, it is harsh. It is  
the cold grey sky. The concrete so  
indifferent. It is the crisp cold  
air that stings your nostrils.  
Corruption, Vacancy, absence.  
I do not know what to do.  
How should I react?  
I cannot.  
I repeat myself, I cannot.  
I feel nothing.  
I want to but I cannot.  
I cannot.

### Response written hours after Auschwitz visit

Expectation always exceeds reality,  
I approach feeling nothing but  
disgust and an all consuming emptiness,  
'Arbeit Macht Frei', a parody,  
Snow begins to fall,  
It is sickening,  
Aren't like flakes fill me with gall,  
Bitter, I survey the lifeless grey void,  
Colours of Corruption,  
Death is difficult to avoid,  
I thought that it would oppress me,  
The horrors attacking every sense,  
yet the only thing I feel  
is absence.  
Nothing of the lost is left.  
Possessions reduced to grey  
masses,  
Theft.

The gate of death,  
The end of the line.  
An image stretching through  
the ages; never ending tracks.  
So vast, nothing but grass;  
lead, lifeless grass.  
The landscape unforgiving like  
those who created this hell on Earth.  
Empty  
yet full.  
Absent.  
yet totally present.  
I feel you pain, the sucking of  
dead pulls me to the cold ground.  
How strange!  
Here  
And there.  
Then  
And now.  
Parallel tracks.

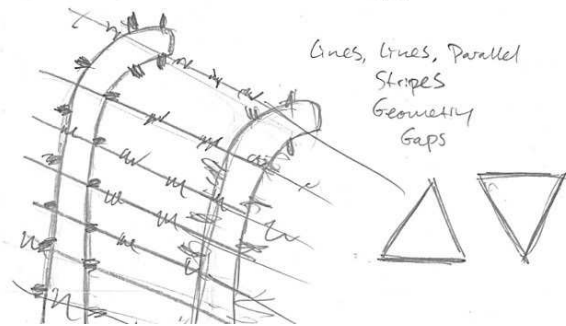
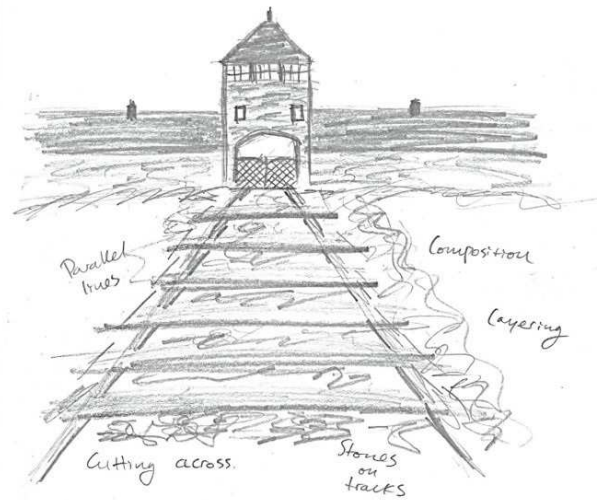
### Response written days after Auschwitz visit

Another profound incident occurred in the aftermath of visiting Auschwitz. As mentioned before, I experienced nothing but emptiness inside yet later that day, I became overwhelmed with emotion. It was not until I reflected on that incident that I learned something key to understanding theatre of witness. I compared my experience of Auschwitz itself and the breakdown that followed. Whilst in Auschwitz, all I experienced was this empty shell; there was a great sense of absence. However, later that day, I witnessed the group together and I realised that this triggered the breakdown. In seeing humans present and interacting with each other, I somehow connected to the people lost in the void that is Auschwitz. In seeing random acts of kindness and compassion, I felt my humanity; I felt theirs and it was too much to cope with. Those absent were suddenly present before me, embodied by my peers. Phelan states that 'performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies' (Phelan, 1996, p. 148) and in that instant, my peers implicated the unimaginable reality of the Shoah. Reflecting on that moment, I understand how we as artists can remember and bear witness.



