



Tracy Breathnach-Evans

## **Interview with Tracy Breathnach-Evans**

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Interview conducted by  
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Underwood-Lee

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**Tracy Breathnach-Evans** is an Irish performance artist, arts manager and educator based in Wales. She has created a series of maternal performances including *Caesura* (2013), *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* (2014), *AfterBirth* (2016) and *Cord* (2016). NON (2018-20) was an exploration of St Non and her birth story through performance, vigil and writing (*The Birth of St David* 2019, pamphlet) Tracy created and facilitates the *Birth Café* in Llanelli in collaboration with the performance company People Speak Up. Her book *Sacred Birth: An Initiation into the Erotic* will be published in 2021.

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**Lena Šimić:** We are sat with Tracy Breathnach-Evans with a list of questions that we are eager to ask.

**Emily Underwood-Lee:** Let's begin at the start of that list. How has working around maternal things affected your performance practice and your identity as an artist? Feel free to break that answer down.

**Tracy:** Becoming a mother was also the beginning of me becoming an artist. I had an artistic practice before the birth of my son Gwion, but it was only after that that I realised what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to focus my artistic practice. I had previously been very afraid of performing and making performances. I had a fear of presenting my own work as an artist. So I had always done it with other people. For example, by working with young people or through community groups.

**Emily:** As a facilitator?

**Tracy:** Yes, as a facilitator, and director, but never really regarding this as my own artistic practice. It was just something that I did, was good at and liked. One day, after having Gwion, I was talking to a friend of mine who is a writer. She said "When you have children you think of the values you want them to grow up with", and I realised, "Gosh, I don't think about that at all!" So it really made me think. What were my values? What values did I want to pass on to my son? I really didn't know. For a couple of weeks thereafter this consideration continued to play on my mind. Eventually I realised that the central thing that I wanted to teach him (or have him learn from me) was to find the thing that you really love doing, the thing that feeds you most, then do it and be really good at it. That was the core of it for me, but I came to see that I was not currently applying this principle to my own life. I was doing all this facilitation work but it really wasn't feeding me as an artist. I didn't want him to look at me when he's all grown up and think, "She says this but she is not really living it herself". So what was he going to think if he saw that?

Was he going to believe me? Probably not, because there would have been no reality behind what I was saying. I realised then that I was going to have to do that thing I was most afraid to do - the thing that scared me most. I was going to have to accept that I was an artist and that I really did want to make my own performances. So moving into that new identity as an artist was definitely motivated by the birth of my son, and it became an act of embodying this value for him. Becoming an artist definitely came about through becoming a mother to Gwion at that time.

**Lena:** Were you trained as an artist then or did you go into training after that?

**Tracy:** I had done a degree in drama six years prior at the University of Manchester, but it was more theoretical and not so practical. There were modules on directing and performance skills, but the focus for me was more towards applied theatre. So I became good at that. I became good at working with other people. My dissertation was on facilitation as this was something I had a natural affinity for. After that I went on to do a PCGE to become a drama teacher. So in one sense I was a practising artist for many years, but it wasn't until after Gwion that I started to go onto courses that introduced me to new practices. I'd say I got my real training as an artist at Aberystwyth University. Here, I worked with like-minded people – Mike Pearson, Richard Gough and Jill Greenhalgh in particular. I started working with Jill in the second year of my Masters and she remained my supervisor when I began to read for a PhD. I enjoyed working with her because she was not coming to the PhD as an academic, but as a rigorous practice maker herself. I was just thinking in the car on my way to this interview, if it hadn't been for her standing beside me throughout that process, I might not have been making performances now. I needed that support because it was still very scary and new to me.

