

LIFE ABSTRACTED

By [Nita Bowerman](#) with [Emma Hendrix](#) & [Caroline Liffmann](#)

A report on a workshop conducted as part of Nightswimming's Pure Research program, in association with Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Conducted at SFU's Woodward's Centre, in Vancouver, June 6-8, 2012.

To what extent can the expression of lived traumas be abstracted without losing emotional resonance? Are there levels of abstraction that intensify emotional resonance? Abstraction enables the enactor/performer to express the lived trauma experience safe, uncensored and emotionally connected. Might abstraction also serve to invite an observer more deeply, honestly and unselfconsciously into a trauma? Using text sourced verbatim, cut-up and wiped-out of personal journal entries, using non-textual vocalization, and by amplifying and digitally modifying the voice, including mixing, layering and looping, this research seeks to investigate expressive states that authentically transfer feeling memory and amplify expressive impact.

Abstraction is appealing to me. It speaks to the nature of memory, fragmented. It also can potentially create a gap that allows for the generalized traumas of human existence to intermingle. Although my artistic crafting of trauma expression is always in search of transformation – whether or not it is achieved – transformation, release, and catharsis were not the goals of this period of research. My primary goal was to accumulate source manipulation strategies in an attempt to mitigate the potency of the material to allow for a greater range of emotional use within a performative context.

I have long been curious about working with an audio artist to explore how amplified sound can be used to deconstruct meaning and manipulate context. I have imagined that audio deconstruction and reconstruction of the voice and body can invoke intense and shocking inner states that are difficult to articulate with language. Once discovered these sound states can possibly bypass the thinking mind and evoke a feeling memory that crosses the boundary of individual experience. [Emma Hendrix](#), core collaborator of *Life Abstracted* Pure Research, is a multi-media artist and a sound designer. He believes in the emotive qualities of sound and uses the complexities of our relationship to our sonic environment to build abstract narratives and visceral sonic environments. The contribution of his expertise and creative instinct was essential to the development and implementation of the research.

In reading the *Life Abstracted* Pure Research proposition as originally submitted to Nightswimming in January 2012 (in italics above), I see that I made a presumption about abstraction and safety. I also realize that I had somehow convinced myself that even the most literal memories had already been sufficiently abstracted by time and age. When it approached time to enter into the studio with such personal and uncensored words from my life, I felt an overwhelming urge to change the source texts to accounts of fictional characters. I had begun to catalogue journal excerpts, pouring over years of reflection to identify significant moments in my life that held potency, that spoke to the core of my personal experience with trauma and suffering.

Dancer and choreographer Caroline Liffmann provided essential advocacy and support during this intense period of research in which vulnerability and judgment were virtually inescapable given the nature and tone of the source material. In my experience memory lives in the body and finds expression through it. It was important that to me that this period of research was a study of expression, rather than a reckless path to retraumatization. Caroline's artistic and professional examination of violence and the body provided essential insight into self-care, sensation mapping and tension relief. Her approach to work is grounding and inviting and her artistic sensibility is eerie, dream-like and playful.

Ultimately, I chose three pieces of text to work with and further extrapolated smaller excerpts from two of the texts. I brought a whole sack of journals with me into the studio. I brought three into play during improvisational explorations. I battered only one.

I would like to thank:

Emma and Caroline for contributing their expertise and immersing themselves so fully in the work. Brian Quirt and DD Kugler for providing the resources and space to explore my curiosities, for their guidance before and during the research period, and for challenging me to refine and articulate my core research questions. Rupal Shah for tending to the details and asking questions. Rachel Steinberg for being present for the research and for taking archival footage of the research improvisations. Nancy Tam for observing the research and sharing her curiosities.

Day 1 – Audio Effects Data Collecting and Archiving

The first day of research was focused on examining audio effects, exploring a common language, and archiving the audio effects and their associative qualities.

My immediate impulse upon entering the studio was to take the stage, to move into the space and test the technology while speaking and moving. It rather quickly became apparent, however, that being inside the work to such a degree made it difficult to focus on what the technology was capable of and took me out of the methodology of data collection and language building. As such I joined Emma and Caroline at the sound station and Emma unleashed an arsenal of sound on a pre-recorded sound bite, beginning with simple audio effects and building to more complex effects. Emma explained the effect, we explored range and nuances of the effects, and we discussed associative qualities that could be used to call on and reference the effect as we continued our explorations.



Nita on Day 1

The day ended with an improvisation in which I entered the space using the full excerpt of text from which the audio effects examination sound bite had been extracted. Here Emma and I engaged in a creative and associative conversation arising from the textual source and the effects we had explored together. Very quickly the relationship developed into a mutual giving and taking of impulse whereby each participant organically took turns leading the tone of the conversation. Again, I noticed the difficulty with objectively listening – if such a thing is possible – to the sound when being so immersed in the shape and context of it as the performer. Emma, however, had recorded the improvisation so that I could listen to it before the next day.

