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# A Life in Diagrams (the Book): A Photo-Essay

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### Abstract

In 1993 artist Sally J. Morgan began developing a series of performances/ installations entitled *A Life in Diagrams (numbers 1–5)* which were shown in developing iterations at: Dartington Hall, Devon, UK; the ICA in London; Le Belluard/Bollwerk International Festival in Fribourg Switzerland; and the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol. Audiences entered a non-gallery, non-theatre space. There was no stage or proscenium, and the performance area was marked on the floor with string and measuring tapes in the manner of an archaeological excavation. To one side, separate from the box grid, was a low table, so low that audience members had to kneel to read a book of diagrams, drawn on tracing paper, that plotted out the artist's father's death, dying and the memories that inflected this process. This essay is a discussion of that work: *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)*.

Keywords: live art, artist's books, memory, performance art

## PART 1.

I am on my knees digging. Breathing. I'm scraping down through a section of earth. I know how to dig. I was once an archaeologist—when I was young I found shards of pottery and Roman combs made of bone. I was taught how to measure the past by depth, width and height. So, I know how to measure and describe. I know you're supposed to know by measuring and describing. Out of the earth come moments. They are measured and described. They are drawn and numbered. They make a life out of diagrams. (Sally J. Morgan, unpublished fragment).

To begin at the beginning. My polemical position on art is that aesthetic matters, as understood by artists and critics in the visual arts, are a means to an end, not ends in themselves. I would argue that art should aim to be 'profound' and should deal, in whatever ways are open to it, with the complex matter of being human. Art can be technically elegant, it can be intellectually stimulating, it can be novel, it can be arresting, but in my view, it needs to be more than that. Ultimately, the art I desire to experience, and to make, induces profound affect, giving insight into the incomprehensible, un-measurable and tenuous nature of our existence. It is emotionally moving and makes us interrogate our understanding of what it is to be alive, to be a sentient being, for the short time that we have on this planet.

My father died of a brain tumour in May 1992, when I was forty. His suffering and death had a profound impact on me. It was something I needed to explore through art, not for the sake of catharsis, because I wasn't looking to cure my grief, rather I was compelled to look squarely at the fact of mortality and the affect of bereavement. Inherent in this interrogation was the tension between 'fact' and 'feeling' and the limits of both when trying to make sense of the condition of being human. Art differs from Science in that it goes beyond what we know and acknowledges what we feel. We are creatures who know we'll die. We are creatures who love, we are creatures who grieve.

The intense tide of emotion that seizes us when facing the death of a loved one, is something we all undergo, hence mortality has been a persistent theme in the arts, in all its forms, in all cultures. Art finds ways of sharpening our perception of our place in an apparently measurable, but ultimately inexplicable universe. Confronting the pitilessness of mortality through the loss of my father propelled me into a new place as an artist. In this place it was impossible not to acknowledge the primacy of emotions in human motivation; this was a place where the limits of 'knowledge' became unbearably apparent. Every fact about my father or any other person—all the measurable details of a life—could only describe the size of things, or the order in which things happened, it could never explain the joy and the pain of being alive and knowing you will die. As an artist I needed new strategies to express these matters. After a career as a painter, on the one hand, and politically motivated community artist, on the other, I had established a comfortable order of things for myself; a difference between what I called 'my own art' and the works I'd made in collaboration with others.

My collaborative works were part of a broad range of contextual, site-specific and politically motivated community art interventions, which moved freely across artforms including theatre, writing, and film as well as visual arts. My 'own' work tended to be paintings exploring sexual ambiguity and gendered power-relations.

The death of my father sent me in an unexpected direction and turned me into what others would call a performance artist. This wasn't a club I wanted to join and my recruitment was accidental; the result of merging a range of experimental modes to solve an artistic problem of my own. The medium I had been trained in, painting, seemed incapable of conveying the complexity of the experience I had gone through when grieving my father. I could not conceive of a singular image to sum up his life, his dying, his fear, and my grief. My major motivation was to find a way to communicate my experience in a way that would resonate with the experiences of others, producing recognition and empathy in the viewer and producing new insights on the nature of knowledge, affectivity and mortality. Adopting a deliberately open-ended, speculative approach to the use of media, I made a number of experimental artworks in which I resolved to use any means available to me to explore and communicate the profound emotional and intellectual affect of mortality and loss. Many of these conceptually driven works could be described as durational installation/performance art works. Constructed with a painter's eye for colour and form, the floor-based, almost 2-dimensional installations were configured, and reconfigured, over time through the actions of the artist. They developed into a process of performed-labour informed by the field methods of archaeological excavation. They contained written/spoken texts, some of which required the audience to physically engage with the paper they were on, unfolding fragments, taking them from open box files, revealing labels, some of which were read aloud by the performers. There were also objects, either found or factored by the artist, that were physically interrogated by the artist, and interacted with by the audience. As I worked on these pieces, I found myself thinking of them, not as performance art, but as an internal meeting between myself as a painter, a poet, and archaeologist.

