

ALWAYS
ALREADY:
NO BODY
IS EVER
COMPLETELY
ALONE

MARY
PATERSON



A RESPONSE TO *ALWAYS ALREADY*

ALWAYS ALREADY IS A PERFORMANCE INSTALLATION,
VIDEO SERIES AND READING COMPANION
BY KAREN CHRISTOPHER & TARA FATEHI IRANI



You walk into a dark room, a hushed space, a quiet place. You find a seat. You wait, you watch. It is a room filled with busy-ness, with quiet industry, with the directed attention of two women among a collection of props: a coil of rope

a sprinkle of seeds

two simple, wooden chairs

a long, flat plank of wood

a large wave of something thick and soft-looking

a giant sculpture of a pair of lungs.

The women fall into step with each other. A strange dance.

They move their legs, their hands, their backs.

They slide across the room, side by side.

Their eyes fix on a distant horizon, somewhere beyond the far wall.

You get the feeling that if you turned around to look you would not be able to see the distance that their gaze predicts. So, you keep watching the women watching the invisible edge of the infinite sky, and through their bodies you imagine where it might be.

Always Already is a durational performance by Haranczak Navarre Performance Projects. Its horizon in time stretches as far as its horizon in space – that is, further than your body can perceive. For eight hours, two performers – Karen Christopher and Tara Fatehi Irani – move in this space together. Sometimes in unison, sometimes in companionship. The duration of the piece means they are always already there when you enter. They are always there when you leave to take a breath of air. They are already there when you return.

‘Why do human beings deal poetically with words, sounds, and visual signs?’ asks the Italian philosopher Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi. ‘Why do we slip away from the level of conventional semiosis? Why do we loosen signs from their established framework of exchange?’¹

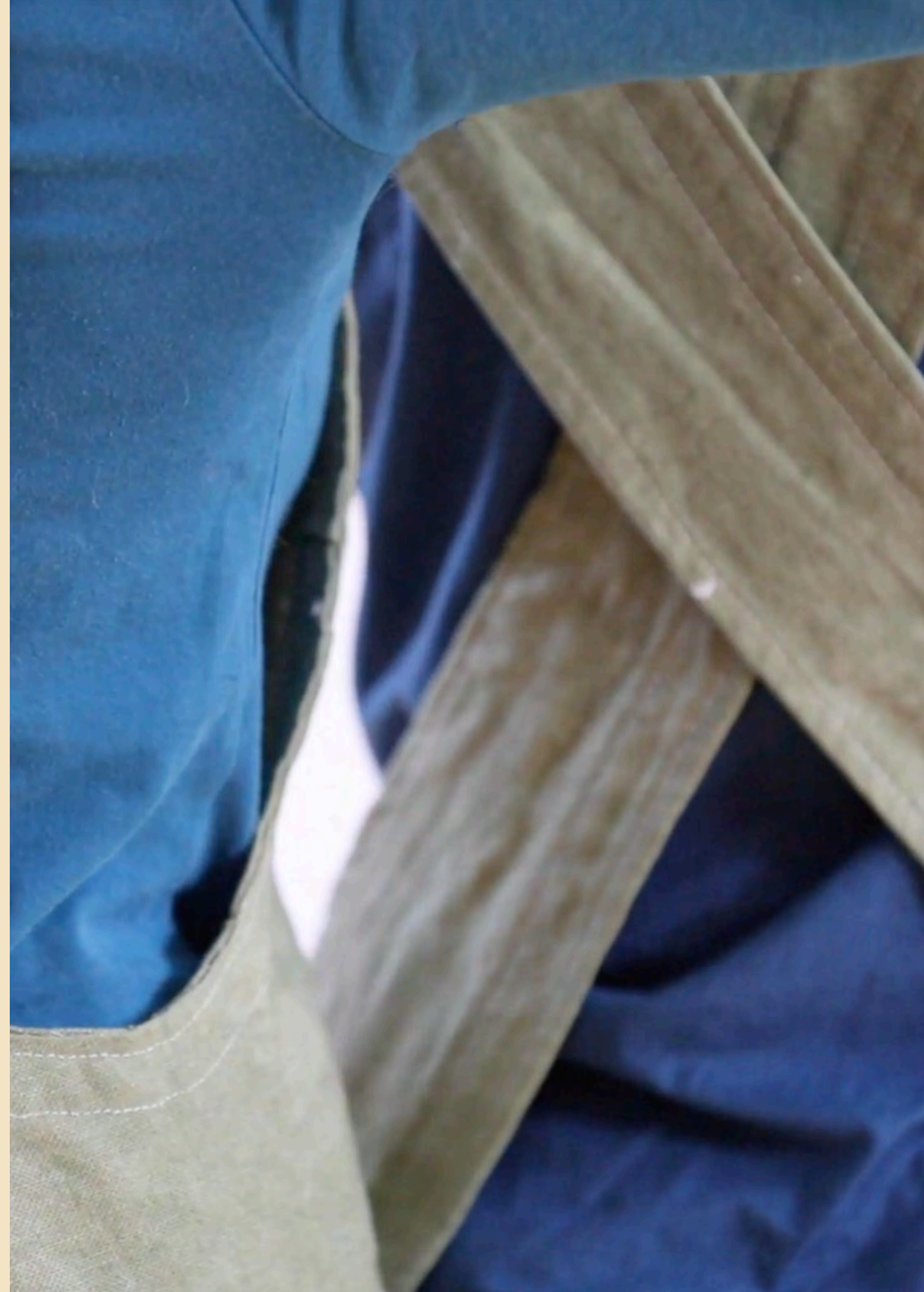
If loosening signs is poetry, then here is an eight-hour poem. It is a poem that unravels the threads of a shared reality (conventional semiosis) and weaves them together again anew. The result is not a framework of exchange; but something like a network of possible connections.

