

The Comfort of Things and the Performance of Homelessness

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Abstract:

The Midnight Florist Collective's performance of The Comfort of Things (2017) was an autobiographic account of the lead artist's experiences of rough sleeping and housing vulnerability, performed whilst the artist was still living in the situation on which the performance was built. This performance presentation will seek to explore the wider cultural questions raised by the situation of homelessness through the lens of performed autobiographic experience and will reflect on the artist's continuing experience of housing precarity.

The performance presentation, like the performance that inspired it, will draw from Daniel Miller's The Comfort of Things (2008) and Stuff (2010) to explore housing as a concept of luxury rather than a human right, and how, through that lens, capitalism's modes of production and profit renders the regular social function of the home defunct. The presentation will be delivered as a practice-as-research enquiry involving 'performative' elements.

Key Words:

'Homelessness', 'Auto-biographic', 'Performance', 'material culture',
'connection'.

Hello everyone and thank you for this opportunity to share with you, my reflections, on the performance of homelessness. This is my first time presenting on my own performative output, rather than the more robust academic work of others, so I'm not overly sure I've got the balance right, but either way, contextualising the academic within a lived experience, or the lived experience within the academic, particularly on this subject, and at this conference can't be a bad idea.

I want to begin where it began, in late August 2016. My former partner and I were due to have a meeting with our landlady. We lived in an annexe situated on her rather spacious country estate on the outskirts of Chichester in West Sussex. Despite the rats, the ever-encroaching mould, and the windows that overlooked her courtyard meaning we always had to keep the curtains drawn in case she could see our private domesticity played out for her voyeuristic delight. Despite these troubles, it was a good place to live. Council tax included. Bills separate. 800pcm

The meeting was in response to a letter we had just received from Chichester District Council informing us that the annexe had been re-banded, which was bizarre considering that council tax had been included in the rent, and the retroactive bill worth a few thousand pounds had been addressed to us. The goal of the meeting was to suggest that our landlady return the sums we had been paying to her for Council Tax, which was now clear had been going towards her own

finances, so that we could apply it to our bill, and we could all carry on our merry lives. She declined our request, and her follow-up response is something I'll never forget, mainly because as a writer I have yet been able to come up with something so villainous: "You've learned a very expensive lesson, haven't you?"

The Citizens Advice Bureau told us that there was nothing we could do if she was not willing to return the money, Chichester District Council said that it was not their issue they only wanted the amount paid, our estate agents seemed genuinely remorseful of the situation but offered no solutions, and even my university was unsupportive as it was not a student-focused let and I lived with my non-student partner. We needed to pay for Food, Bills, and retroactive Council Tax. We had the income for two of those. My former partner moved back to Devon with her parents, and I stayed to complete my degree, sleeping on over fifty floors, sofas, futons, and occasional underpasses. As a first-generation university student, I was aware that if I took a gap year and went back home to rural queerphobic Devon, the likelihood of me being able to return was minimal.

This "very expensive lesson" was the set-up to *The Midnight Florists'* work *The Comfort of Things* (2017), in which, with my worldly positions in various bags wrapped around me in an uncomfortable display of accidental breath play bondage, I tried to explain to an audience, and upon retrospect myself, the intricacies of my newfound existence as a

vulnerably housed and homeless individual.

For this conference, I have been given an opportunity to reflect upon the show, but also on my life, these past six years through the lens of that once-lived experience. As a period of life, I have been quite happy to move on from, my reflections this past week have made me realise that I never set those bags down, I've been carrying those bags around with me ever since.

The first moment the true weight of what was happening hit me was as I was walking to university mid-afternoon with all my stuff for the first time. I had just said goodbye to my then-partner at the storage unit where our things lay entombed, and the weight of the bags around me felt impossible. I am 5'5" and at the time only 7.5 stone, I barely had the physical strength to carry my burden. I saw two friends walking towards me on their way home and I burst into tears. After a few moments of consolation, they helped me take my bags to the theatre department corridor and I sat, waiting for my first temporary accommodation to become available. That was the last time for the duration of my homelessness that anyone would offer to carry my bags.