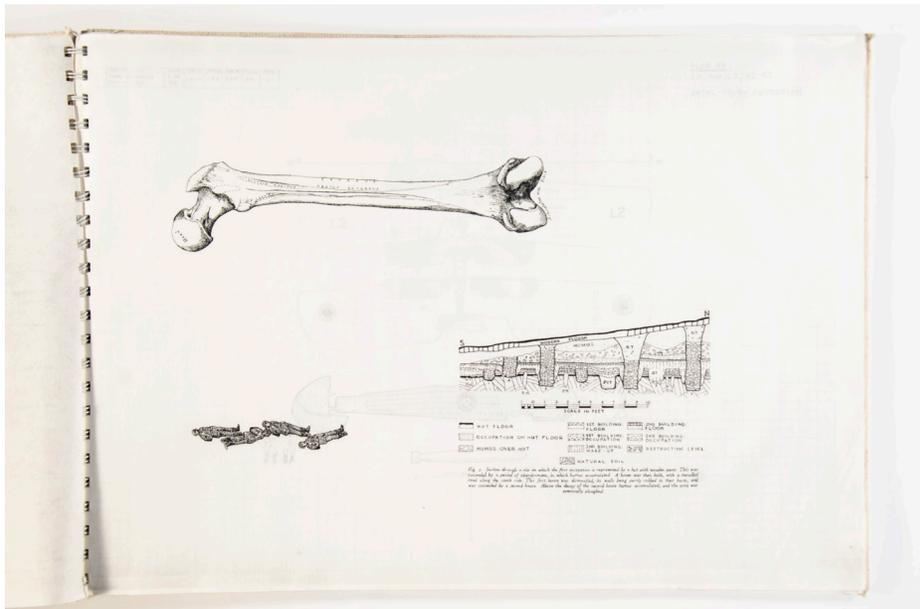
The first major outcome of these explorations was a series of performance/installations entitled *A Life in Diagrams (numbers 1–5)*. This was shown in developing iterations: once at Dartington in Devon, UK, twice at the ICA in London, at Le Belluard/Bollwerk International Festival in Fribourg Switzerland, and at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol. Arnolfini also commissioned a subsidiary work, entitled *Measuring Existence*, which was performed in the mediaeval crypt of St Nicholas Church, Bristol. A subsequent related series, *The Song of the Bomb Aimer's Daughter*, was