A woman carries a bundle of the brownish-grey wave across the room. What is this strange material? It looks both soft and scratchy, shapeless and sculpted. She unfurls it into a line and its undulating surfaces reveal itself as sheep’s wool: rolls and rolls of it, raw and undyed, unspun, unprocessed. Or, only partly processed. A material like this is of course always already processed:

 processed by the shearer who carves the fleece from the sheep,
 before that processed by the sheep itself from its obliging body,
 which is processed by the farmer who rears the sheep,
who feeds and cares for the sheep, who pens and shelters the sheep, who
removes the male lambs for slaughter.

This process is performed in the shape of centuries of interdependence between our species. People and sheep are no longer wild to each other; we are always already woven – for better or worse, for life or death, for warp or weft – into the fabric of each other’s world.

1. Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2018), *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e) / Intervention Series, p. 19.



Think of the shapes and the processes already living inside your body. Think of the dances you always dance. Think of the experiences you hold beyond the horizon of your furthest memory. Think of the other bodies you move with, sometimes in unison, sometimes in companionship.

‘Reality,’ Bifo says, ‘[...] is the sphere of human interaction and communication secreted by language and refined by poetry.’²

What is the language in this weave?

What are its words?

What is its pattern?



Later, there will be buckwheat seeds spilled across this floor.

Spilled and swept,

spilled and swept.

Later, or earlier (time works in

circles in this horizonless room,

this room that infers more time and space than four walls can contain),

one of the women rotates her arm, slowly, as if stirring an imaginary pot. One of the women rolls out the raw wool into rows of gently curving carpet. Ghosts are summoned in these rituals: invisible bodies have warmed the pot, have reared the sheep, will place their feet on this warm ground.

2. *Ibid.* p. 18.

In the field of ancient DNA analysis, scientists have been able to predict ‘ghost populations’ of human beings through samples taken from long buried bones. A ghost population is a group of people that no longer exists, but whose patterns of movement and culture around the globe can be inferred from body parts that survive today. The ancient Yamnaya, for example, is a ghost population of farmers on the Eurasian Steppes, whose use of the wheel and the domesticated horse spread as far as modern-day Finland in one direction, and modern-day Iran in another. Their DNA survives in the bones of their descendents buried in the warm ground, whose DNA survives in the cells of their descendents now alive. Their culture survives in the form of shared Indo-European myths of cattle raiding, and shared Indo-European languages.³

Somebody in the audience stands to leave.