Other pieces of learning that I took away from Poland regarded composition and imagery. When visiting Kraków's Jewish quarter, we explored a synagogue and its graveyard. In the graveyard, we came across a great wall made up of fragments of Jewish gravestones. Much like the performance and this document, each broken fragment was placed next to other little fragments to make one large and complex object. In that moment, I was met with a visual representation of our process and of the composition strategy used to make the work. It was in this same graveyard that I came across the image of the rocks and the act of stacking them in memoriam of the dead. Such an image has penetrated the entire process and is even present in this document. For me, there is something incredibly profound in it. In looking back over the terrain, I have already travelled, I can see rocks being this eternal object. Something so stoic yet so powerful and ever present. Such unassuming objects appear to have a spiritual purpose. When witnessing Shonaleigh's traditional Jewish storytelling, after our trip to Poland, I came to learn the significance of stones in Jewish tradition. Shonaleigh told us the story of creation and how God gave each precious stone a purpose, whilst forgetting every other rock. She told us that the rocks were unhappy that God gave them no purpose and so God eventually endowed them with the purpose of prayer. After learning this, pieces of information started to clump together, much like the fragments of the synagogue wall. These rocks were prayers left for the dead. They not only represented the dead and the physical presence of memory, but they also held the prayers of those associated with the dead.

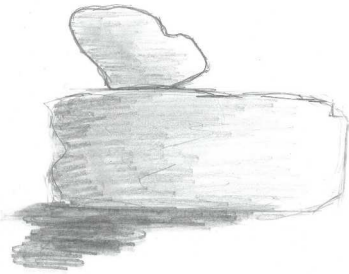




Rocks,  
 On rocks,  
 Rocks stacked on rocks,  
 A Jewish custom,  
 A sign of mourning,  
 Of respect.  
 So powerful an image.  
 It is from the Old Testament.  
 This is how they buried  
 their dead.  
 A symbol of death,  
 Stacks of stone,  
 Stacks and stacks,  
 How many?  
 Piles and piles of bodies,  
 Piles of possessions,  
 Robbed from the dead,  
 Nothing but a mockery,  
 One large pile of death.  
 How many rocks to stack?  
 One can never conceive of such things.



I return to my rocks, the rocks I have collected on this journey. One has been placed and yet the others remain in a rudimentary muddle on the moor. I think for a second and I then select another rock for the cairn.



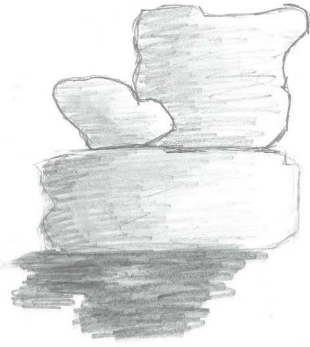
## The Second Rock - Theatre of Witness

Some may ask why we are creating a show about bearing witness to the Holocaust and some may ask how we are supposed to bear witness to something we did not witness first-hand; I initially asked myself that question. I have come to realise the impact the Shoah had on humanity. The mechanised mass murder of Jews has left a wound, a void in history. Like a splash on the surface of a pond, this event has sent ripples through time. Those ripples are still reaching us today. It seems almost impossible, given the Shoah's profound impact, to make art these days that is not related to, or bearing witness to, it. The Holocaust's impact is all consuming, with Björn Krondorfer stating that 'in a post-Shoah world, all moral and political talk [...] has to be different' (Krondorfer, 1995, p. 52). The same applies for theatre. Traditional forms of theatre and performance can no longer express the unimaginable. These shifts in paradigm prove that everything living in a post-Shoah world is linked to the Shoah. We were not making a show about the Holocaust and yet we were.