developed over 25 years. The first was shown at Spacex Gallery, Exeter, in 1994, and the most recent was at the Defibrillator Gallery, Chicago, in 2016. A bound book of drawings: the subject of this short photo essay, entitled *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)* was included in all the showings of the performance of the same name, and was separately exhibited in the Engine Room Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 2015; the Palitz Gallery, New York, 2016; and the Sullivan Galleries, Chicago, 2016.

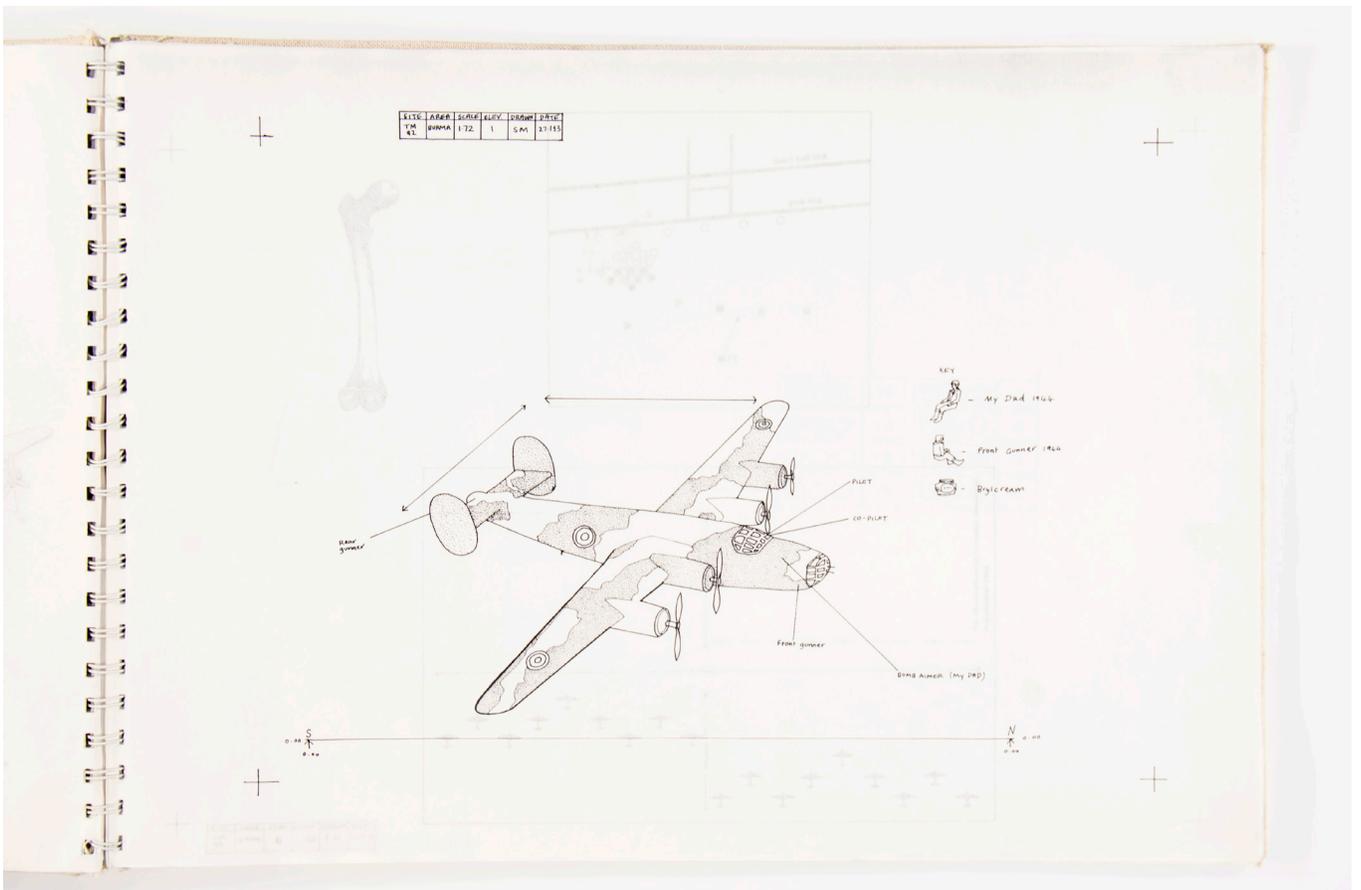
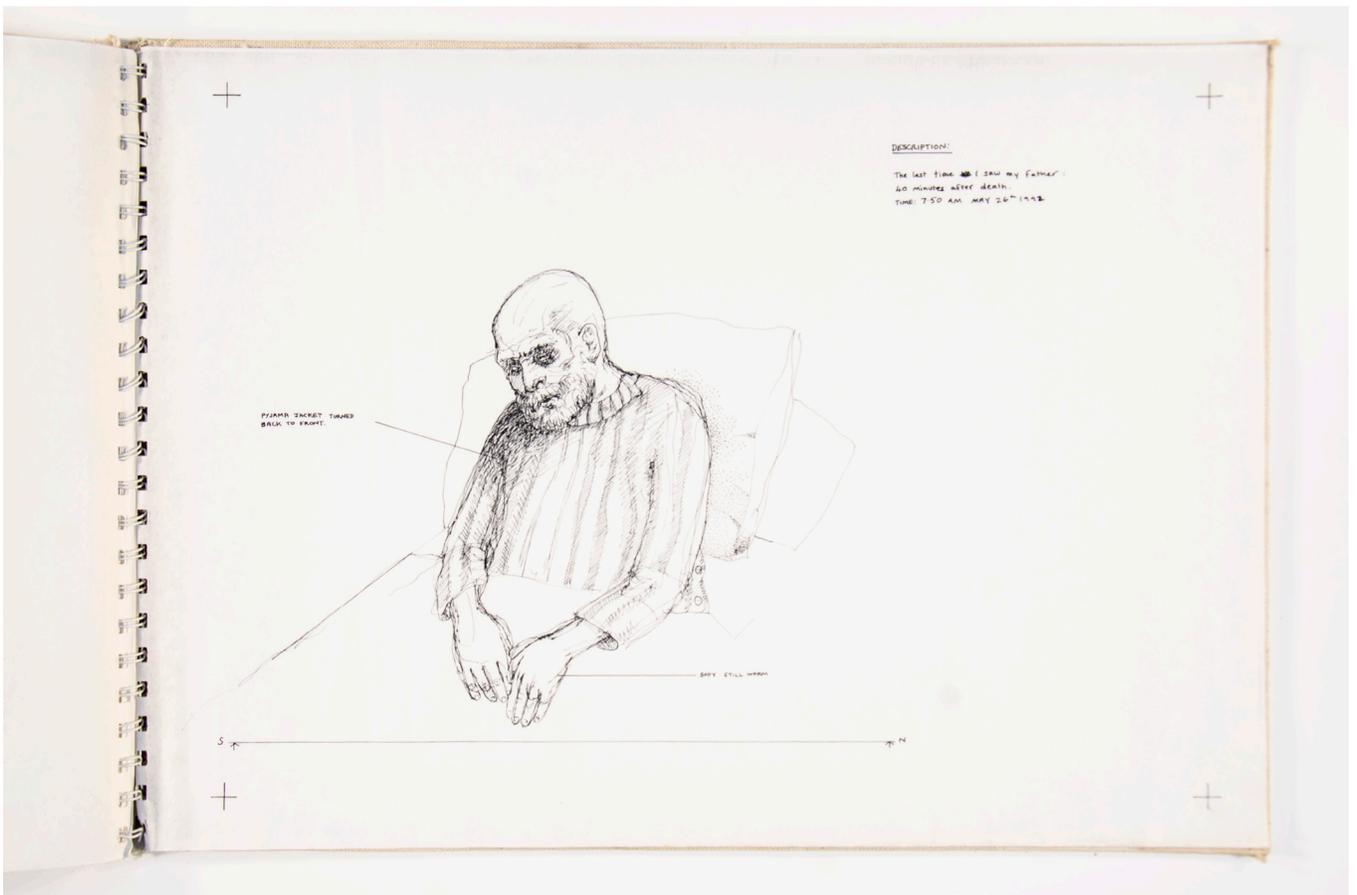
## PART 2.