Here is an excerpt from the simple Audio Effects Collection and Archiving chart:

Name of Effect	What Effect Does	Notes on Effects
EQ Filter	filters frequency	high filtered = muffled low filtered = feminine/liquid low/high filtered = telephone voice
Reverb	Reflections of sound tail of sound Sound reflections	lots of reverb = distance only reverb = muffled/faded/ apparition/sense of past
Pitch Shift	high & low	low = creature/alien (high = child?)
Detune	ring modulator?	scratchy/horror movie/voice masking
Delay	echo/pauses/feedback Every time it repeats it layers/gets louder	apocalypse universe collapsing eternal descent into chaos

We explored 17 effects in total on Day 1.



Nita on Day 1.

Day 2 – Sound Collection and Archiving / Improvisational Explorations with Effects and Sound

Day 2 began with listening to the improvisation recording from the previous day, while Caroline and I endeavoured to identify the audio effects Emma had been using. A discussion ensued about the difference between the recording that Emma had made on his computer versus the live sonic sound environment that was created in the room in the moment of exploration. I had noticed that Emma had the ability to mute my voice completely out of the recorded version of the improvisation, sometimes delaying it or highlighting an excerpt of the text only. In a live context, the voice of the performer is always present and although the amplification can be muted, the live speaking voice is ever available. To help me hear and understand this Emma set up a mini recorder for the latter part of the day to capture the sonic environment of the room during our improvisational explorations. There were then two recordings to compare, one that captured the ‘live’ sonic environment and another that Emma recorded on his computer that further abstracted the voice by muting, delaying, and modifying it with the option of wiping out the original live vocal source completely.

Before the afternoon improvisations we expanded our audio manipulation vocabulary by collecting and cataloguing a series of sounds that spoke to the material in question. Here I learned a very important lesson about abstraction and safety. The exercise was simply structured; it was a quick moving recording session using abstracted breath, voice, body, and specific props. We would record these sounds and later apply them to text with effects. What I had not taken fully into account when I drafted my research outline was how transporting this experience would be. There are certain sounds that the body can make that bypass all reason and hit at an emotional core. Allowing myself to make these sounds, in combination with the introduction of key props that spoke to intense moments in my life, punched up the past with extreme potency. One prop I chose to use too literally and I discovered that certain self-directed physical actions, even modified and decontextualized, are best left in the past and alternative forms of expression explored. Inanimate objects tend to provide excellent resistance – and sometimes compliance – to the expression of violent impulses. It seems incredibly self-evident upon reflection, but because I had abstracted the action by changing its form and content, I hadn’t expected the feel and latent intent to be potentially injurious.

By this time we needed a break. When we reconvened we began to integrate the audio data we had collected with text that spoke directly to trauma experience through a series of improvisations. We switched from a hand held microphone to wireless, which freed the body and voice to move. Over the course of the improvisations the key props were introduced, including journals. There were multiple improvisations of various lengths, after each we engaged in automatic writing to record our uncensored impressions in silence.

The following audio files demonstrate the live sonic environment of the room versus the sonic environment that Emma created and recorded with his computer. *Warning, the material is violent.*

The live sonic environment:

<http://soundcloud.com/nita-bowerman/pure-research-audio-day-2-1>

Computer recorded sonic environment:

<http://soundcloud.com/nita-bowerman/pure-research-audio-day-2-2>

My plan for Day 3 had been to explore vocal replication of audio abstractions. The goals for this experiment were to use audio abstraction as an inspiration for live vocal abstractions and to identify which sounds were potent. It was noted, however, that this had already been organically occurring during the improvisational conversations between Emma and myself. This opened a myriad of possibilities for directions to take the research. I left Day 2 exhausted, enlivened, and utterly confounded.



Day 2 with Nita, Emma, Caroline and Rachel

Day 3 – Audio Effects Examination / Search for Contrast

After brainstorming several directions in which to take the research, I again joined Emma at the sound table and asked Caroline to take to the space with text. We went back to the audio effects chart drafted on the first day and began to explore the effects in greater detail and in different combinations. We explored nuances of pitch to find the subtle shifts that could contribute to a child-like innocence of the speaker's voice or work toward masculinizing the voice. Through the role of active observer, I identified the selection of text that resonated with me most deeply in cutting to the core of my personal trauma identification. Further, it provided the opportunity to test the language that began to develop on Day 1 around audio effects and manipulation. Based on the associative description of an audio effect, for example 'universe collapsing' used to describe delay, I identified key effects that I was curious about exploring further.

Soon a question began to develop about tonal contrast to the material. Given the heaviness of the content, I began to wonder if form could provide a counterpoint, creating an incongruous blend of the material and the audio expression of it. Initially we looked at a selection of the effects themselves and the sounds we had collected to search for this contrast. In the studio we concluded that the contrast had to be somehow present in the source provided. At this point Caroline introduced us to a smart-phone application that transforms simple recorded text to song. We named a specific trauma and set it to a dance beat and used it as a core element in our continued search for contrast.