**Lena:** What was your very first maternal performance?

**Tracy:** It was the piece that I did for my Masters dissertation called *20 Minutes*. The invitation from Jill was to make work about the things that really haunt you, the things that are really present for you. This actually drives my inquiry and the live event itself. If there isn't this kind of deep pull to the material, then what is the point? I'm interested in that kind of depth and then transformation. Gwion must have been aged about six when I made my first maternal performance. I was still very interested in how the whole birth experience had been for me. I was still healing from that. What had stayed with me most was the twenty minutes of being unconscious when he was born - when he came into the world, and I was not there to see that or be there with him. I was not the first person to hold him. So all of the things you look forward to and imagine when you're pregnant were actually different in my experience. I didn't have that and he didn't have that. So, where was I during the birth? As an artist I formulate questions, so for this piece they were about this 'lost' time or trying to remember this time. At first I was trying to do all this clever stuff, making films, doing lots of writing, and I would bring it to Jill and would talk, talk, and talk. The inner gaps would appear and I began to question myself. Do I really believe in this? Do I really think that? The answer would often be a "No".

The performance date was September and I'd gone home to Ireland in August, where I was making this performance on film. I came back with it later in August, but I did not believe in any of it. I wasn't sure, however, if I had the courage to wipe it all away and be left with nothing! With only four weeks left to go this idea was terrifying. It was literally waking me up at night and scratching me from under my skin. It brought up a lot of emotional stuff, but because Jill was there, I was able to take everything away and then ask myself so "What am I going to do now?"

I'd previously watched a Forced Entertainment production *Exquisite Pain*.<sup>1</sup> I actually fell asleep during it because it has this over, and over, and over again quality. Yet, there was something about this repetition, which was also magnetic and I thought "Ok, well what if I filmed myself speaking the experience over and over again?" I decided to do this off-the-cuff with no idea really if it would lead me to anything. I just set up the camera for about 15 minutes and gave myself some rules. For example, speaking about the birth story only from the moment where I chose to have the caesarean (because that's where everything changed). What I discovered when I looked back at the film shocked me because there were so many pauses. It looked like I had paused the film because I was totally frozen. Yet in my experience of articulating those moments, I was not frozen. In these pauses, however, there was still a huge energy present, a very intense charge going on because what I realised was that I was remembering, but on the inside. That's when I realised for the first time that this experience of being unconscious was actually a trauma, and that these freezes in the 'now' were me performing the trauma in my body of the 'then'. So that was it. That was the beginning of the whole search for me. People have watched sections of the film and I've watched them go [gasps]. It's that whole thing of it being kind of contagious. So when you perform that kind of trauma, how do you introduce it to people? How do you support people? How do I support myself to keep listening to it?

**Emily:** So there was the film, the story, the pauses?

**Tracy:** Yes. I created a twenty-four-hour piece which was the length of my first labour. So it mirrored that. The first twenty-three hours was just me in the space where I built a giant sand mandala. Then, in the last hour, I had a more choreographed performance to present, which included this film shown on a large screen.

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<sup>1</sup> Forced Entertainment (no date) *Exquisite Pain*. Available at <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/exquisite-pain/> (Accessed: 28 May 2020).

I created a giant sand mandala, which was ten metres in diameter, and it was drawn geometrically and in a very precise way. Inside of it there was a labyrinth space. The audience were sitting on one side in one line and I was on the other side where there was a table with a number of instruments on it and a loop station. On another side there was a steel bath. For twenty-three hours it was my task to complete the giant sand mandala. I just about managed it and then went into the performance. This involved setting up a soundscape with music that looped, and that sat alongside me speaking on the film. There was some choreographed movement before entering the sand. The labyrinth comprised seven circles and each one had a choreographed sequence of movement which was performed as I moved further in. These had been matched to the phases of labour itself. I just moved through those until I came to the centre where again there was movement. After which I came out - to wash it out. I took off my clothes, got in the bath, then got out and that was the end of the performance.

**Lena:** Was there a live performance outside of that one performance in Aberystwyth?

**Tracy:** No.

**Lena:** So it was only shown once?

**Tracy:** Yes.

**Emily:** What that important? To do it only once?

**Tracy:** Not particularly, no. My own practice was only really just starting to develop and I knew I'd be beginning a PhD straight away. I don't think at that point in my development I'd have been confident about sharing it anywhere else because for me this was the birth of how I was making work. Then later, the PhD was driving the practice. The second piece that I made was called *Cesura* and that was

another labyrinth piece. So it spoke to this first piece in some way. I was making an inquiry into how I could engage with the audience in a different way - being in a more intimate relation.



