



## #2 UNTITLED

ANNA RANKIN | THE BODY BOX  
Sat 23 Feb | 12.45-3.15pm

How strange to look at a writer seated at a desk placed on a stage inside a metal shipping container, how strange to be a writer seated in a shipping container. It feels as though I am in a little strange boat out on the harbour. Stage spotlights set up on either side of the metal walls which enclose me strike my face with sharp, purple light. I am reminded of playing a lonely orphan in the musical production of Jane Eyre as a 14-year-old, singing a thin voice out into a dark abyss as a bright spotlight above blared into my line of vision, blocking out the mass of shadowed faces with a single beam. The floor of the stage was dusted with white talc which is a smell not easily forgotten. This stage is dusted with soft footprints.

Those that walk past me look in, and their faces wear expressions of utter confusion or bemusement. Sometimes they stop, and watch for awhile. I wonder what it is that they are looking for. A few speak to me. Sometimes I look up, too, and hold their gaze, and we stare at each other. It is good to be older, to be a woman in her early thirties. Where, as a younger woman, I would have winced at being exposed in this way, and hidden my face. Seated at a desk parked wide open and exposed to the curious or pitying gaze of others, raised on a stage in a cavernous space in which those streaming past stare into, I now feel a sort of muted happiness or a kind of blank joy. Part of discovering this feeling – the ability to feel this way without trying, or even really being aware of it – can be credited no doubt to spending the past few days in a secluded house in the far north, probably a fourteen or fifteen hour drive from here, literally the other end of this island, a house reachable only by boat access, with two good friends also in their

thirties, who move through the world with a kind of lightness that also feels like a beam, as though their radiance outshines shadows of dark stains in the way that the sun bleaches the pale sky and dull stains on white cotton t-shirts. A pigeon scrapes around for shards of raw rice at my feet. I have not seen this harbour before and I do not live in this city so it is strange to me. Concrete stretches out in my line of sight, it is a hardened desert. A wide and tall wall, set flat as a plane against the greyed sky, is an enormous screen beyond the immediate screen of my laptop. Like Brutalist architecture, like feeling nothing at all. The perfect wall on which to project a film, the perfect substrate for blank thoughts.

Is writing a private act? I am not so sure. I feel written by my friends; we script each other into existence. What we love others will, also, by how we show them. In this way we learn how to love by what others' mother, and so it seems to be with writing; that it is a way of learning how to love yourself by writing what you see and what this seeing itself makes, which goes beyond what it immediately presents; how it intervenes in the world. It can be quite shocking, what comes out. And it can be incredibly banal and useless. People stand in front of this open stage where I sit and I refuse to look up because I am locked in a world on the white page of a screen and if I meet their eyes this world will split open and I'll be forced to address them in some way which will feel aggressive, probably, and consequently myself, which I don't feel like doing. Here, I think of pulling down a book by Kathe Kollwitz from a dusty bookshelf in a second-hand bookstore, years ago, now. I've never forgotten the epithet on the first page, which was a line penned by Muriel Rukeyser: What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.

In high school art history I studied Kollwitz's lithographs, which depicted hard labour and menial working conditions of men and women's lives. In one poem, Rukeyser references Kollwitz's work, and writes as though in Kollwitz's voice:

A woman pouring her opposites.  
 "After all there are happy things in life too.  
 Why do you show only the dark side?"

I have always felt writing to be a private act. But it relies on relation, too – perhaps writing in privacy is writing into a relation with the page, so in fact it's always relational, and not private at all. Even as a journalist there remains a private portion to a story you're reporting – there are always elements to the story you can't share, or can't relay, that remain as trace particles in you. Or more simply, and more relevant to what I'm doing at this present moment, if a particular story isn't hard news but is more prosaic or dull it can be mildly educational, it passes with little or great interest, which is how I feel about these people who at this instance walk past me and stop, and watch, or pass and quickly avert my gaze. Whether they or I are cognisant of this, i.e. mostly I am not looking at them but I feel their presence, the fact is that we've somehow intervened in the others' reality and perhaps we will meet again in this life, the next or in the world of the dream. "Catch you in the next one", someone once said to me as a way to end our relationship, which was mostly conducted in messages and so, not something you'd say with speech. In any case, I saw him again, and I did think it an excessively tragic thing to write and used mostly to add to the emotional temperature of the moment.

Just now, I look up to see a woman staring directly at my face. She is very close to me. As soon as I look up from my phone into which I am typing and meet her gaze she covers her mouth with her hand and sharply draws her breath. Her friend begins laughing and they



are both very embarrassed. Caught – but in what? How are we so different. She turns her head away, very quickly, and her ash-blond hair catches the light which also hits the large silver hoops in her ears. I laugh, as does she, we are both embarrassed but I guess neither of us knows why. What is it we were looking at in the other? She stared so searchingly at me – it was startling, I wonder what she saw. In this way, her face was very likely mirroring mine as I stared into the message I was typing into my phone. What was I staring at when pressing each letter into a sentence which formed a message to a friend, which adds yet another message into the accumulation of a friendship mostly premised by distance. I must have been looking for something, as I felt a frown on my face. We have not lived in the same city for years, now, and our friendship has mostly consisted of epistolary ephemera. Recently, she arrived in the same country as I am, after years apart. She has arrived to undertake the same writing course I did last year. We braid in and out of each others lives. We didn't know what to say to each other because there was so much to say – and also nothing, because we knew, have known, know each other through our long letters. I have noticed a marked difference between typing a message into WhatsApp and recording one. The latter is easier and takes less time, and I am more careful what I say and thus what ends up being written, because hearing the sound of my voice often sounds ridiculous, and it makes me realise how flippant, careless, stupid, or nonsensical I can be when I write. Utterance, aloud, is a good way of ensuring you say what you mean, and I can be so careless with words, with language, which is pretty useless really but it can so often be all we have, which makes me want to look after it which is also a way of looking after yourself and those you're writing toward and into and past.