The Comfort of Things (2017) was centred on a recurring motif of "a very important question" that I was going to, at some point ask. Over the year that I performed that work I was still homeless, and many nights I had been unable to organise a place to stay, I didn't have the funds to pay for anywhere to stay, as all my spare cash had to go

on the debt. The climax of the performance was for me to ask, an audience of complete strangers, if any of them would take me in for a night, or possibly longer.

This was an attempt to engage with what I was calling, rather verbosely at the time, “radical connection”. It was inspired by the autobiography of musician Amanda Palmer called *The Art of Asking* (2014). Where she recounts as an early touring musician how she would sofa surf with members of her audience, total strangers, and the enriching encounters she had with them. The act of staying with strangers, of placing myself in a position of vulnerability, of asking for help, not only satiated my need for physical shelter but also for connection, resulting in several enriching encounters of my own.

The Care Collective’s 2020 book *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* opens ominously with the statement ‘Our world is one in which carelessness reigns’ (1) as my colleagues Dr’s Pete Philips and Jodie Hawkes recounted at a conference yesterday:

‘the extraction of profit and reduction of the state at the heart of the neoliberal project means there is less care, both in terms of care infrastructure that has been decimated through the budget cutting of austerity and the profiteering of private enterprise, and in our capacity to care, as the rhetoric of individual responsibility and fear of the other dominates

public discourse. The mantra of capitalist realism, described by Mark Fisher, the insistence that there is no alternative, leads to passivity and carelessness’.

The Care Collective argue that this ‘careless word creates fertile conditions for the growth of notoriously *uncaring* communities’ (16) This was certainly my experience from 2016 to 2017, and still afterwards, as post-homeless aftercare is non-existent.

It was not immediately obvious to me that I should make work on my then-current situation. The instigating moment was a rather large group discussion where my peers at university delighted in informing me that I was not in fact homeless. This came as quite a shock to me, to be honest, but it seemed that there was a cognitive dissonance between how they viewed me: a showered, vaguely intelligent, funny person, and how they viewed “homeless people”: dirty, ignorant, threatening. It became clear to me that people see homeless and vulnerably housed people through the most visible symptoms of their social condition, rather than as people affected by that condition. I became aware of the value system applied to the homeless: Those who sleep on the street, those that sleep in their cars, those that sleep on their friends’ floors, and those that sleep at their workplace. In society’s eyes, they are not the same. For most people, there is only one kind of homelessness, and I was not it. As The Care Collective concludes ‘all forms of care between

all categories of human and non-human should be valued, recognised, and resourced equally, according to their needs or ongoing sustainability' (40)

It felt bizarre to make a work whose major aim was to validate my own experience as a homeless person, yet the labels we apply to ourselves and others are a major form of self-making, particularly when it comes to young people, as I still was then. As Jerome Bruner suggests in his paper *The Narrative Construction of Reality* '[i]n autobiography, we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world' (Bruner, 1991: 67) Yet without the safety of home, our ability to self-make is inhibited, as Bachelard suggest in *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994): 'the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths.' (6)

Daydreaming allows us to envisage who we might become, how we might be cared for, and through that image, attempt to become it. We might fail in that endeavour and become someone else, but without the safety of a place to dream we can only experience the now, who are we now. So, the question then becomes, who am I now?

I am first and foremost, really rather handsome, secondly, I'd say pretty funny and prone to exaggeration, but after those I find, rather upsettingly that I define myself by my jobs. I start by saying I am

Andrew Martin Lee, Artistic Director of The Midnight Florist Collective, I'm an associate lecturer at the University of East London, and at The University of Chichester where I am also a PhD Candidate writing on Socio-Ecological Interventions within The Culture of Steam. What I don't describe myself by is the job which actually pays my rent, Service Advisor at The University of Chichester's Support, and Information Zone.