*Photographed by Jess Rose*

**Lena:** I want to pick up on something you've been saying about the audience. You were trying to take care of yourself and take care of the audience?

**Tracy:** Yes. This has been an ongoing artistic conversation over the

years. I continually ask myself "what is my responsibility to the audience as a performer?". I don't really have an answer to this, but I guess it's a kind of ethical question, especially when you are working with and/or performing narratives of trauma. I don't necessarily think I am responsible for the audience, I think the audience are responsible for themselves when they step in. However, a part of me does want to hold that space for them. I don't want to traumatize people like, "Hey, here's my trauma" kind of thing. So all those dramaturgical things became ways of balancing this, offering other anchors for people beyond just the thematic content of trauma.

**Lena:** Do you think your concerns are particular to this type of birth trauma and your personal relation to it? For example, was it more about the traumatic story in general or more specifically about your birth story?

**Tracy:** In the first piece it was about the trauma because that's what I had felt. I knew that was present and I knew that people were having a reaction. I had feedback from one of the [MA] examiners who said she could sense how bad it could have been if it had just

been me showing the film. Yet, in the performance event, that was not what I was asking them to do. She recognised that and I was grateful for this. When I came to make *Caesura* for my PhD, that was totally about the birth experience. In this piece I was asking people to watch me, a woman giving birth and I think that might have been difficult.

**Emily:** So it's a question of how a structure can be created within a performance to support people to stay with it for as long as they feel able/not able.

**Lena:** In the performance that I saw nobody left.

**Tracy:** No they didn't, but people felt right on the edge of that. I ultimately want people to be able to stay the duration, so it is about how I can encourage that in the making of the piece. I want people to be with this material.

**Lena:** I've been reading Bracha Ettinger on the connections between the maternal and trauma. She says "The artist-woman channels anew trauma(s) and jouissance(s) coming from non-I(s) that are linked to her. She bifurcates, disperses and rejoins anew-but-in-difference their remnants and traces, and she acts on the borderline, transcribing it while sketching and laying it out and opening it wide to turn it into a threshold and to metamorphose it into a borderspace."<sup>2</sup> I'm thinking about to what degree trauma borders space, and how negotiating the difficulty is necessary to what needs to be said. For example, you're talking about staying with the audience and supporting them, but also pushing them somewhat. I just wonder, then, what is the role of maternal art?

**Tracy:** For me, I think there is the link beyond the maternal into mothering as something that is holding, that has its own kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Ettinger, B. L. (2004). 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 21(1): 69–94.



hospitality. For me, *Cord* was about that. I was the one to sit on the outside and just kind of sit with the contractions. That is, to sit on the outside and slowly just remain present, as present as I can be. So, yes, maybe it is to do with holding, but it's also to do with trying to be present in that.

**Emily:** Can I ask you about Jill? You talk about her standing by you and kind of holding your hand.

**Tracy:** Absolutely. I was continually asking what was the role of the witness in the performance for me, what was I asking the audience to do? So we had a lot of long conversations about this. Within trauma theory the role of witness is really developed as a kind of concept. So what is this



*Photography by Peter Morgan*

role of witness then in the performance practice? What is it in my practice? Who is the witness in the live performances, and how do we ask the audience to step into that, and are they willing to? It is an active position so, if it's active, do I need to ask them to be witnesses? So I'd say one of my core practices as a human being, which then informs my artistic practice, is that of deep listening, and later speaking into that listening. So it is about being a witness and allowing whatever is felt and thought to just be present, to not change it, just hear it. Then, with another person, it is hearing myself when they are speaking. For example, if I'm witnessing you, I'm not thinking about or hearing what you are saying and how you're feeling. I'm actually just being present to what's going on here for myself. In performance that is the kind of performer I'm interested in being, of being in a place where I am just in my own experience, and

am not there entertaining and attempting to give you something. More like, I am here and I am doing this, and that is all I am doing. I'm aware you are here. I am grateful you are here. You being here changes what I am doing, but I am just being here. I don't know whether by doing that, the people who are present then have permission to be in the same mind-set. I am here, and you are there, and we are together.