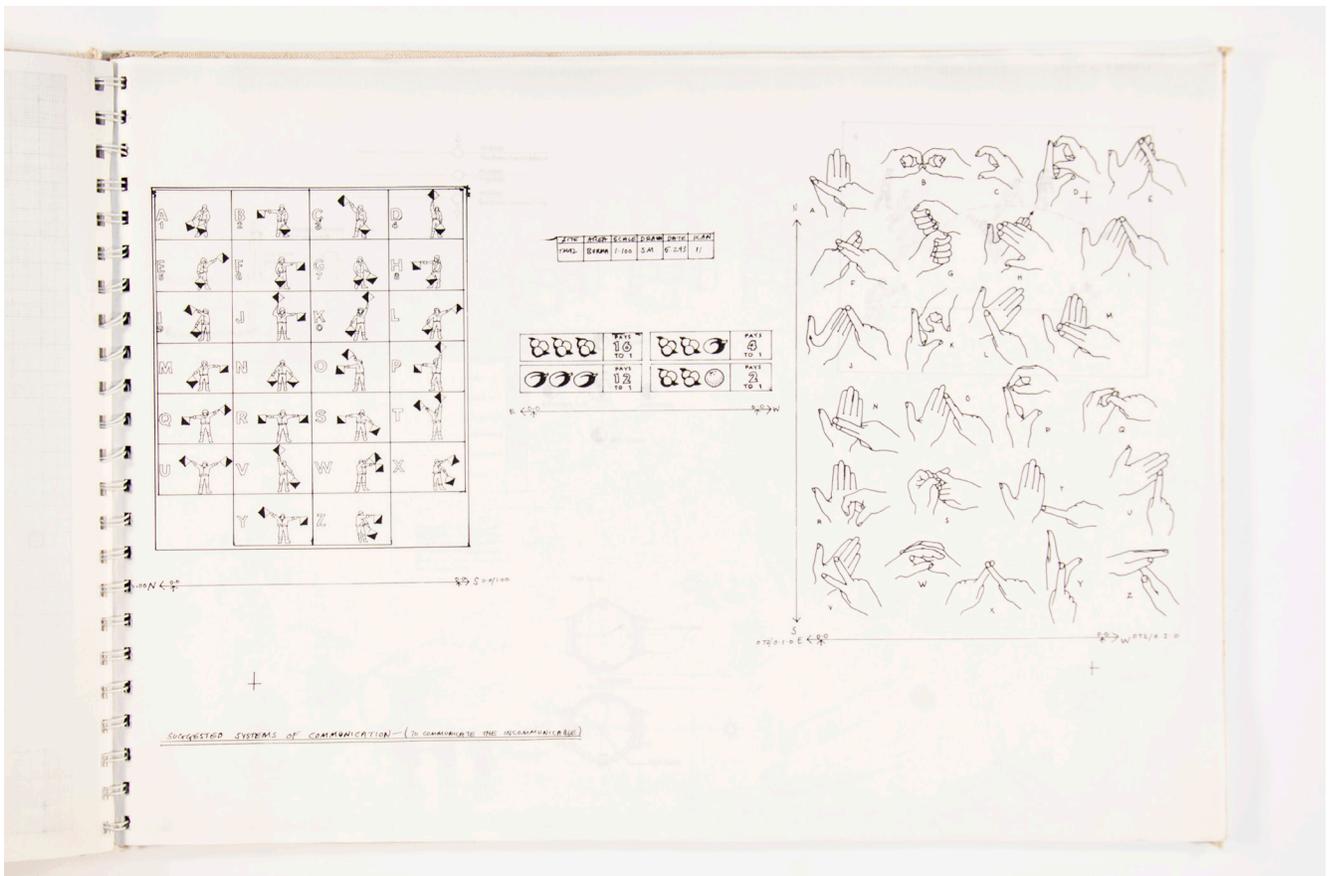
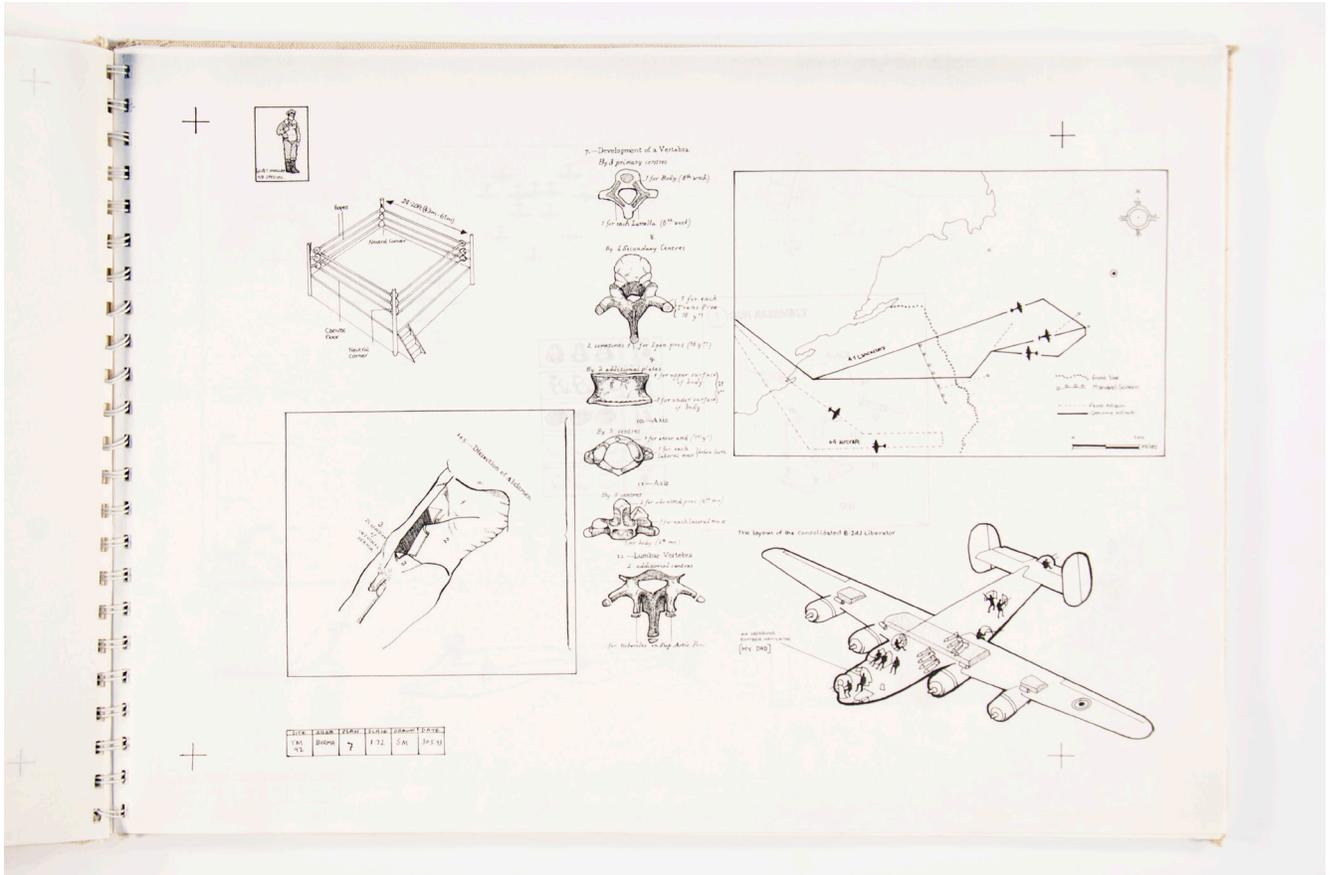
‘Morgan uses an eccentric array of diagrams to movingly convey the trauma felt by her father after being a bomb aimer in a Lancashire bomber [*sic*] in World War Two, and how that memory is now held after his death. The work explores how the most sensitive of memory may be held in the matter-of-fact schema of instructional diagrams and through the act of drawing. Some diagrams are purely illustrative—rugby formation strategies next to bomber formations—while others are more fanciful. A cross-section of the seams of earth around a hole in the ground is used to illustrate the layers of feelings that have accreted that the artist is mining’. (Amery 2015)