The artist as witness must approach such a trauma with care and consideration. Saul Friedlander, in his work *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992), examines representation and historical trauma. Friedlander states that whilst it is important to bear witness and record such trauma, 'this record should not be distorted [...] by grossly inadequate representations' (Friedlander, 1992, p. 3). Friedlander claims that it is easier for artists to create adequate representations of trauma as

reality is there [...] but perceived through a filter: that of memory [...] that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid (Friedlander, 1992, p. 17)

Whilst our work endeavours to bear witness to the Shoah, it does so through the lens of memory and Post dramatic aesthetics. Karen Malpede explores theatre of witness, proposing it 'as a new aesthetic practice' (Malpede, 2000, p. 266) in which personal witnessings are combined with wider historical events; theatre of witness is 'the inner life as lived in the presence of history' (Malpede, 2000, p. 266). I was taught many years ago that art does not happen in a vacuum and as I gaze over the moor, I think back to that old cairn and how external forces influenced my previous work. As I lay down the second stone, I think about my position in history. We made work relating to humanity and the extermination of it whilst in Syria men, women and children are being exterminated by air strikes. I think about Malpede's discussion. Malpede talks about tremors and refers to an incident in which she smelt burning flesh whilst taking a shower, during the Gulf War. I do not recall such personal tremors during the process, except for the incident in Poland. In that instant, my inner life converged with the Shoah. In that moment, I realised that to bear witness to the extermination of countless people, we as people had to be present. Our bodies retain the history and the audience bear witness to us, the witnesses. As I look over to the rest of the stones, I consider the influences and form of the work. I have selected my third stone.



## The Third Rock - Kantor's Influence

On returning from Poland, I realised that the process and work itself was going to be demanding, both physically and mentally. Given my learning in Poland, I understood that the process was going to involve composing generated material around memory and the Shoah, along with our chosen text *Hamlet* (1599-1601); just like the synagogue wall, we were going to assemble tiny broken things and make something beautiful.

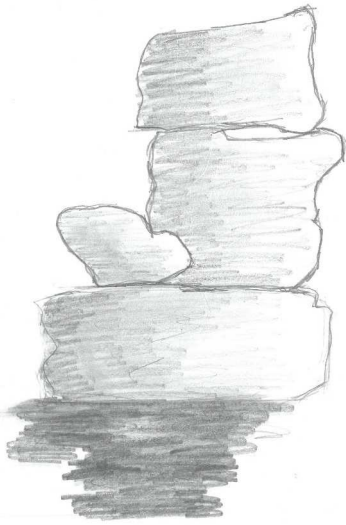
On reflection, I can see similarities between the work we produced and that of Polish Theatre practitioner Tadeusz Kantor. Whilst in Kraków, we were unable to visit the Kantor Museum, and so it is in retrospect that I discuss his influence on our work. Milija Gluhovic examines the Kantor's *Theatre of Death* (1975-1990), in her work *Performing European Memories* (2013), stating that as a witness to the Shoah, Kantor 'sought to represent and commemorate those staggering losses in the hope of a better future' (Gluhovic, 2013, p. 102). Like Kantor, we portrayed loss and death. We remembered those lost in the Shoah and those lost in atrocities elsewhere. Like in Kantor's work, 'references to ghosts and other apparitions of the dead' (Gluhovic, 2013, p. 131) feature in our work. In dealing with extermination, memory and *Hamlet* (1599-1602), the motif of the phantom appeared in both character and composition; Ian, the absent father figure, was the ghost of Hamlet's father, the Village Mute ghosted a lot of material in the space and the staggered duplication of certain gestures created many phantoms in the space. Looking back on the process and performance, I can see many similarities to Kantor's *Dead Class* (*Umarła Klasa*, 1975). Gluhovic describes this piece as

closely intertwined material of personal memories and intertextual references [...] while pursuing an obsessive reflection on the nature of time and human memory. (Gluhovic, 2013, p. 103)



Tadeusz Kantor, *The Dead Class*  
(1975)

The parallels between our work and Kantor's is apparent. I think about intertextuality and the allusions we used in the piece. I look over the stones remaining. I select another stone.