Through observing Caroline another question began to formulate for me surrounding the potency of stillness within the world of this material. I had already noted the need for silence within the audio landscape, moments to let the sound settle and give the body and mind space to interpret,

or simply be, with the arising sensations and associations evoked by the sound environment. It was now becoming evident to me that the same was true of physical stillness. There was a vulnerability that arose from Caroline's stillness and the simple statement of up pitched words in juxtaposition to the 'universe collapsing,' for example, that opened a window to seeing the speaker on various levels; in the moment, as a child, and as a projected interior emotional state.

Upon placing myself into the experiment I encountered my habitual tendency to move the material and found it challenging to commit myself to stillness. I also discovered that significantly slowing down movement provided an emotional pull that was powerful, yet grounding.

Pure Research is not about product. However, here is the recording of Day 3's final improvisation:

<http://soundcloud.com/nita-bowerman/beat-around-the-bush>

CONCLUSION – What Really Happened on Day 2 of Pure Research?

<http://soundcloud.com/nita-bowerman/pleasant-sexual-sensations>

It took a month for me to process the three days of research enough to write this report. After writing the report I sent it to Emma and Caroline for feedback. Their responses resulted in a re-evaluation of the process and raised a lot of questions about how to construct a supportive environment in which to explore this material.

I have come to realize that the relationship of abuser/victim is inherent in the work and that the exploration of sex and violence requires an extra delicacy, care and consideration that was not fully realized during this period of research. The intimate nature of the work triggered concerns that are not necessarily present during the exploration of fictionalized material.

I have been coping with and healing from the content of this material for most of my life. Likewise, I have been exploring it through artistic form personally in studio since I began shaping my personal practice. When I got into the studio for Pure Research, I was ready to go deep and, with such a short collaborative period, I was also ready to go fast. I wanted to do the work and had given little thought to how we would collectively navigate the emotions and concerns that might arise.

Invariably, when I work with this material concerns about my safety arise. The level of discomfort, particularly with the knowledge that the material is personal, and in the case of Pure Research, autobiographical, magnifies insecurity and confusion. When particularly violent expressions arise it acts as a trigger for alternative lived traumas and fuels a natural aversion to abuse. There is an inherent need to know that as brutal as things may get, everyone is working together and in unity. That is, there is a need to know that what is being created is a form of expression and not the reliving of a trauma.

I admit, that as a survivor of violence, there is a part of me that resents having to assure people that I am okay. For so long there has been a desire to give voice to the traumas that I have

endured. And for even longer there has been the conflicting impulse to remain silent for fear of how my expression of abuse will be perceived and engaged with. If one focuses too heavily on the violence there is a perception of victimhood. And without a concurrent expression of healing, witnesses and engagers are left feeling culpable, perhaps even responsible, for an act of retraumatization. Most human beings are compassionate, and intense expressions of violence, pain and suffering hurt them. It hurts to see others hurt and it's confusing to engage with the emotions that arise.

I didn't feel like a victim in my Pure Research explorations. In fact, I found the expression of intolerables to be ultimately empowering. And listening to the recordings, I feel that the potential to audio extract internal mental states of distress into the common sound sphere in a way that compels body hearing is entirely possible. This, however, does not negate the need to facilitate a compassionate environment for others to engage with the work. A key element of making the expression of intolerables tolerable is to address the healing process, that it is possible and that it is in progress. The expression of lived trauma is not inherently unhealthy or abusive, and can be potentially healing in itself. Breaking silence is healing.

I did not enter Pure Research seeking catharsis and release. I wanted to explore the expression and abstraction of painful memories. The exploration of personal and painful material takes special consideration around how to construct the collaborative environment, an environment where each person feels safe and empowered. I had spent so much time in my preparation of Pure Research focusing on how to explore the expression of my suffering and not enough considering how to shape an environment that encouraged trust and support. Both Emma and Caroline went deep, took big risks and committed fully to the work.

In retrospect, it is clear that more care could have been taken to facilitate an environment where everyone felt like they were connected and grounded. There needed to be more relationship building, more sensitivity toward potential triggers, and more time to talk about 'what just happened.' The responsibility to facilitate an environment where others can engage with this material without being injured in the process cannot be undervalued. Due care must be given to each collaborator in the shaping of the studio space and the approach to the work. Everyone must be free to weigh in on the dynamics of the room, to delineate boundaries and to share their concerns and confusions. The opportunity to pause an exploration must not just be offered, but it must be clear that it is there to be used. Sometimes going off schedule is necessary. Sometimes talking about the work is more important than doing the work. Each collaborator must consider what it means to be safe and a studio space that reflects the collective vision must then be created. This takes preparation and forethought. It also takes sensitivity and a willingness to surrender some impulses for the good of the group. This is ensemble training. Trust building and, ultimately, relationship building. An essential part of any collaborative creation process.

I would like to thank Emma and Caroline again. I wanted to know to what extent it was possible to express extreme internal states of mental duress in a way that is representative of the actual mental and physical experience. I wanted to move my internal violence of surviving outward; my motives are still under reflection. I was blessed with generous, trusting, and open collaborators who have given great consideration to the process and their experiences with the research. Their responses to the research have deepened my own reflections on the work, and most importantly the work in relationship with others.