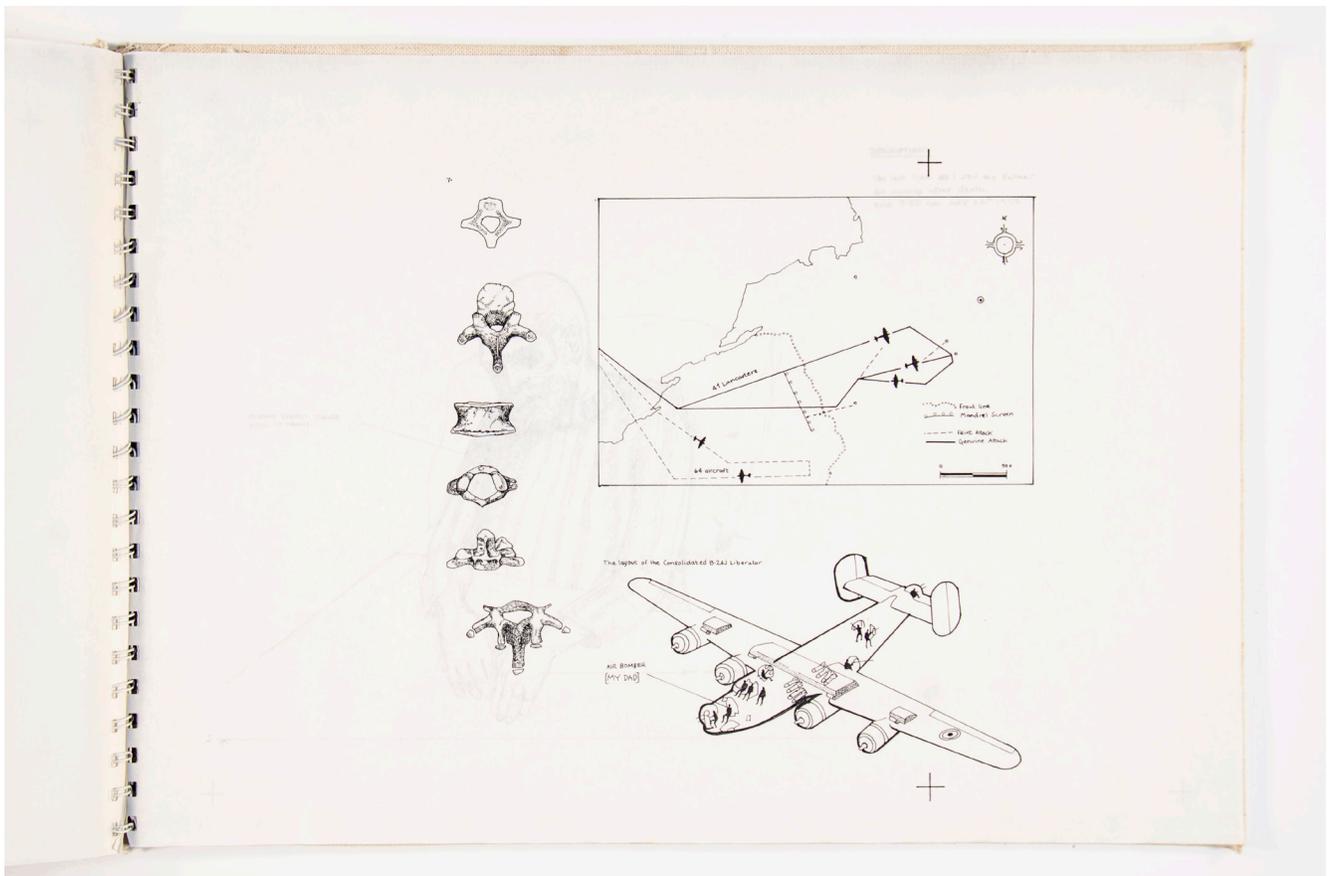
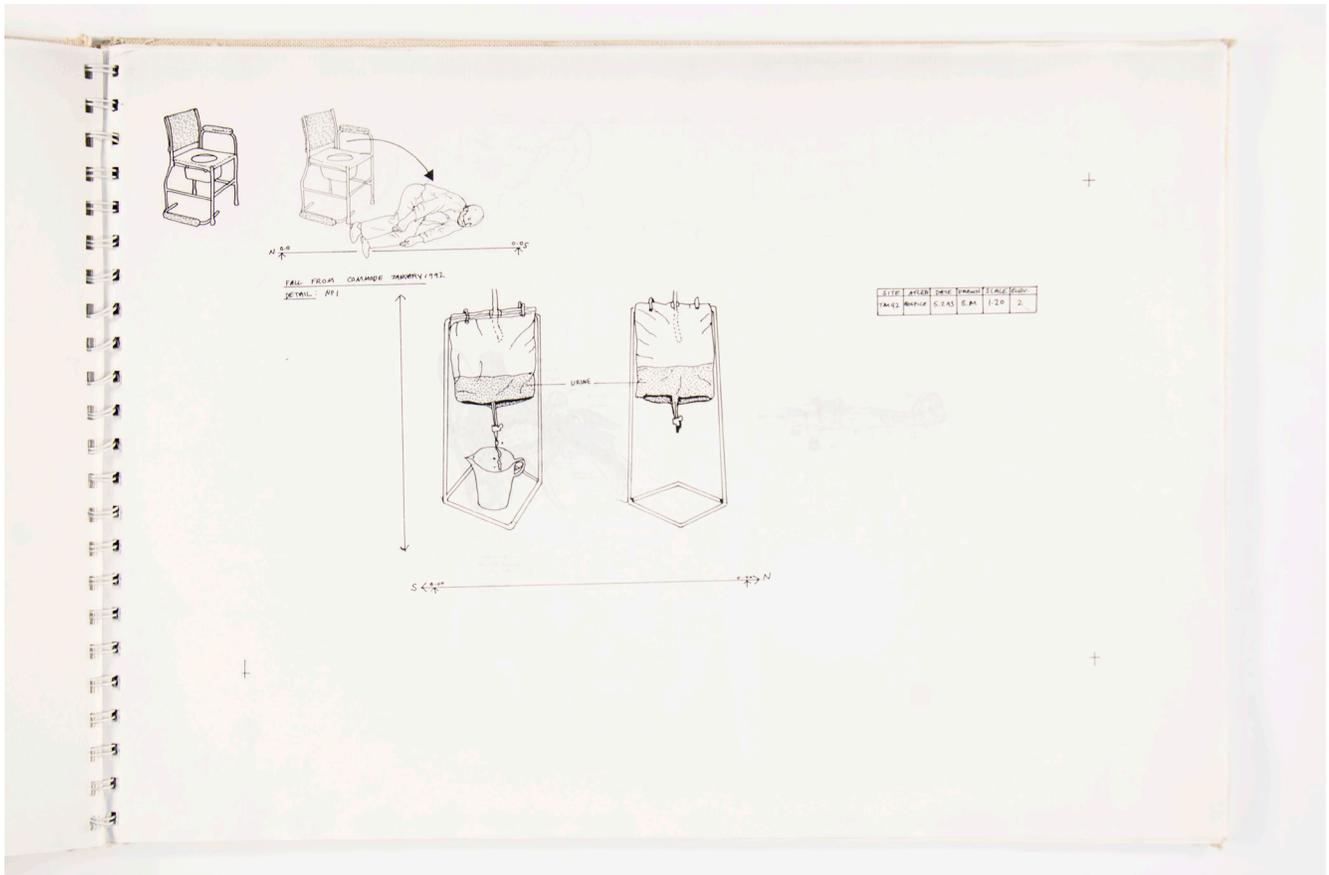
Figure 1–2. Sally J. Morgan. Page from *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)*. Photo: Jessica Chubb.

