

LIFE WRITING AS RESEARCH CREATION: THE PROJECT *DRIFTING, PHUKET TRILOGY 21/22*

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ABSTRACT. *Life Writing as Research Creation: the Project Drifting, Phuket Trilogy 21/22.* This paper addresses the practice of “self-fiction”. It also discusses various stances about the process of “life writing” as an artistic and academic research. The research creation project *Drifting/À la dérive* (2012-2025) consists of “sensory-scapes” often described in detail. These combine literature, visual arts, and dance. This study focuses on self-fiction within a coherent series of dance videos based on poetics, traveling and performance studies. The study also implies a creative methodology developed in academic setting. The project *Drifting, Phuket Trilogy 21/22* was conceived and developed by the author of this paper, Biliana Vassileva, a dancer who has been a university professor (MCF HDR) and researcher since 2009, inspired by “practice as research” approaches to academia.

Keywords: *self-fiction, research creation, dance, performing arts*

REZUMAT. *Scrierea vieții ca proiect de creație-cercetare: Drifting, Trilogia Phuket 21/22.* Această lucrare abordează practica „fichionalizării sinelui”. De asemenea, ea discută o serie de perspective referitoare la procesul de „scriere

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a existenței” văzută ca o formă de cercetare artistică și academică. Proiectul de creație-cercetare *Drifting/À la dérive* constă într-o suită de „peisaje senzoriale” adesea descrise în detaliu. Acestea combină literatura, artele vizuale și dansul. Studiul de față se va concentra, așadar, asupra „fichionalizării sinelui” așa cum apare în cadrul unei serii de secvențe video de dans, bazate pe călătorie, poetică și studii de performance artistic. Cercetarea implică, de asemenea, o metodologie creativă, elaborată în mediul academic. Proiectul *Drifting, Phuket Trilogy 21/22* a fost conceput și dezvoltat de autoarea acestei lucrări, Biliana Vassileva, dansatoare și conferențiar universitar abilitat, ale cărei cercetări privesc, încă din 2009, abordările de tipul „practice as research” în mediul academic.

Cuvinte-cheie: *autoficțiune, cercetare-creație, dans, artele spectacolului*

Introduction: a note of intention

The current paper addresses the practice of “self-fiction”. It also discusses various stances about the process of “life writing” as an artistic and academic research. The research creation project *Drifting/À la dérive* (2012-2025) consists of “sensory-scapes” often described in detail. These combine literature, visual arts, and dance. The project conceives an autobiography as a quest for intuitive self-enlightenment, as described by Fernando Pessoa in *The Book of Disquiet* (2002, 74): “My soul is a hidden orchestra; I know not what instruments, what fiddle strings and harps, drums and tamboura I sound and clash inside myself. All I hear is the symphony”.

Joan Ramon Resina claims: “Especially since Foucault’s seminal essay on ‘Self Writing,’ self-production through writing has become more versatile, gaining a broader range of expression, diversifying its social function, and colonizing new media of representation. For this reason, it seems appropriate to speak of life-writing as a concept that includes but is not limited to classic autobiography. Awareness of language’s performativity permits us to read life-writing texts not as a record but as the space where the self is realized, or in some instances de-realized” (2019).

Regarding that process, creative life writing as self-fiction can build identity, but it can also contest ascribed identity by producing alternative or disjointed scenarios of identification. Therefore, the current study focuses on self-fiction within a coherent series of dance videos based on poetics, traveling and performance studies. The study also implies a creative methodology developed in academic setting. The project *Drifting, Phuket Trilogy 21/22* was conceived and developed by the author of this paper, Biliana Vassileva, a dancer who has been a university professor (MCF HDR) and researcher since 2009,

inspired by “practice as research” approaches to academia, and so this paper is mainly written from a personal subjective viewpoint.

The study, accomplished by producing dance videos, questions the visual transformation, the unpredictable transitions, the vibrations and the myriad sensations of the dancing body. All the videos concern the idea of drifting, linked to a particular practice of “autofiction” and “self-staging” on camera. They comment on the dancer’s work while travelling. The project is academically supported by the special issue “On Poetics and Performance” of *Performance Research* (2015).

Feminist creative writing issues

The idea of feminist autobiography based on dance experience was developed by the American choreographer Yvonne Rainer (2013). Carolyn Carlson, another American choreographer, in her solo *Blue Lady* (1983), depicted different phases of her life through the mixed media of dance improvisation, poem writing, drawing, and the tracking-in-journals creative process (Vassileva 2008). These examples show how feminist writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries dwells on a process of introspection, a quest for freedom and strategies allowing linking words and movements. Carlson describes the importance of “the eye gaze as self-observation” in her creative self-fiction as a choreographer. To this can be added Cahun’s (1930) essential comment on the assumption of false narcissism, assigned to women who create independently.

The task of deconstructing certain clichés, such as the modesty of female gender as a required condition for domestication (Watson & Smith 2002), supports a diary’s right for privacy as an intimate space (“jardin caché”), legally protected. So are privacy of personal creative space and legally protected authorship rights. Post-qualitative and post-human studies have expanded the question of legal authorship rights to any creature. Does this mean I should credit the Bali monkeys and the Asian civet from the *Bali Luwak* video?