**Lena:** Do you think performance offers a good space for that?

**Tracy:** Yes. For me, as a performer, I think it absolutely does offer that.

**Emily:** In our research we are exploring specifically the difference between performance alongside other art forms in relation to the maternal. So, in relation to what you have been saying, what do you think is specific about maternal performance?

**Tracy:** I am here in my body and I am in process, and so are you too. There is a recognition of this co-existence, a relation that I think is tangible. I feel it. You know, when I did *Caesura* and people came in, what I didn't expect was to hear them. I had thought this was a piece done in silence. Yet there was no silence. I could hear them and everyone sounded different. When I sat up, I could smell them. I could smell where they'd been or what they'd done. There is this sensual presence of the 'other' in performance, which is not there in other art forms, that may otherwise separate your body from my body. In live performance it is always two (or more) bodies together.

**Lena:** I love what you're saying, but isn't that terrible presence of the other impacting too? When I'm reading a novel or if I'm looking at a painting I'm also there and I'm really engaged.

**Tracy:** Yes, I wonder for me, if the word connection is useful here because that again kind of goes back again to the journey with the

trauma. We can choose to stay connected or not. In any of those other art forms I could be really over there, or back home. So live performance is the invitation to connect and to be together, which may or may not be what we need in any one moment. What I'm sort of committing to is being there as much as I can be. That is my commitment and I am inviting the other to do the same, as little or as much as they want to without judging or being hard on myself if they chose to get up and leave.

**Lena:** Do they get up and leave? Have you had that experience?

**Tracy:** No. In that performance I had the opposite. Some people wanted to stay. It was like I had done the work, done the exchange, done the stuff, and most left, but then there were one or two who stayed. What now? What do you do in that situation? It was the same in *Cord*. You are aware that you are kind of creating that space. Most people wanted to leave as I left because they thought that's the end and I am now going to go, but some really wanted to stay. So how do you...

**Lena:** This can be too much as well. I think this is really interesting for us in terms of the capacity of performance as an art form, as well as this idea of the invitation.

**Emily:** There is something I'd like to ask which I don't think we've covered yet, and it is around the nature of performing the mother? You're also performing a maternal that is specifically a biological maternal identity. Your work is fundamentally linked to this experience. You have talked about performing the maternal, rather than being a mother, but the latter is so linked to your own biology. So I'm interested in what happens when you perform this biological identity.

**Tracy:** I suppose the first thing is that my aim is not to do this. It is to instead perform wherever I am in that moment. For example, I

happen to be pregnant so that is what I'm performing. I'm performing both the pregnant mother...

**Emily:** But you are amplifying the sound of the baby.

**Tracy:** Sure. But what I mean is that this is where I am right then so that is what I perform right then. I'm not coming to the performance thinking that's what I will be performing. It is more like I am in my body right then, that is what I'm working with. This is what I'm bringing as I present the performance. So if I look at the performances I was making, I already knew there was going to be three because the PhD had this structure. For the second one [*Rehearsals for a Birth Story*], if I hadn't been pregnant it would be a completely different performance and this is what I mean. I was like "I'm pregnant, so this is where I am now". So I either perform as if I'm not pregnant and talk about the last birth experience or I go, "This is exactly where I am". This is how *Rehearsals for a Birth Story* became about being pregnant.

**Emily:** I understand that what you want from the audience is to witness and you want to witness back for them. So it's a reciprocal thing, but what do you want the audience to take? I want to push you a little more on that, because with narrative the audience is going to take on content as well.