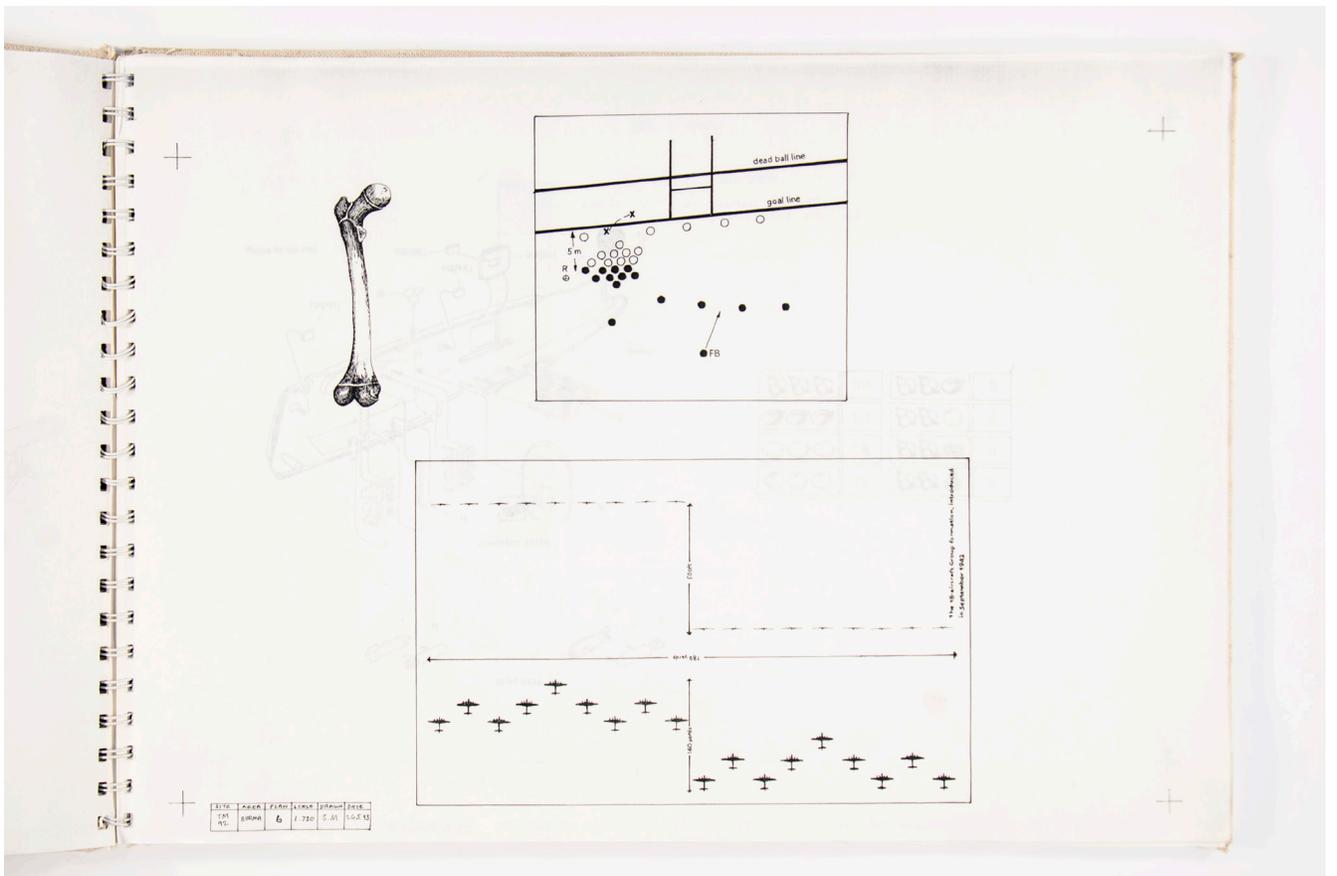
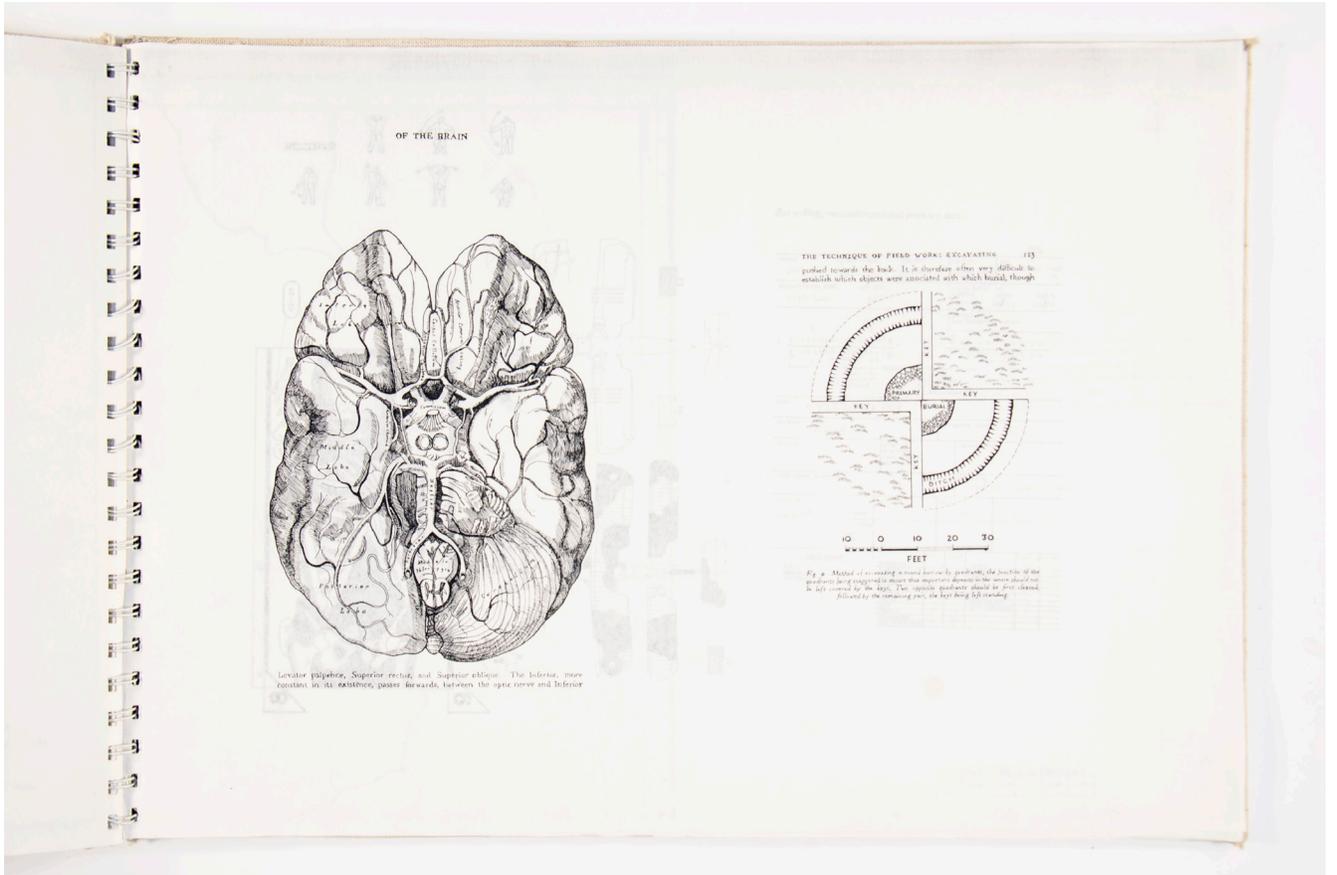
Page 197-200. Figure 3-8. Sally J. Morgan. Page from *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)*. Photo: Jessica Chubb.