## The Fourth Rock - Intertextuality and Character

I found it interesting alluding to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1601) and the focus on Ophelia. At the beginning of the process, we explored a lot of contact work, trust exercises and gathering fragments of material. We then began to use compositional strategies, such as accumulation and contamination to explore and develop each piece of material. Certain bits of material planted seeds in my mind's moorland, which later grew into a small meadow of wild flowers. The *Strip the Willow* idea, proposed by Jake, grew into the setting of the piece. Along with this structure, the folk dance allowed us to explore and develop characters. It was in this material, that Jess and I discovered some kind of homo erotic relationship between our characters. The development of these characters grew after I witnessed a piece of material in which Rachel was suspended to depict John Everett Millais' painting of *Ophelia* (1852) drowning herself in the river. At this moment, my mind's eye was drawn to a familiar feature. I instantly made the connection between Ophelia's suicide and that of the novelist Virginia Woolf. I then asked myself if there was any other figure which related to Virginia Woolf, that I could explore. At the time, I could not think of one immediately. It took a piece of material that James and I made, to realise my literary figure. In working through and contaminating a piece of gestural work, the distinction between Hamlet and Ophelia disappeared. James and I became Hamlet and Ophelia. This androgynous character suddenly made things clearer. I took myself to that familiar feature and found Woolf's work, *Orlando* (1928). Using that knowledge as a signpost, I ventured to discover the figure behind this androgynous character and that is where I found Vita Sackville-West. In the introduction to *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf* (1984), Mitchell A. Leaska explains how Woolf writes to Sackville-West, asking if she may write a novel about her but though the character of an ageless, androgynous aristocrat:

Suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind [...] shall you mind? Say yes, or No. (Woolf cited in Leaska, 1984, p. 31)

In discovering Woolf's muse, I then explored their 20 year long relationship. From studying their correspondence, I learnt that it initially began as a love affair but it then matured into a strong friendship. What became apparent about Woolf and Sackville-West's relationship was this mother-child bond that they shared. Woolf, having lost her mother at a young age, sought counsel in Sackville-West. This related to the image of the Pietà.



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852)



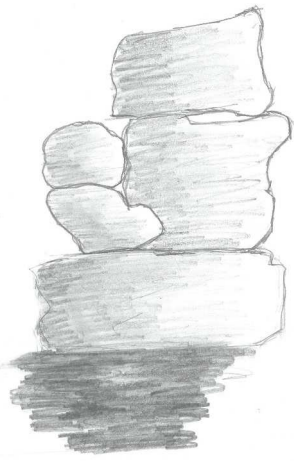
Nicole Kidman's portrayal of Virginia Woolf in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2003)



Janet McTeer's portrayal of Vita Sackville-West in Stephen Whittaker's *Portrait of a Marriage* (1990)