**Tracy:** Well, if I speak about *Rehearsals* particularly, the narrative in that piece is about a LOT of preparation. There is a lot of setting things up. It is a repetition to myself of "I am here, I am here, I am here". Then it is "Now I am thinking this, and I am saying that, and I am thinking this" for example. For the birth I need to do all these things, and then maybe I'll be ok. So there was this kind of layering to the preparation, whilst at the same time trying not to be attached to the outcome. I'm trying not to be attached to a particular birth story because in the first birth experience, it had been my attachment to a particular outcome and particular kind of control

that had led to the trauma for me. It was like I couldn't let go of what I thought it was going to be. You know, my whole life I've been a teacher. I've been a very good girl. I've been very successful academically. So my whole life I have thought if you want to be successful you just need to do all of this work, learn this and do that, and everything will be successful. No matter how many people told me, that is not the way it works in birth, I couldn't understand that. That's what the trauma was. That's what the rupture was. That's what the breakaway was. It's like life is not like that.

**Lena:** The second birth was more "successful"?

**Tracy:** Yes. Yes.

**Lena:** Isn't there something about the first birth, though, that makes better art?

**Tracy:** Of course. I had seven years of work as an artist absolutely. With the first birth I came out and thought that I didn't have a birth story, but Jill pointed out that I have all of my performances – a very extensive birth story actually. Oscar, my second child, kind of got a mention in *Afterbirth* and the sound of him in *Cord*. But the second birth is not the thing that haunts me if I go back to why I make art. You know, I'm not haunted by that. I go into that and there are difficulties and challenges, but not enough to hold me there that I want to explore that in my art.

**Emily:** So it's really about the discomfort?

**Tracy:** It is not even discomfort, but it is some big change. That was certainly there for the birth, but if I think about where the work is going now it is not necessarily discomfort, it is something that I feel is really big that I can't articulate, something that engulfs me. I am trying to make sense of it and I do that through performance.



Photography of rehearsals

**Lena:** What are you working on now because you did *Afterbirth* and *Cord*?

**Tracy:** I'm starting to work on a new piece. What I was interested in after all that thinking and writing was this idea of arrivance (Cixous' "waiting for the waiting") and just looking at this waiting.<sup>3</sup> I wanted to look behind the desire and the feeling, and ask where the beginning of that was. I was reading Luce Irigaray's *To Be Born* at the time, considering at which point does the child agree to be born.<sup>4</sup> Birth is really what I am interested in and I am less interested in performing the ongoing act of mothering. I'm interested in birth and how that relates to the notion of being born. So, rather than me thinking about giving birth, it is more about the act of me/mother being born and what that means. Being born myself, being born as a mother through giving birth. I'm also interested in this as a metaphorical concept, and what that has to say about where I am at in the now. This is like a wider sense of consciousness which questions what exactly is being 'born', what is coming through, and/or what is finding its way.

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<sup>3</sup> Cixous, H. (1998) *Stigmata*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Irigaray, L. (2017) *To be born: Genesis of a new human being*. London: Palgrave.

I ask myself, what do my experiences and my performances have to offer in terms of helping me to understand bigger concepts? There are two things happening. I have just started a course in Ireland with a somatic practitioner, Joan Davis, which is encouraging me to go further and further into my own body - but at a cellular memory level. I had a one to one retreat with her in October and November last year where I was looking at my relationship to my own experience of birth in the womb. Previously, I would have just said that I am a body practitioner and I work with what is present, but I am beginning to realise that there is so much more to that.

Then, there is the second level, which is more theoretically informed. I was completing my Masters and thinking about doing a PhD. Imogen Tyler's essay on birth really made me think and so I just went with that because it was really interesting to me.<sup>5</sup> It is also worth mentioning here Hannah Arendt's work on natality.<sup>6</sup> Also Irigaray talking about Eros and Love in relation to focusing on the constant generation, the constant birthing in every moment; the renewal and the transformation.<sup>7</sup> I don't even know on what scale I'm exploring this yet, but this is what I am curious about.

