

The image shows a corner of a room with a decorative ceiling. The ceiling features a series of concentric, V-shaped lines that create a sense of depth and perspective. The walls are a warm, light orange color. In the foreground, a dark, textured ledge or shelf is visible, extending from the left side towards the center. The overall lighting is soft and warm, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Poetics of Space
Making

Georgie Fehringer

POETICS OF SPACE MAKING

SELF-GUIDED WORKSHOP

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Emerging Writers Festival

Melbourne City of Literature

2022



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NECESSARY MATERIALS

- 80 minutes (minimum)

- A notebook and writing implement (I encourage this exercise to be done on paper)

- Timer

- A room/several rooms/public space

You should be familiar with the space. Choose somewhere you have been many times. (Anywhere is acceptable as long as you are allowed to exist within the space for the entirety of the hour and you feel comfortable enough with the people who may or may not be watching you!)

- A willingness to make movements that might, in any other circumstance, make a fool of yourself

INTRODUCTION

In writing, we are so often worried about getting from A to B – whether that is moving the narrator or character from one place to another, getting dialog from one character to another, or information from the narrator to the reader – we often forget about the spaces that surround ourselves, our words, our ideas, and our readers. These spaces have shapes, sounds, vibrations, feelings, resistances, echoes, and other presences in the world that call out to the writer and reader who take the time to listen and feel. This workshop is designed to get you to spend an hour listening to and feeling these physical and metaphorical spaces with the intention of learning to incorporate them into your writing.

Originally my personal fixation on sounds and the feeling of air moving over my body was inspired by Professor Amanda Davidson. A performance artist and a poet, she insisted that once a week we spend our writing class in the gym, moving our bodies listening to the sounds of the space, feeling the walls and the ground, and even imagining ourselves as those objects. I will never forget the day she asked us to run our hands over everything we could in the room and report back. A classmate from the far corners came back to the group and told us, “When I was feeling the pipe over there, I touched some gum and I thought, ew! And then I thought... well the gum probably doesn’t want to touch me either!”

Likewise, Professor Miranda Mellis taught me the value of noticing sound. She started many a class free write with the instructions to focus on our own bodies or the sounds echoing around the room. This led to many a day’s free write spiraling

out into intense fixations on the tightness of my little toe in the shoes I had thrown on that morning, or the coolness of the air vent only brushing through the hair on the back of my left leg.

C.A. Conrad, the poet, writer, and beautiful thinker, has a word for turning the everyday into an exceptional location for writing: (Soma)tics. In *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, they explain (Soma)tic poetry as:

“(Soma)tic poetry is a praxis I’ve developed to more fully engage the everyday through writing. Soma is an Indo-Persian word that means “the divine.” Somatic is Greek. Its meaning translates as “the tissue” or “nervous system.” The goal is to coalesce soma and somatic, while triangulating patterns of experience with the world around us. Experiences that are unorthodox steps in the writing process can shift the poet’s perception of the quotidian, if only for a series of moments. This offers an opportunity to see the details clearer. Through music, dirt, food, scent, taste, in storms, in bed, on the subway and at the grocery store, (Soma)tic Exercises and the poems that result are just waiting to be utilized or invented, everywhere, and anytime.”

(“Right to Manifest Manifesto”, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, Pg. 1)

This workshop has been designed to get you moving about and think about the physical spaces and bodies we inhabit and how we might incorporate those feelings into our writing. Audio files have been included throughout so that you may listen to the exercises as if we were running this workshop in person! Audio files are direct recordings of the written workshops so please feel free to follow along.

A huge thank you to the Emerging Writers Festival and Melbourne City of Literature for selecting me as the 2022 virtual writer in residence!

Georgie Fehringer
November 2022

EXERCISE 1 - FEELING

(5 MINUTES)

Every writing workshop should start with some sort of a freewrite. This one will focus entirely on feeling. Get yourself into a comfortable (or uncomfortable) position. The only things important about the position are that it is intentionally chosen and that you are able to hold it for the entirety of the 5 minutes while writing. If you are able to write while standing on your head and wish to do so, I won't discourage you from trying, but I will suggest that it is important that you are positive you are capable of holding this position for the entirety of the 5 minutes! Once you are ready, you will write for the entirety of the time without stopping. This might mean you reach a point where you are writing "I'm not sure what to write" over and over again. This is acceptable! Try to push past it, and find your way back into the feeling.

Step 1. Take your timer and set it to five minutes. Do not yet press start.

Step 2. Do a full-body scan. What are you noticing? Maybe you can feel the blades of your shoulders pulling from the way you are sitting criss-cross on the floor? Or, the places where your shin touches your heels crossed in your lap? The breeze from the fan blowing past your nose, which is slightly running from your seasonal allergies? The pull from the back of your eyes that have been staring at a screen for many hours in a row, on many days in a row, for many years in a row. How is your hand feeling after not using it consistently for so many years? How will it feel by the time the timer sounds?

Step 3. Press start. What are you waiting for? Go on!

Step 4. Read back what you've written. Circle images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing you don't often use.

Reflect (2 min)

What surprised you? How might you incorporate these images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing into your writing practice?

EXERCISE 2 - SOUND

(5 MINUTES)

Exercise two starts off almost exactly the same way as exercise one. So, let's shake this up! These exercises are about noticing the neglected parts of life. Stand up! Cross the room! Sit in a position you have never sat in before. Often for me, this might involve laying or sitting in a corner with my face towards the wall. Where is the spot in the room that gets the least amount of attention? Find it. Sit, stand or lay there! Underneath the table might start to look inviting. I know it always does to me!