A thread of light spills across the floor as he opens the door:

for a moment, the shape of another timeline enters this edgeless space.

The women keep moving, unaffected. One of them curves her mouth to sing.

We do not know how ghost populations died. They could have been wiped out in genocide. They could have been subsumed into the gene pool for love. The same goes for other species of human, who lived un-wildly with *Homo sapiens* for thousands of years, sometimes in unison, sometimes in companionship. Imagine what it was like for our Neanderthal cousins to watch us arrive on the Eurasian steppes, naïve strangers with empty hands. Imagine what they taught us, and what they withheld. What passed between us? What do we still remember from the texture of those days?

3. David Reich (2022), interviewed by Sean Carroll for *Mindscape* [podcast] ‘179 | David Reich on Genetics and Ancient Humanity,’ available at <https://www.preposterousuniverse.com/179-david-reich-on-genetics-and-ancient-humanity/> Accessed 5 September 2022.



We must all decide where to place our attention: the endless horizon of space, or the thread of light emanating from one body's timeline.

Later, or earlier, the two women sit opposite each other on two chairs, sharing a look across distance and time. The room is empty and full. The room is empty of movement and its objects are tidied away: neat bales of wool; neat bags of seeds; a neat coil of rope. At the same time, the room is filled with a noise that is drawn from the sounds of industrious work – of machinery moving, of people talking to each other in low voices, of ligaments of woven thread snapping. The noise is a soundscape designed by Pouya Ehsaei, and it thickens the air without revealing where it comes from.

The English word textile, like the Greek word 'tekhnē' (art) and the old Persian 'taxš' (to be active), stems from the Indo-European root 'teks' (to weave). The culture that domesticated the horse leaves its spirits in the warp and weft of sounds we hear today; in the shapes we carve between us with our tongues.

The soundscape returns one of the women's dances to my mind, and the memory of their movement populates the room with the fixtures and the bodies of a factory. The women were spinning an arm above their heads. They pulled on something invisible, like a thread. A moment of intricacy occurred between their fingers. This happened in the past to their bodies and it is happening to me now as the soundscape conjures a memory of what their bodies might mean.

This is how our ghosts travel with us – through the memories of bodies that carry their relics, sometimes in unison, sometimes in circles, rolling, spinning, pulling, like an ancient memory, like an ancient seed sprouting roots and starting to grow.



Imagine a seed is sprouting roots inside your body. Imagine it is starting to grow inside your brain, weaving your synapses together with its curious tendrils, finding the curve of your ear canal, stretching into the air that brings sounds into your body in waves. Imagine the sound your body might make as the plant grows through you and with you, as the plant turns you into its tool, its inter-species interdependent, its domesticated animal.

(Are you the seed or are you the body?)

Buckwheat seeds spill onto the hard, dark floor. Each bead is an island of potential, yet to grow. A human body sweeps the seeds with her cupped hand, her bowed back, her bent knees. The seeds coalesce into waves. The woman works at the waves one edge at a time.

(When are you the seed and when are you the body?)

Later (or earlier) the women are dancing, again. Their legs kick, their arms spin, their faces gaze at that endless edge they summon with their eyes. Their bodies echo one another, their movements draw patterns into the air. How do they know when to begin and when to end?

(Where does one stop, and the other begin?)

The soundscape conjures voices, machines, bells. The kinds of noises that do not emanate from an individual, but from a system. A system that is always already there.

(When did your body and the seed become un-wild to each other?)

A process, like the bodies that grow fleece, like the seeds that uncurl roots,
like the people that bend their backs to the ground.

(Are you woven together in love, or is one of you committing an act of violence?)