**Emily:** There is something very interesting in what you just said, and how you used the word 'constant', and that is about this newness as a kind of endurance, a kind of ongoing newness. This is interesting to me in terms of the performance encounter. It seems that through performance we are constantly recreating that moment where, in reality, it was only there in the personal experiencing of it.

**Tracy:** Yes, and for me, it is also about learning that through being a mother. As a mother there are constant little deaths. There's a constant dying to myself, of having to find new resources within myself. It is not about survival, but of having to come back to myself

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<sup>5</sup> Tyler, I. (2009) 'Introduction: Birth'. *Feminist Review* 93: 1-7.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>7</sup> Irigaray, L. (1993) The Fecundity of the Caress: A Reading of Levinas, Totality and Infinity in Phenomenology of Eros. In Irigaray, L. (1993) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp 185-217.

anew and to keep coming back. So there isn't a singular origin or a single birth that creates/births, it is a continual renewal/creation of newness. Performance has shown me how to find this through a creative practice and process, enabling me to find it in every lived moment as well.

**Lena:** So there's a link between your everyday life as well that crosses your family, your children and your performance making?

**Tracy:** Yes.

**Lena:** With many artists there is this connection between direct personal experience and thematic content of work. So maternal performance often emerges at the time of becoming a mother but then the artist moves on.

**Tracy:** Yes, because you get through that phase.

**Lena:** For example, you talk about Imogen Tyler, who did a lot on the maternal but doesn't do that anymore. Her work is now focused more on other things. I love what you are saying about newness, we are always starting anew in whatever way. I wonder, how long is this going to last? As I said I was rereading Ettinger on the way here, and she was talking about how important it is to be in a post-reproduction cycle. I was like, what does that mean? That you have to be past it to get it? I mean, I have had my children and I don't want any more, but here I am involved with a post-reproduction cycle writing a book on the subject. Do either of you think of having any more children?

**Emily:** No.

**Tracy:** The opposite actually. I'm going to be sterilised later this year. I've decided I don't want to have any more children. This is really interesting for me to feel this because I am thirty-eight years old.



Biologically I could potentially have another five, six, or seven years of fertility. My body could, but for me there are a number of other factors influencing my decision. Part of it is my work absolutely. I just think that having children takes a lot of time, energy and resources. I don't want to give up my creative work. I'm always trying to integrate things so that I can do them all. I don't want to choose. I don't want to have children and just stay at home. Neither do I want to, and couldn't, give up my children to go and be an artist somewhere. I want to be in the community working with people, and this tends to be my paid work. So my question is always, how can I bring these things together? Part of the reason why I love performance is that I'm not with my children. I can step away and be in the studio, by myself, in silence. For me, this juxtaposition of motherhood and work, makes both even more special.

In terms of that idea moving on, I do feel that birth as a theme is still very present for me now. I wonder why that is? Maybe it is because I am birthing from a kind of post-mother place. I also just came out of my PhD which also feels like another baby. Coming out of that I am at that point in my life where something new is coming, but I don't know what it is yet. So there is all that anticipation. I am in conversation with Jill about this. She would agree perhaps. When you first have the baby you ask "why isn't everyone making work about this? This is huge!", but you do get over it. Jill talks about this 'getting over it' stage. Imogen Tyler quotes Lisa Baraitser who talks about the need for women to be making autobiographical work and the need for expressing that kind of work, but where do you find the audience to listen to it?<sup>8</sup> That's the other side of it for me. I've got all these performances and they've all had limited audiences. Do I need to, or want to, continue making work like this? When I try and have those conversations, actually people aren't really that interested in the work.

**Emily:** What do you mean by that?

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<sup>8</sup> Baraitser, L. (2009) 'Mothers who make things public'. *Feminist review*, 93(1): 8-26.

**Tracy:** Venues in Wales is what I mean, so it is very specific. I've presented it to a range of them, presenting it in lots of different ways that they might engage with it. Maybe if I continued to push, and push, and push - effort, effort, effort – they might be open to it eventually. The interest, however, doesn't seem to be there in the same way that it is in academia where people are more interested in thinking about it and the implications of it.