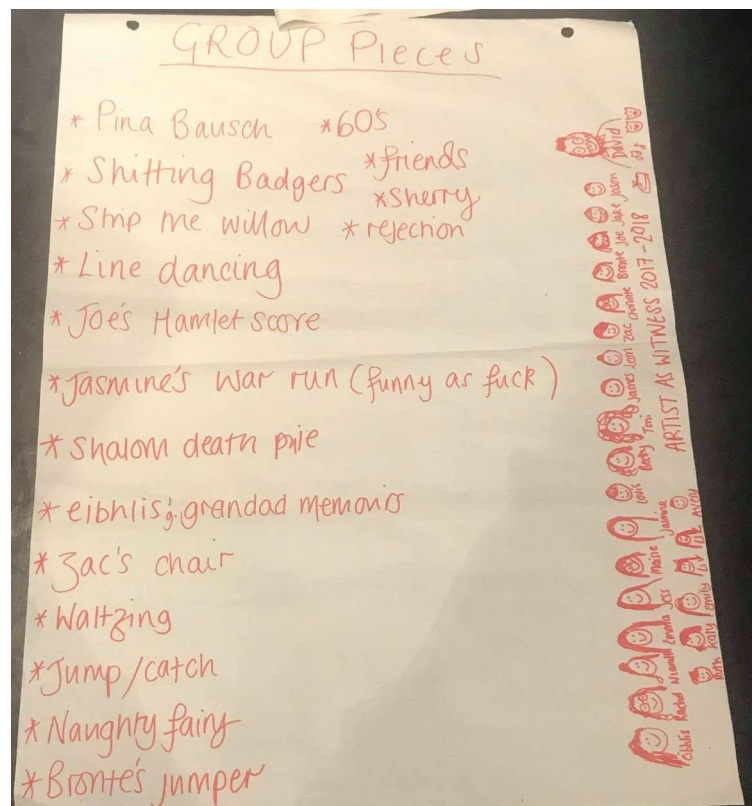
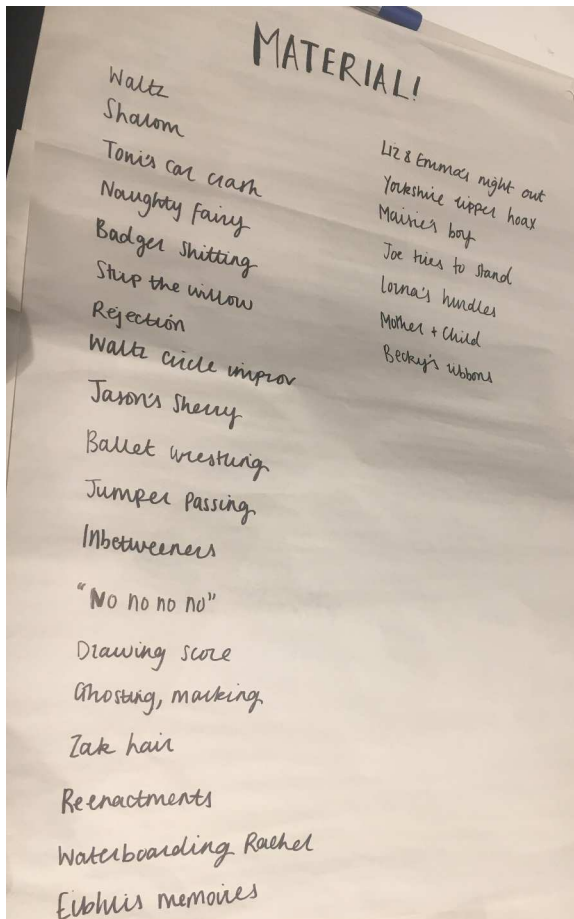
In exploring Sackville-West's ambition, lust, maternal nature and passion for gardening, the character of Vita became mother to half of the village, the lover of her daughter-in-law, Virginia, and the one who piles bodies in the space as if gardening. I look up from the cairn, I see the wild flowers and the rocks left; all are connected, all are confusing. I realise my struggle; everything is connected. Everything that I discuss leads to another thing and so on. The question is, how do I grasp it and place it on this cairn? How do I focus on what I wish to explore without digressing? I am suddenly aware of a map. What is this map? What does it represent? Surely, to navigate a territory I must have a map. It then makes sense; the map is memory. Everything I explore I mark on this memory. Like the cartographer, I acquire knowledge and I mark it down. In constructing this cairn, I mark it out in my memory. This whole analogy is marked out in my memory. But I digress, as discussed. I select another stone.



## The Final Rocks - Content, Contamination and Composition

As I pick rocks from this landscape, I begin to notice more of the landscape that I have not committed to the cairn; the curse of learning and knowledge. I reflect. Is this what I expected? In answer to that, no, it is not. I expected a straight forward document which puts plainly my learning and the process. This does so, to an extent, yet it takes turns and as I reflect, I get lost in this landscape that is my mind. Clouds make the moor hazy. So many rocks left untouched. I could have stacked them and yet I abandon them. Should I talk about the piece itself? Should I discuss the process? I should present the process, but words cannot put it simply. So caught up in my learning analogy, I feel it difficult to articulate the process and the piece. I look over my rocks, it is time to make a decision; what have I left unsaid that needs to be said? A sunbeam pierces the cloud cover, it illuminates a rock. My final rock; the unsaid that must be said.