Without paying close attention I have come to describe myself now in terms of my interactions with the machines of capital. Something that, six years prior, I was unable to do. Why do I not describe myself in my anti-capitalist volunteer efforts, excusing for a moment the neoliberal reality of volunteerism as a replacement for funded service? Why do I not describe myself as Andrew Martin Lee, volunteer with Stonepillow, a Chichester based Homeless Charity, as a supporter of Life Centre, a likewise Chichester-centric rape crisis charity, or as Chichester Universities only Mental Health First Aider for a student body of just shy of six thousand? Because despite the depth of my capacity for care as displayed by these associations, within the context of the neoliberal project, it falls out of its end goal, that Federico Campagna details as the 'limitless process of production of other instruments, ad infinitum.' (Campagna, 2018, 30)

'A friend once joked, that "I should get a Job at DFS, that way I would always have a sofa to sleep on". (The Comfort of Things, 2017) That anecdote, recounted in the show, and now here, encapsulates quite

neatly the misunderstanding many people are under about the specific technicalities of being homeless as it relates to capitalist production. 'What he didn't understand when making that joke, is that to be employed, you must tick a series of requirements that prove you are eligible to work in the UK, one of which is an address.' (ibid) During homelessness at its most extreme, you can lack, a postal address, formal identification, access to a bank account, medication, and access to GP health care, not just a home.

Before my period of homelessness, I had several physical and mental health conditions which I was now unable to treat with any regularity. Over the course of that year these conditions grew significantly worse, the results of which I am still currently working through. I had slipped out of my working-class existence that was so familiar, into something else. Further down than even what Mike Davis describes as the informal working class, the billion or so people who reside in slums worldwide who are prevented from full integration with the global economy (Davis, 2006:77. My sense of self was slowly being eroded. I was without class, a non-entity under capitalism.

My studies, which had now become the primary focus of my existence, allowed me to keep a sense of self, and my strong friendship group kept me from isolation, yet these are not available to many homeless people who in society's eyes, become these non-entities. As I noted six years ago:

Having somewhere where you can close the door behind you, where you can feel safe and at home, roots you to a place. Makes you feel like you are part of a community. Without those roots, you are alone, an invader, a constant visitor in the rooted lives of others. Out of place, like a life packed in boxes stored in a 20x20 space. Waiting to be put back to where they belong. (The Comfort of Things, 2017)

Yet the precarity of a pre-homeless experience is just as present in my life now as they were then, only now as a PhD student I am less ingratiated with campus life, and if I were to become homeless again, my path out would be much harder. As an associate lecturer at various institutions, my employment is consistently precarious. At this moment in time, I don't know if I will ever work at this institution again. If I want to engage in the painfully precarious callings of educator and art maker that I have chosen for myself, then I am unable to plan for financial emergencies, to invest in a life somewhere whilst I wait for contract changes that might never come, to build a safe financial future that protects me from relapsing into homelessness. I could of course move into a field in which a pre-existing middle-class existence is not a perquisite, but I think you'd miss me, I know I'd miss you.

Even my former working, now middle-class lecturers who oversaw the supervision of *The Comfort of Things* as it began as a piece of student work are now experiencing this same financial precarity as the UCEA refuse to engage with the University and Colleges Union's four fights for fair pay, fair workloads, equality, and an end to casualisation, and the recent comments of its chair, and the University of Aberdeen's Principal and Vice-Chancellor who expressed his desire for 'pain along the way' (Pizzuto-Pomaco, 2023). Homelessness is closer to us all than we would like to think, and it's not just a home that is lost.

The loss of a home is closely followed in the imagination by the loss of stuff. As a quick exercise, I would like you, if you are willing, to make a note of up to five items, objects, and keepsakes that you would take with you if tomorrow you discovered that you were to become homeless or vulnerably housed. I would very much like to hear them after.

The Comfort of Things drew heavily from, as previously mentioned, Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, and Amanda Palmer's *The Art of Asking*, as well as the work of Anthropologist Daniel Miller particularly on his work around material culture, specifically his books' *Stuff*, and of course *The Comfort of Things*, from which, with his permission, I took the projects name. Millers' *The Comfort of Things* presents 30 Portraits of individuals almost all of whom live on a single street in south London. The portraits examine how people express themselves through

their possessions, but few homeless people have any such possessions, at least not objects through which they express self-making.

For me, my "treasured objects" was a large 6-pint saucepan, a frying pan, the head of a rose that Amanda Palmer had thrown out to the audience at a gig, and about three months later the burned hinges of my writing desk. Before I was homeless, if there was an object, I would use to define myself by, it would be my writing desk. When I was young, I wanted to be at first a singer, then a teacher, and at last a writer. As a dyslexic of some incredible magnitude, and a poor working-class kid with very little in the way of actual feasible aspiration, becoming a writer was going to be a challenge. I thought, for some early teen reason, that this endeavour would be made easier if I had a writing desk at which to do it. The writing desk, within the show, became its own character, I returned to the story repeatedly, fleshing it out more and more.