Now, get yourself into a comfortable (or uncomfortable) position. The only thing important about the position is that you are able to hold it for the entirety of the 5 minutes and write while you are doing so. You will write for the entirety of the time without stopping. This might mean you are writing "I'm not sure why Georgie is making me sit under this table" over and over again. This is acceptable! Push past it, and find your way back into the sound.

Step 1. Take your timer and set it to five minutes. Do not yet press start.

Step 2. Do a full body and surroundings scan. Are you noticing the blades of your fan spinning around and ticking at every turn? The sound of your heart from within your body, is it louder in your chest? Your wrist? Your hand? Your head? How does your hand sound after not using it consistently for so many years? Does it start to audibly protest as time moves on?

Step 3. Press start. What are you waiting for? Go on!

Step 4. Read back what you've written. Circle images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing you don't often use.

Reflect (2 min) What surprised you? How might you incorporate these images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing into your writing practice?

EXERCISE 3 - THE BIGGEST VOWEL (10 MINUTES)

Now that you've analyzed and recorded all the sounds the room has to offer, I want you to find the biggest vowel in the room. "What do you mean by that Georgie?" That is a great question, and one only you can answer. There are no wrong answers here. What do you find when you give yourself permission to make the rules?

Now you are definitely thinking, "What could Georgie possibly mean by the biggest vowel?" Ask yourself, What does the biggest vowel look like? What does it sound like? What does it smell like? Those are all great questions.

Start your timer.

Write about it for 5 straight minutes.

Now that you've found the biggest vowel in the room, become that vowel. Decide how you will become that vowel.

Be the vowel for 1 minute straight.

Embody what the vowel sounds like. What it looks like. What it feels like. Make noise! Make movement!

Need inspiration? Watch this Tik Tok from @the_devonmaid!

https://www.tiktok.com/@the_devonmaid/video/7098003058294066437

Reflect (5 min) Write about being the biggest vowel in the room! It's not so often you've been one - don't lose the chance to document it.

The biggest vowel is an exercise I like to run in my living room. I ask everyone sitting on my sofa to stop, listen and then report back to the group, "What is the biggest vowel in the room?"

Once a friend told me it was the letter U for all of "you" in the room. Once I told them it was the letter E - the projector in the background squealing out EEEEEEEEEEE continuously had caught my attention and refused to let go.

EXERCISE 4 - SLOW WALK

(20 MINUTES)

The slow walk requires a bit of space. I suggest you find a spot with a minimum of 10 feet wall to wall. If you are outside or would like to do this exercise sans wall go ahead and choose a starting point and a stopping point.

How to slow walk.

Taking one step:

Place both feet solidly on the ground. If you are able to, take off your shoes! Feel your toes on the floor, your heel behind them. Now slowly roll your heel off the floor until only your big toe is making contact with the ground. Keeping a steady, consistent pace, lift your toe from the floor and start its journey forward. When you start to descend, make first contact with your heel and slowly roll down until you have your toes back on the ground.*

Now that you've taken one step, recenter yourself at your starting position, set your timer to one minute and take the entirety of the time to cross the space from wall to wall. You should be in constant motion, however slow that motion may be! When you get to the other side sit down and write as fast as you can for 1 minute.

Repeat with a 5-minute timer.

When you get to the other side, sit down and write as fast as you can for 5 minutes.

Optional challenge: repeat with a 10-minute timer.

Read back what you've written. Circle images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing you don't often use.

Reflect (5 min) What surprised you? Was moving slowly more or less difficult than you imagined it to be? How might you incorporate these images, sounds, noises, and ways of writing into your writing practice?

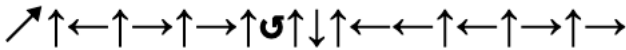
*Alternative movements: This exercise can also be achieved by starting with your arms down at your sides, lifting them as slowly as possible until they are stretched out as far as they can be over your head. Individuals in wheelchairs with manual wheels may want to try pushing themselves forward as slowly as possible. Other variations also work! What is important is that you move as slowly and as intentionally as possible.

EXERCISE 5 - INTERNALIZED MOVEMENT (20 MINUTES)

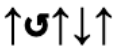
Move to the entry point you would typically use to enter into the room, building, or park, etc. you've chosen to complete these exercises in.

Follow your normal path into the building/space while also noting down (using arrows or other methods) the movements you often take through the space.

Ex. Here is me entering the English Philosophy Building at the University of Iowa and heading to my classroom:



Notice the way I shift when I enter the elevator:



I walk into the elevator, turn around, move slightly forward to press the button, slightly backward to make room, and again forward to exit. The movement of this on paper came as a great surprise to me.

What surprising movement do you make every day?

Internalize your movements

Once I have these directions written down, I scribble them onto a tiny piece of paper and literally eat my movements. You may choose to do this in a more metaphorical way. If you do choose to eat your movements please use care to not ingest anything that would harm you. Once you have internalized your movements in whatever way is most comfortable to you write a poem, short story, or micro essay! Allow as much time as needed!

Exercise 6 - Reflection

Now that you've completed the workshop, ask yourself what worked for you and what didn't work for you. Why? What would you do differently if you did these exercises again? What do you know or notice now that you didn't before? What would you like to explore more?

Write for 5 min. Look back to this reflection when either redoing this workshop or as a way to help incorporate any of the elements you learned or noticed today.

Bonus exercise!

Look over all of the ways you found to record sound, movement, and feeling over the course of this exercise. Write a short story, essay, or poem that incorporates and prioritizes these sounds movements, and feelings!

Potential starting points:

When I open the door...

It was only after...

I couldn't get [] out of my...

Never in my life had I...