So far, I have ventured to stack my learning, making references to moments and content otherwise left unsaid. I now commit the content to the cairn; I intend to answer the question of what we did. After our ethnographic research, we began contaminating material. The developed material resulted in extensive lists, too vast to discuss any further. The process of contamination, however, has room for discussion.



## Score of the Piece

1. First Jumper sequence into Shalom
2. Louis and Lorna enter into second Jumper sequence into character introductions
3. Mr. Morris and Village Mute into 4 Sons sequence
4. Vita and Virginia into Inbetweeners
5. Eibhlis Memoirs gestures into Virginia and Leonard
6. Sherry into 1st Reset (Drunk Will)
7. Third Jumper sequence into Virginia's Suicide
8. Grandma Gump and Gertrude into 2nd Reset
9. Hamlet and Ophelia dance into Sign Language "They will die" into My Little Buttercup
10. Brenda and Ian's God Talk
11. Hamlet and Ophelia dance into suicide
12. Mother and Daughter images into Ophelia's Pina Bausch
13. Pina Bausch gestures, Snake out to "Into my Arms"

As a group, we composed various fragments of material just as the artist selects and manipulates the paint on a canvas. An example of this process can be seen in the floor plan activity we conducted. Our performance space became this blank canvas and one by one, we were invited to enter the space and perform material. Anyone could then enter the space and perform their piece of material. They could overlap their fragment with the one in the space. Several fragments could overlap. We worked compositionally, looking for ways to compliment, balance or cut across material being performed in the space. This method of working fed into the composition of the scenes in the piece. For example, when staging the image of the pietà, a duplicate of that image was placed on the opposite side of the space to compositionally balance the scene out.

I found it interesting how the tiniest fragments of material could be put with others to make something greater than itself. Jake's idea started as a simple witnessing of his village and as he was asked more questions, the material, like a snowball rolling down a slope, gained substance and momentum. The folk dance, Strip the Willow, came from exploring the village hall and what happened in there. The witnessing then built up to the characters and the meta-structure of the village hall and the outside devastation.