**Emily:** I think that academic focus is also quite new though. Not radically new but certainly still new-ish.

**Tracy:** I guess within academia the performance will be met with a different kind of interest. Most people weren't coming to the performance because it was about the maternal or birth. They were coming because they knew me or they knew what was going on for me.

**Lena:** At the moment I think there is a lot going on in the arts world in terms of the maternal. Recently I was in Manchester at the *Royal Exchange* where there was the *Birth Festival*, and I think they are going to do it again. I watched *Partus* by *Third Angel*, and then saw your show.<sup>9</sup> Yours is much more careful and deeper somehow.

**Tracy:** I've been in touch with Susan Hogan who led *The Birth Project* in Sheffield and Leeds.<sup>10</sup> I think one of the differences is how it came about. It was a project exploring visual arts and birth stories, working with nurses and midwives. The idea that the artists and the midwives working together could both get something out of it at the same time. Then they commissioned *Partus* in order to disseminate the research findings. So performance was more about the dissemination of information. It was almost more like exploring how

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<sup>9</sup> Third Angel (no date) *Partus*. Available at <https://thirdangel.co.uk/shows-projects/partus> (Accessed 28 May 2020).

<sup>10</sup> University of Derby (no date) *The Birth Project*. Available at <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/about-our-research/centres-groups/health-and-social-care-research-centre/the-birth-project/> (Accessed 28 May 2020)

we bring this information to an audience, whereas mine isn't this. It is driven by the questions, and I am asking those things in every live performance.

I have a solo live practice, but actually what my senses say and what Lisa Baraitser says is that we need to find the places that we can reach people with these autobiographical stories. Working for me as a solo live artist - it is so far from lots of people. I meet small groups of people. I go to *TAPRA* and maybe only five people may come along, for example, but then those people might go away and write about it so that it reaches others.<sup>11</sup> So there is a kind of filtering through in that way, the artwork itself is something that is more in the field of knowledge.

I do think, though, that the piece that is in my head at the moment is for a theatre stage, and I am wondering how I move all this onto a stage now. What would it become there? Without becoming a 'play about', what kind of aesthetic would it take? How do I hold the aesthetic of holding a relationality to witnessing when something moves to the stage? I did some training with Phillip Zarrilli on psychophysical acting. His production of *The Water Station*, is a really beautiful theatre of divestiture, of silence, of stripping everything away, very slow and careful in the act of becoming more present.<sup>12</sup> So I wonder how that could speak to this? Where could some of the writing, the performance writing that came out of this, move into a theatre space. How could I think about body, voice, stillness and movement?

**Lena:** Do you mean that you would also be thinking of working in collaboration?

**Tracy:** I don't even see myself in the performance. I see myself as the director. That kind of feels like that's where it's coming from. You

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<sup>11</sup> Tapra (no date) *Tapra*. Available at <http://tapra.org/> (Accessed 28 May 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Phillip Zarrilli (no date) *Water Station*. Available at <http://www.phillipzarrilli.co.uk/productions/waterstation/index.html> (Accessed 28 May 2020).

kind of just get a vision. It comes all of a sudden, doesn't it? Then you think, "Well, do I want that and do I follow it or do I ignore it?"

**Emily:** Then it comes back to this approach that you have talked about. The need to ask "What's the question? What's the problem?" That is the question and the problem now – it's again about the relationship and the how, and who we actually engage in this work.

**Tracy:** Yes, and who are we speaking to. I work in programming as well, I've worked on audience development projects for many years, and here you are always asking who the audience will be. When I make work in a university setting I don't need to think about that. I have the freedom, and it's golden to be able to just make work like this and not care about the who because you know there are always people who will come.

**Lena:** So you are creating the context somewhere.

**Tracy:** Absolutely. But once you come out of there and you are in the industry it is very different. I could make work if I didn't need any money, or if I didn't need to pay for any space. I could continue to work like that, but the fact is I need to make a living. Using space costs, you have to employ people, so these financial needs or requirements mean that it changes the way work is made and received. For me, it is very pragmatic. It's the lived reality of the profession.