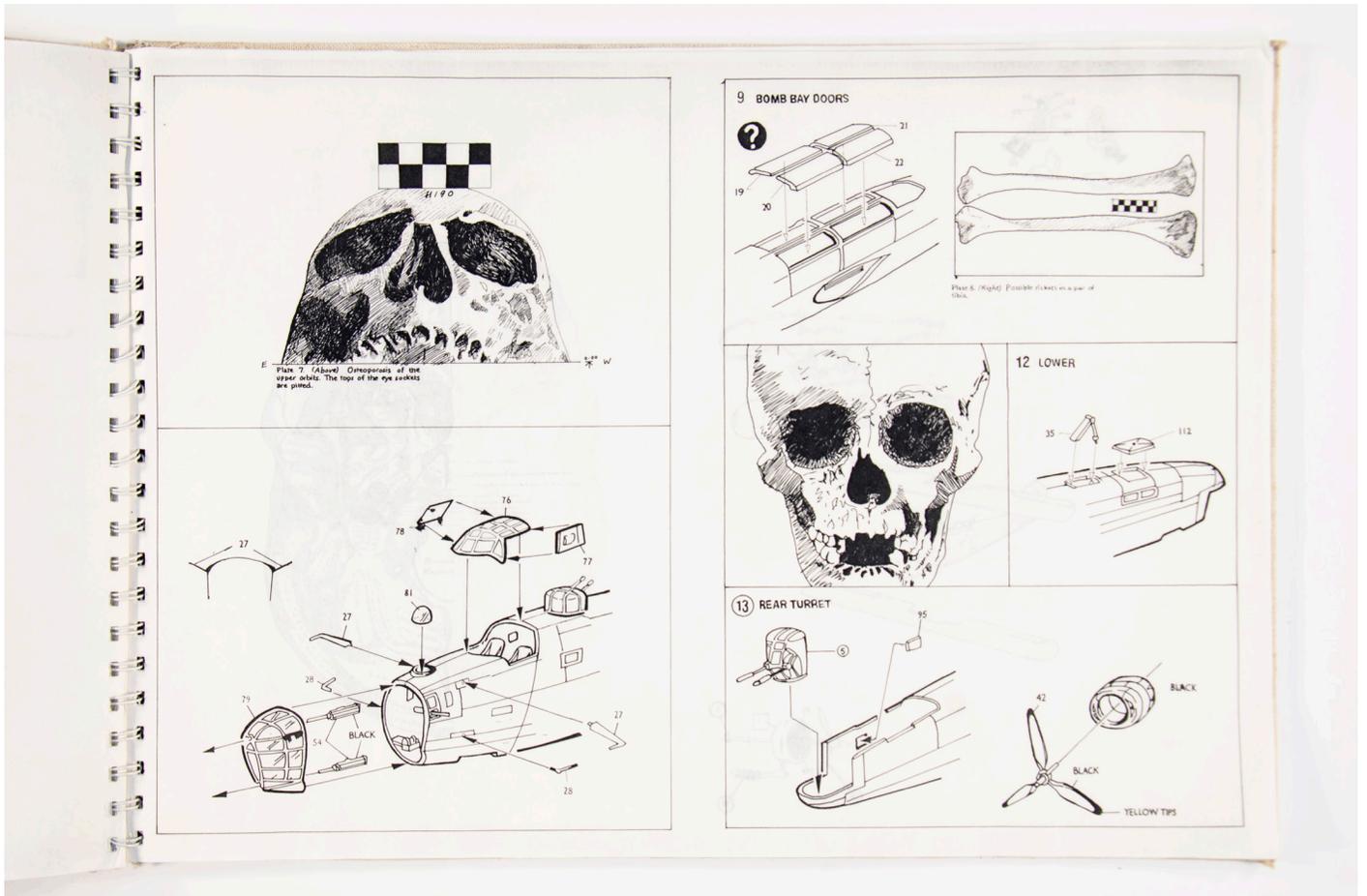


Figure 11. Sally J. Morgan. Page from *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)*. Photo: Jessica Chubb.

### PART 3.

Drawn on A3 tracing paper, cumulative ink images grew in overlays, outlining and unpicking my father's life, from his time as a bomb aimer to his death from a brain tumour. Nothing but diagrams and labels. I used the conventions of archaeological, scientific, and instructional illustration, and tried to turn them in on themselves, through juxtaposing images, to make sentences and paragraphs that spoke of the futility of cold, observational discourse in the face of emotional 'truth'. When they were shown in *Trigger Points* (Palitz Gallery, New York, 2016), curator Heather Galbraith said of them, 'the instructional tone to many of the drawings that seek to map, and explain mechanics, technology and strategy in both warfare and in medical treatment of disease, only amplify the heightened emotional experiences of Morgan and her father'.<sup>1</sup>

Using words only within labels in the diagrams, I tried to make poetry with drawings. I borrowed the elements of poetry that I understood best: simile, metaphor, repetition, analogy, visual 'rhyming', space between imagery, pauses and absences. The transparency of the pages added to the idea of the drawings as a narrative process, the viewer anticipating the coming images as shadows behind the present ones. The peeling of each page away from the one below it, echoed a process of archaeological excavation. Each page a layer in the stratigraphy of the

book, each layer contextualised by the ones above and below it.

In her review of *A Life in Diagrams*, Janet Hand spoke of the ‘archaeological process of measurement, categorisation and display (being) displaced in its scientificity by the affecting relation between reminiscence and mourning’.<sup>2</sup> In a number of my pieces, including the *A Life in Diagrams* series, I have questioned the relationship of those oppositional positions contemplated above—the perceived binary of truth as reason and truth as feeling—through contrasting them, and testing the adequacy of each, within the structure of an artwork. Kearney writes that, for Bachelard, ‘the poetic instant is a harmonic relation between opposites’<sup>3</sup> in which, perhaps we see the same kind of ‘convergence’ as artist Stuart Brisley described in his early performance works.<sup>4</sup>