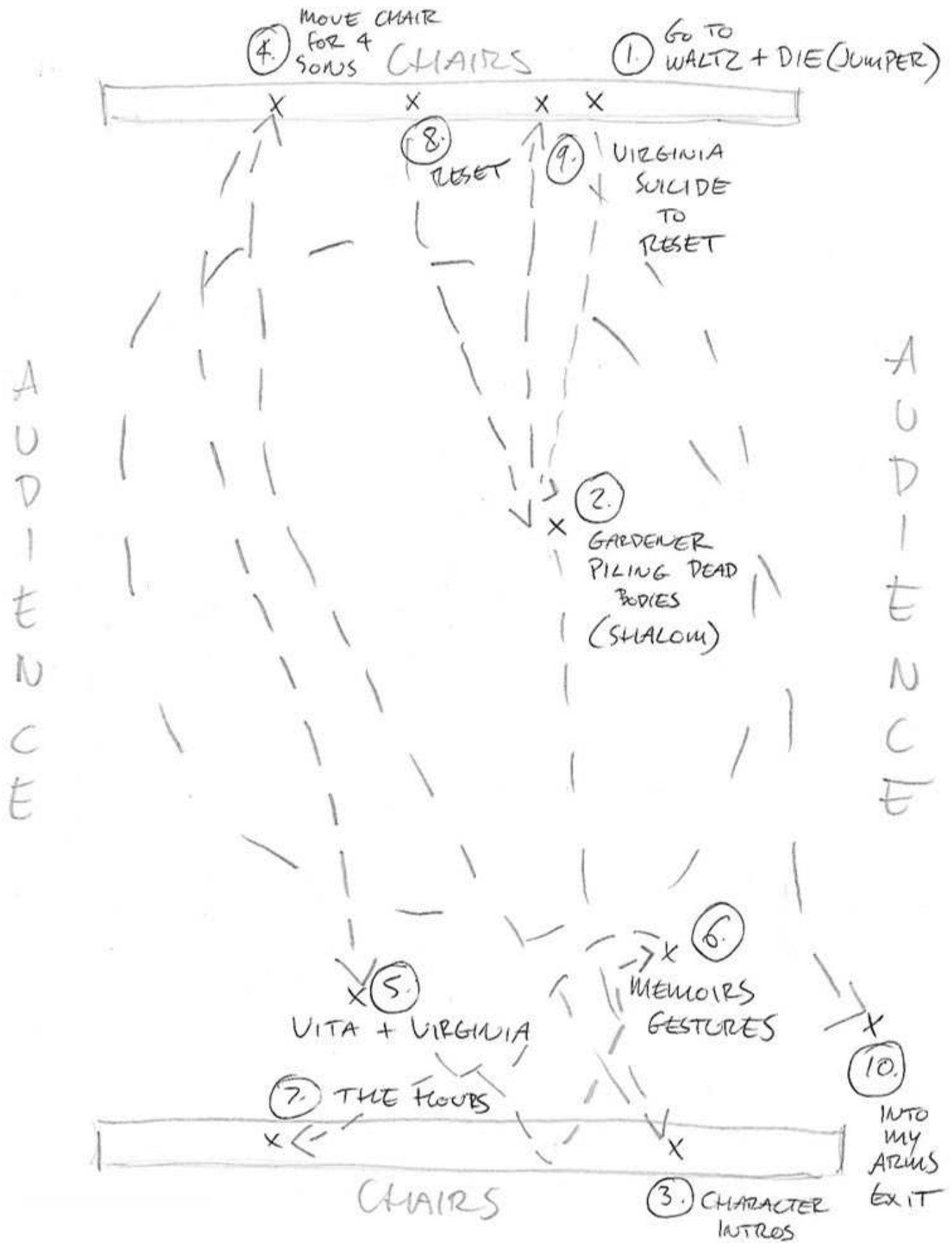
My material, based on my mother's witnessings, began with a jumper being passed down; I decided to represent my mother's childhood of having hand-me-down clothing from her sisters. This material was then contaminated by having James waltz with each sibling and laying them down after they die in his arms. The second sibling then took the jumper off of the body and the sequence of dancing, dying and unclothing repeated until all siblings died. This sequence was then spread out throughout the structure of the piece and adapted to match the character relationships; Virginia took the jumper from Vita's body and then Rover (Virginia's child) took the jumper form Virginia's body. Such a piece of material went from being my mother's witnessing, to one that bears witness to the Shoah; it became an abstract memory, an image of death that points towards both past and present. Staniewski articulates such a process, stating:

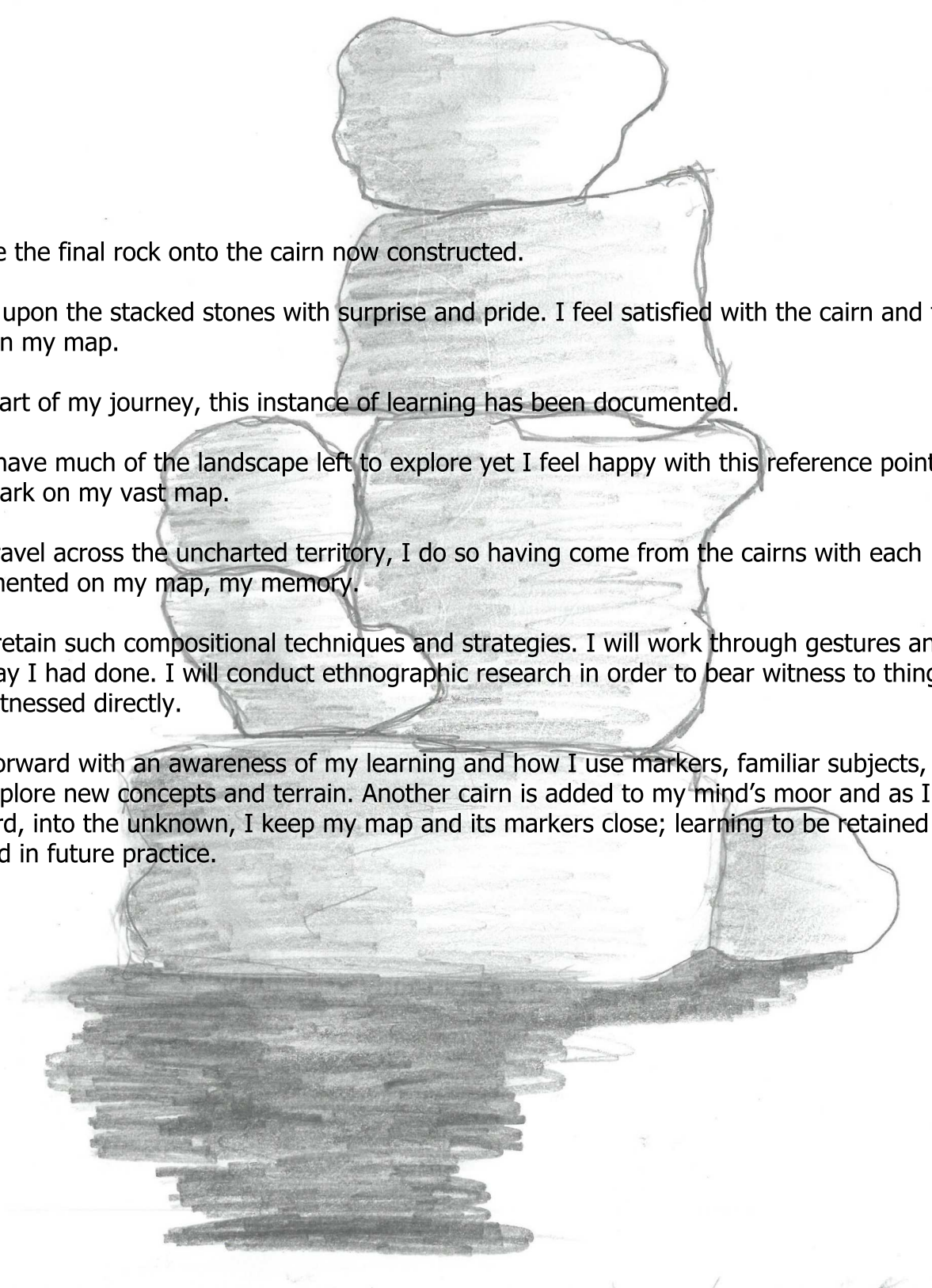
I use the same gesture but try to transform it into an allegorical language which breaks the realism. (Staniewski and Hodge, 2004, p. 33)

This applied to all of the pieces of material. Each were observed, developed, contaminated and composed into this allegory for life death and the Holocaust.



# MAP OF MY JOURNEY THROUGH THE PIECE





I place the final rock onto the cairn now constructed.

I look upon the stacked stones with surprise and pride. I feel satisfied with the cairn and the mark now on my map.

This part of my journey, this instance of learning has been documented.

I still have much of the landscape left to explore yet I feel happy with this reference point, this landmark on my vast map.

As I travel across the uncharted territory, I do so having come from the cairns with each documented on my map, my memory.

I will retain such compositional techniques and strategies. I will work through gestures and material the way I had done. I will conduct ethnographic research in order to bear witness to things I had not witnessed directly.

I go forward with an awareness of my learning and how I use markers, familiar subjects, to help me explore new concepts and terrain. Another cairn is added to my mind's moor and as I go forward, into the unknown, I keep my map and its markers close; learning to be retained and applied in future practice.

Perchance To Dream

**Quad South**  
**Hall**

Wednesday 9th may  
Thursday 10th may



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