
Witness: An Autobiographical Performance

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Artist's Statement

The song 'Witness' is an autobiographical telling of the performer's experiences as a witness in a court case in the summer of 2014. The presentation takes the form of a Pecha Kucha—a 20x20 presentation format showing 20 slides, each for 20 seconds. The slides forming the background to the performance are solid, objective, permanent. They present the facts. They are the authority: these are things that happened and words that were spoken. In contrast, the song presents the witness' experience of the proceedings. Here there are no facts, only how it feels to have your private memories of a traumatic event interrogated and the truthfulness of your words brought into question.

"Traumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay...or as disconnected fragments".¹ The repetitive loop of the music is as unrelenting as the examination and cross-examination by lawyers of a witness in the stand.

'I put it to you...'

But unlike the drama of trauma, which replays itself over and over, capturing its victim in a bubble of 'now' with no option of being assigned to the past, a performance is something that must come to an end and disappear. "Performance's only life is in the present".²

Song combines language (the crystallisation of thought) and music (a flowing expression of emotion) to create narrative from the swirl of memory within a person, externalising those memories and creating a bridge that stretches across the silence imposed by trauma to form a connection. Art is retelling—not reliving—and reduces that which is formless and overwhelming in the mind into a solid reality, communicated to and accessible by a community that listens. "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener".³ When that listener questions the validity of your statement, the self is brought into doubt. When the listener is receptive, the traumatised, fragmented self is remade.

I am interested in how the personal and autobiographical ideas conveyed through art and music gain broader meanings through internalisation by an audience. You will watch my performance, hear my song through your own history

and experience, finding meanings I perhaps did not originally intend, but that are nevertheless inherent in the original. Every interpretation is right. My story becomes our story.

‘Witness’ was originally presented at Memory Matters, a Masters Symposium on Cultural Memory that took place at York St John University on 11 October 2014. [A video of the performance by Emily Rowan can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/165975441.](https://vimeo.com/165975441)

Keywords: autobiography, public memory, fluidity of memory, testimony, trauma.

Witness

*Put me in the box and I'll tell you what I know
You ask me what happened when I was 13 years old*

I solemnly, sincerely, truly declare.

*It's been 16 years, I don't come with a guarantee
"I can't say for certain" is as valid an answer as any*

I solemnly, sincerely, truly declare.

*I'll stand and declare my most shame-filled memories
In front of 12 strangers whose faces I've no way to read
You're here to judge him, but it feels like you're judging me*

I solemnly, sincerely, truly declare.

*Pick, pick, pick me apart, dust off every box
That I've mentally filed so I don't flashback
Everyday, take possession of what I have lived through
Label and tag it "Exhibit A"
Wield your words like a scalpel to cut to the core
I'll clear up after, I've done it before*

I'll clear my mind after, I've done it before

*Make your statement, cause yours is the burden of proof
Don't forget the defendant is here and listening to you
We need the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*

I solemnly, sincerely, truly declare.

*You can put it to me any way that you want
But I'm under oath, did you hope
That I was lying to you*

*My memories are malleable in timing and chronology
I can't say it all for certain, but of some things I am sure
And you can keep on chipping till I am just a child
But there are facts that I can cling to and I won't let go*

*My memories are malleable, they're placed upon your pedestal
And, oh god, if I say something wrong, the case will collapse.*

Endnotes

1. Susan J. Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self”, in: *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal et al. (Hanover: UPNE, 1999), 42-43.
2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.
3. Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 70.

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Biographical Note

Emily Rowan is a musician, composer and performer based in York, UK. She is one half of the ‘punk cabaret’ duo Flora Greysteel, completed a Masters in Music Composition at York St John University in 2015 and is currently co-writing an urban fantasy musical. Emily’s other musical works include the site-specific installation ‘Archiving Sounds’ (for Infinite Record: Archive, Memory, Performance (international seminar), October 2013), ‘Vestiges’ (in collaboration with David Lancaster and Fabia Preece, 2014) and ‘Songs for the First World War’, settings of Katharine Tynan’s ‘Joining the Colours’ & Wilfred Owen’s ‘Anthem For Doomed Youth’ (2014).

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