When human beings evolved there were always already other human species to learn from, to live with, to wonder with under the magnificence of the sky. There is more Neanderthal DNA alive today than ever was inside Neanderthal bodies alive on Earth. It travels in the bodies of Homo sapiens whose ancestors subsumed the Neanderthals in love or violence. The discovery of this fact is tied in time, not coincidentally, to the discovery of the rich cultural history of Neanderthals: their large brains, their proto-flutes, their textiles made from twisted bark.⁴

Outside this room there is a courtyard. It glistens with soft November rain. A clutch of human bodies stands in the courtyard holding small fires to their lips. Beyond the courtyard there is a city: rows of tarmacked streets rolled out like veins. Beyond the city is the sea, and weaving between the two is the river, which breathes its foamy waves in and out of the populated terrain.

I can tell you this because other people have told me.

Other people have cupped their hands to my ears
and whispered this knowledge into the tendrils of my brain.

4. Hardy, B.L., Moncel, M.H., Kerfant, C. et al. (2020), 'Direct evidence of Neanderthal fibre technology and its cognitive and behavioral implications'. *Sci Rep* 10, 4889.

Today there is a rugby match that has gathered thousands of bodies to this city, to this river, to this mouth. Bodies that gather to stand and shout in waves, their lips shaped into circles, their arms moving in ancient ways.

Other people have planted a seed inside my body.

I did not plant the seed.

I do not know where the seed came from.

All I know is that it was always already there, moving, sprouting, rolling,
weaving ...



Somewhere during this time (later, or earlier) the soundscape that summoned the factory has been replaced by the sounds of a single woman's voice, and a robotic kind of birdsong. The woman is speaking some questions that sound like instructions.

Is everyone breathing? Did your breath change when I asked?

Sometimes the questions give way to stories that sound like questions.

The roots were breathing under my feet, and I didn't know where to stand not to suffocate the huge, breathing roots.

Somewhere during this time, the woman's voice changes from one that infers an American identity to one that infers an Iranian one.



What have you inhaled?

And back again.

The women talk in numbers, but their numbers are incomplete: a damaged skeleton of partial remains. They dance like young trees waving in the wind. They move like they have memories, sometimes in unison, sometimes in companionship.



Sometimes the women fall out of step with one another, and something inside me aches. Ghost populations fade from view – rows of workers pulling threads, rows of sheep waiting to be sheared, rows of woven shawls: bright shapes tossed across young shoulders in a luxurious wave of time. These apparitions disappear as the women retreat into their individual selves. First, one woman misses a step. The other relaxes an arm. Something changes in their gaze. They are no longer looking out to the edge of time but are returned to this room with me, with you, with the lighting rig and the folding chairs and the rope, the wool, the planks of wood, the large and looming sculpture of a pair of lungs.

Perhaps we are not interdependent bodies after all. Perhaps we are separate individuals, self-propelled selfish genes: small units of information motivated by our own survival, pushing our selfish hands out of other people's bodies whether or not they like the sound. Perhaps it is just a coincidence, a prejudice to imagine we belong to each other, always already. Like the people who believed the Sun belonged to the Earth, that the Earth belonged to Man: it looks that way, but only if you are the centre of your own imagination.

The room feels cold. Outside, rain turns to sleet and collects in teardrops on the cobble stones.

And then: a look.

One woman looks to the other.

They share a smile.

A thread of something known to them electrifies the room.

'Love is the extremely difficult realisation,' writes the English novelist Iris Murdoch, 'that something other than oneself is real.'

(I tell you this because other people have told me. Other people have planted the seeds inside my body.)

'Love, and so art and morals,' Murdoch continues, 'is the discovery of reality.'⁵

She means that in order to perceive the world we must first recognise that it exists beyond our perceptions. Only then can we find out how to connect.

What crackles between the two women is something like love, or art, or morals. It is an emotional connection (like love), an abundance of meanings (like art), a shared cultural belief (like morals). It is a mutual understanding that means they know when to start and when to stop, when to stay silent and when to sing, when to be in unison and when to be in companionship.

Later, or earlier, one of the women's voices will ask, 'Can you stretch a story to its longest length?' The two women will be swaying like saplings in a hostile wind.

Where does one story stop, and another begin?

5. Iris Murdoch (1959), 'The Sublime and the Good', Chicago Review Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 42-55. See p. 51.

There is no horizon in this place: no beginning, and no end. Like a circular breath, the space continues, moving, dancing, spinning, sweeping.