Recounting how my mum had driven past someone loading a writing desk into a skip and had surprised me by putting it into my room whilst I was at school; how I spent my teen years writing at the desk, attempting to outdo Stephen King by writing 3,000 illegible dyslexic words a day to his award-winning 2000, and how finally as I was moving out of the annexe putting my things into a shopping trolley and wheeling it the 5-mile round trip to the nearest storage unit because I couldn't afford a vehicle, I realised that it wasn't going to fit. I told

them how I had to tear my writing desk apart with a mallet so that I could put it in the bin and avoid the cleaning fee fine from my landlady. A very expensive lesson indeed.

A friend was available to help for one day only with her mini, but the desk wouldn't fit in there either. She took the wood for her firepit, waste want not, and three months later, long after my desk had gone up in flames. I was a guest on their sofa. Having fallen asleep outside by the fire, in the morning I noticed in the ash, the two burned hinges of my desk. Homelessness became the new self-making; it defined me, and, in some ways, I defined myself by it. At its conclusion, the before period had been tainted by the struggle and those hinges have come to epitomize my life before.

At the conclusion of my degree, I was offered a golden opportunity. A master's degree with a £10,000 student finance loan upfront, and an alumni discount. Instead of paying my University, I paid my rent, and I became eventually employed, as for some reason employers are not interested in someone who explains the gap in their CV as having been homeless. But the housing I could afford was not of a quality I would have liked; it was a particularly unsafe house with some exceedingly unsafe people.

The housing options for those who do find a way out of homelessness are far from safe, and the sexual violence experienced mostly by women, but also by disabled, queer, and trans people is

disastrously high. For some people, me included, it was safer to be homeless. With a dark irony, when my housing did become unsafe my university offered me a discount on accommodation so that I could get out. An offer that was not made to me as a homeless student. As I said in the show 'It appeared to me that as a housed individual I was worthy of more support than one without. As if this measure of housing is a predilection to what support people should be afforded'.

Since the 2008 financial crash we have seen more of what UN Special Rapporteur¹ Leilani² Farah calls the 'financialization of housing' whereby 'massive amounts of global capital have been invested in housing as a commodity, as security for financial instruments that are traded on global markets, and as a means of accumulating wealth' (Leilani, 2017) She asserts that:

States must redefine their relationship with private investors and international financial institutions, and reform the governance of financial markets so that, rather than treating housing as a commodity valued primarily as an asset for the accumulation of wealth they reclaim housing as a social good, and thus ensure the human right to a place to live in security and dignity. (ibid)

¹ Pronounced (Ra-por-TEER)

² Pronounced (Ley-lani)

When basic human needs are commercialised for extreme profit, the human rights of the citizenry are infringed, or so Farah sets out in her report. The city of Chichester, where I have resided over the last ten years is a perfect example of the effects of the financialization of housing. Chichester is a district of both high wealth and massive poverty, with little area in between. The council website boldly declares that homelessness has not risen in recent years, through my experience as a volunteer with Stonepillow, that might have something to do with the increased death rate of homeless people during the pandemic, unfortunately, the data is not available to confirm my suspicion, for Homeless and vulnerably housed groups are a difficult group to quantify.

The Conservative government's 'Everyone In' campaign led by Dame Louise Casey during the pandemic, saw homeless groups given accommodation in hotels. For up to a year, we got as close as we ever had to solving the issue of homelessness, proving in clear terms that it is only through lack of willingness on behalf of the government, or dare I say lack of care, that this problem remains.

Throughout this review, I have tried to veer away from the Academic as much as possible. I am reminded of a conference I attended about keeping arts in education hosted at Chichester University, where local venues such as the Chichester Festival Theatre and the Pallant House Gallery, bemoaned the lack of engagement with the local population of young people. They all discussed their strategies, for

improving service uptake, but something was being missed that seemed painfully obvious to me and the other smiley-faced 2nd-year student supporting the event. Other than us, there were no young people at the conference. Too often fringe groups are told what support they need, rather than asked. It was my hope that if a conference where the topic of homelessness will hopefully be brought up by others, that in those discussions we do not forget the core human element at the heart of the topic.

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