**Emily:** Yes, and I suspect that if you weren't a mother these pragmatics wouldn't so much come into it. You could be freer.

**Tracy:** Absolutely.

**Lena:** I just wonder to what degree does the work gets distorted when pushing it out there onto a big stage. Well, you lose something, don't you?

**Tracy:** I think it is something else, and part of that is because the audience is actually very different. I know that if I make work for this type of audience then I am making work for people who go to the theatre. So, who are those people? They are not the people I have been making work for so far.

What I would love is for people to come to see my work and say “You can change your story. This is narrative, and we are the agents of our own narrative, and we can write that. Or you can re-write and keep re-writing as much as you want”. I mean, if we all knew that, I think we would just be so different.<sup>13</sup> So how do you introduce that to people?

The other way I can reach audiences is to go and do workshops of course. I did an event in Swansea recently. It took the format of a birth storytelling circle. The idea is that we are setting up a listening circle. It’s really nice, it’s comfortable - comfy chairs, cup of tea, and cake. Then, working with a partner to introduce this idea of listening as a witness and trying to be there with someone. That person is able to speak for five minutes without interruption, and really go into whatever part of that experience is there for them. Then, swapping places and going back again. This returning, and returning again, is a kind of practice. So I could see how that could work as a way of facilitating that.

**Lena:** Did you enjoy that?

**Tracy:** I did. I really enjoyed it.

**Lena:** Was it a commissioned project?

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<sup>13</sup> Tracy expands on this theme in relation to her work with the Birth Café in her TED X talk, which can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w94saeRC\\_Sk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w94saeRC_Sk).

**Tracy:** Sort of. I've been working with a birth photographer, and we have been thinking about ways of creating the spaces for women in particular to come together and think and feel about birth. So using some creative stimulus and then creating a space for dialogue around that. We've been talking to various venues about that. It just so happened that she was invited by the student midwifery society at Swansea University to do a talk about her work and hang some photographs on a day where they were showing Ricki Lake's film *The Business of Being Born*.<sup>14</sup> It was about her experience of birth in the States ten years ago. So the student midwives were showing this film and some other things.

There was a morning session where the space was free and I was like "Oh, we could do this thing...". So I invited myself along to run the circle at the beginning of the day. So for the programmers it was another thing to offer that was free. It wouldn't cost anything, yet it might bring people into the day. Interestingly, the student midwives who were there (who were mothers) found it very difficult to engage with and yet left asking "So, when will you be running the next one?" They wanted me to go back to do another. It was like they needed to be in it to first see what it was so as not to be afraid of it. So, I imagine if they attended another they might open up to it more.

**Emily:** Interesting. It comes back to this who is it all for question again.

**Tracy:** Well, there was Fern Smith's Death Café.<sup>15</sup> So I thought about a Birth Café as the other side of that. So there are these type of things which aren't live performance either. It's not theatre, it is another kind of engagement, which opens up spaces for dialogues for thinking, feeling, and changing.

**Lena:** That is brilliant.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Business of Being Born* (2008). Directed by Abby Epstein. United States: Barranca Productions.

<sup>15</sup> Death Café (no date) *Swansea Death Café*. Available at <https://deathcafe.com/deathcafe/2106/> (Accessed 28 May 2020).

**Tracy:** I've been thinking about what I've learned from different things. Being a mother, performance and research is part of a triangle. It is actually my training as an artist that allows me to do that. Being able to work with a tension, by being able to stretch attention and presence, it helps me to be a mother. Being able to see that kind of play of energy has been useful and a resource that I've learned.

**Lena:** That is something definitely connected with the performer for you?

**Tracy:** Yes. For sure. It's something I've been working on with Jill. Asking what is presence and performance, how do we develop it, and how do we even know that it is important? To be able to be present to those other things, the expansion and contraction, take us back to the pregnancy and the birth again, but actually it's there in presence and attention all the time.