‘There has never been a piece of DNA,’ says the American geneticist C. Brandon Ogbonu, ‘that has ever functioned without a context. ... Every single one has operated in the context of other genes, other environments.’⁶ We might speak in the digital language of DNA codes and units, but we are not selfish genes. Reality is not a single garment but a collective fabric that passes from body to body, culture to culture, time to time, weaving, spinning, singing, dancing. Un-wild, we are woven – for better or worse, for life or death, for warp or weft – into the texture of each other’s world.

A loom becomes a rib cage, its bones held taught as rope.

A body becomes a factory, peopled with cultural memories.

A factory becomes a body.

A brain becomes a tree.

Seeds become its branches.

None of these elements is separate from the others, just as no body is ever completely alone, and no action appears in a vacuum. Here, in a room filled with endless time and endless space, these elements flow out of one another: the seed, the skull, the loom, the look, the wool, the waves. It feels as if the very fabric of space and time is becoming frayed, as if ghosts are alive inside our bodies, as if we are a forest of trees connected by the roots, a rib cage inflating with a fragile breath, a collection of strangers feeling the threads of our lives twisting together.

6. C. Brandon Ogbonu, interviewed by Michael Garfield for *Complexity* [podcast], ‘C. Brandon Ogbonu on Epistasis & The Primacy of Context in Complex Systems’, Santa Fe Institute, 2022, see 19:05 onwards <https://complexity.simplecast.com/episodes/81-exzBZjS9> Accessed 5 September 2022.

Even a vacuum is not empty: a vacuum is simply a space where nothing moves (dances, spins, sweeps ...).⁷

Perhaps love (so art, so morals) is the gaze that brings the fabric of reality into view. The gaze that conjures an endless horizon, reflected through her body and into mine.

The look that electrifies a room.

The glisten of an invisible thread in a stranger’s hands.



The penultimate hour of *Always Already* is, in the artists’ words, the time in which the performance ‘has a thicker weave’. And it’s true, the air feels heavy with anticipation. There is a tangible excitement in this space – I can sense it in the twist of the rope and the heavy tug of invisible thread, the sweat on the women’s faces, the brightly coloured shawls that lie invisibly across their shoulders. I can hear it in the strange hum that illuminates the air, like a powerful breath. And I can feel it in the circular movement of the shape of this room, endless, edgeless, an infinite horizon.

It is a feeling that has grown from nothing more than the elements that were always, already here all those hours ago: the past and the present dancing together inside your body, sometimes in unison, sometimes in companionship, relics of ancient knowledge writing poems into your bones.

Why do human beings deal poetically with words, sounds, and visual signs? Because we need to loosen the ties of our conventional understanding of the world. Because the metaphors that we have been breathing with no longer work.

7. In quantum field theory, a vacuum state is a state of the lowest possible energy. Unlike in classical (Newtonian) physics, this does not mean that there is nothing there; instead, that the fluctuating fields of quantum systems are moving as little as possible. See for instance: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vacuum_energy Accessed 5 September 2022.



‘[Biologists] are undiscovering the individual,’ says the English writer Daisy Hildyard, ‘we are realising that our concept of the existence of a human being could, in a technical way, be wrong.’⁸

Instead, we should think in terms of symbiosis, of environments, of horizons of possibility that began before we remember and stretch further than we can know.

Outside the rain is sliding into sleet, smoke is folding from the lips of people lighting fires. Inside, a rib cage of rope is being unmade by these two women who wear similar clothes, who speak in soft voices,

who each hold a long, thin tool, like a spear or a stick or a giant needle.

The rope is a single, sinewy fibre made from many fibres twisted together.

It is this twisting together that gives the rope strength.

The women pull on the rope with their giant needles and it falls slack, like a sigh. Like the exhalation of a powerful breath.

When the rope has finished breathing the women coil it into a circle, the shape of a mouth about to sing.

8. Daisy Hildyard (2017), *The Second Body*, London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, p. 109.

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BY MARY PATERSON

A RESPONSE TO *ALWAYS ALREADY*

Always Already is a performance installation, video series
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