In both the performance of *A Life in Diagrams* and in the book of drawings of the same name, we see two conceptual opposites; two different versions of Truth, which ‘converge on each other in time creating a crisis’.<sup>5</sup> In the performance of *A Life in Diagrams*, the convergence is achieved through the actions of the performer. In *A Life in Diagrams (the Book)*, this is realised through the juxtaposing of images, and through the overlay of semi-transparent leaves. The revelation is achieved somatically, through the fingers of the reader as each layer is revealed. In both these iterations we see the art work refusing ‘stasis’, and meaning being arrived at through a cumulative process of physical and conceptual interactions. This is a process whereby Bachelard’s poetic instance, the harmonic relation between opposites, is achieved through repositioning Brisley’s crisis as an internal struggle for the viewer/reader. A crisis that must be resolved out of what we might describe as a crescendo of contradiction. The method used, that of introducing the audience to a set of dissonances as ontological experiences rather than as a singular epistemological proposition, enables an active intellectual and emotional response as a process of embodied reflection on the part of the viewer/reader. It is therefore through the active participation of the audience, in response to the stimuli deliberately introduced by the artist, that the poetic instant is achieved.

## Endnotes

1. Heather Galbraith and Andrew J. Saluti, eds., *Trigger Points* (New York, NY: Syracuse University/Wellington: Massey University, 2016).
2. Janet Hand and John Gange, "Performance South West, National Review of Live Art, ICA London," *Hybrid: The International Cross-Artform Magazine* (March 1994).
3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014).
4. Stuart Brisley, "Letter," (London: Collection of the artist, 1969).
5. Ibid.

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## Biographical Note

Sally J. Morgan has exhibited in the UK, USA, France, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Brazil, Japan, Bulgaria, and New Zealand. Over the years her work has been included in international festivals such as the *National Review of Live Art (NRLA)* at London's ICA; *Belluard/Bollwerk International* in Fribourg Switzerland; and the *>In Time* Chicago Performance Art Triennial. As a published cultural theorist and historian, she is an acknowledged authority on contextual (socially engaged) art practices, particularly in the areas of public, community and 'live' art. She has published widely on cultural history and her article on the film 'Braveheart' as a manifestation of the influence of popular culture on the historical imagination has been reproduced in a collection including such names as Theodor Adorno and Stuart Hall.