The current research creation project reflects the author’s decision regarding the elements chosen to compose the work and become visible. As Carolyn Carlson states in the documentary *Blue Lady* (1983), “intimate work belongs in the studio, shows belong on the stage”.

Intercultural studies of collaboration processes comprise questions of how to avoid clichés of perception, gender, or race. This approach helps avoid statements such as “it is that way, it has always been that way” or “it has to be perceived in a certain way”. Yvonne Rainer and other postmodern thinkers have expressed their concerns about the license to craft. Artists, including

Xavier Le Roy, French choreographer, have worked on redefining each individual's right to create, and have advocated the political overpowering of cultural institutions. These topics, in relation to feminist life writing, have been addressed in many research seminars, including the major question of how to comment on one's own work. Some of the seminars are held in the Center of Contemporary Arts Studies (CEAC) at the University of Lille, France. The new trend in academia of mixing writing styles and voices is still relatively recent, as Sondra Fraleigh, the American anthropologist of movement studies, reveals in her book *Dancing Identity, Metaphysic in Motion* (2004). Despite being a scholar, she may suddenly switch to writing a poem to better express her analysis of rational academic data.

Many fine arts departments have been building practice-based research habits for many years. Anthropology departments have established a tradition of "first person" fieldwork descriptions. However, few other academic research scholars (restricted to the humanities) accept such monographs as a valuable outcome of academic work.

Life writing while traveling: the anthropological stance

Travel requires a new kind of cinematographic "life writing". It articulates my professional needs as a researcher and my personal needs as a dancer and human being. I had to gradually find a new qualitative and post-qualitative research posture and paradigm. The first step was to abandon any plan, such as "scenario", established before the journey. Each new accumulation of visual material, and the later process of editing, is an outcome of encounters with largely unknown environments and their inhabitants. The only guideline possible within these circumstances is the unpredictable flow of sensations that arise: "the surest route to true knowledge is to turn our attention toward our perceptions themselves... we are all, by definition, experts in our own experience" (King 2019).

The camera can be used to capture study material using spontaneous filming as a method to investigate new cultures. It is all about the process of drifting: "not only from listening to Inuit stories and sharing their meals but also from studying (my)self in interaction with them – perceiving (my) own perceptions, in a way" (King 2019). Self-observation in feminine writing has long been suspected as a potentially narcissistic endeavor in relation to the domesticated representation of a woman, bound to modesty and the intimacy of socially enclosed space, as discussed above. Hence, even when my dancing is the main subject of the recording, special attention is brought to the environment that

makes this motion possible. This particular subject/environment observation broadens the perspective of new self-discovery and self-definition through the enlarged possibilities of a diverse cultural mingling.

It is also necessary to underline the “notion of the relativity of all education” (King 2019) when returning from a dance training journey in Thailand, Bali, or elsewhere. During the process of arranging the gathered visual material into a series of video journals, I sense and redefine myself according to the newly acquired intercultural knowledge. When traveling in foreign lands, a person can sometimes be fooled, in spite of all their knowledge and expertise, as “being smart was relative to one’s circumstances and surroundings”. This knowledge can only be gained through local interactions, “the sense of regard that his (her) hosts displayed toward him (her), as well as the reciprocal education that he (she) was gaining from them”. It requires a specific opening before any analytical procedure – “the training of one’s heart to see the humanity of another”. Therefore, cultural anthropology deals with “humans in the context of their *ethnos*, the specific societies or communities – nations, ethnic groups, tribes, races – into which they seem to sort themselves”, while comparative intercultural aesthetics, such as the current research creation project, is about the artworks, arising from specific context of intercultural encounters. This knowledge is ever changing, and the process of life writing cannot be reduced to preconceptions: “I see such a wide and free field of labor before my eyes that the mere thought excites me” (for further reading see King 2019).

The fleeting traveling process stirs both the surface and the depths. Compared to the long-lasting fieldwork required by anthropology studies, this method of collecting sensory data is more spontaneous and open to imagination at work. There is no intention of revealing any truth about the art forms encountered, especially those linked to body knowledge and its use. A multiplicity of truths emerges during the process of associating the visual and intellectual ideas at work: “the longer I studied the more I became convinced that the phenomena such as customs, traditions, and migrations are far too complex in their origin... to able us to study their psychological causes without a thorough knowledge of their history” (King 2019).

The geographical displacement is compulsory. Many examples of an “imported” East, modified by, and for the sake of, Western needs and preconceptions of what an art form or body at work should be, can be deconstructed only in their original contexts. For the sake of the project’s evolution, I relied completely on meeting “the true experts – that is, those who actually used it, in a given place, at a given time (...) this bone rattle might make music” (King 2019). Concerning this, the anthropologist’s standpoint required for this research creation project is defined by King as “the combination of travel, artifact collecting, language learning and bone hunting” (2019).

Sensory-scapes of collecting fleeting sensations across East/West

The concept of “sensory-scapes” as life writing involves a collection of sensations caught through images while drifting. It consists of a coherent series of videos based on traveling and performance practice. “Coherent” implies using the same method of collecting sensations by capturing fleeting images, followed by a process of editing, based on “stream of consciousness” assembling associations. Regarding this, the process of collecting sensations through images can be described as “sensory-scape”, especially during the first phase of the project, which simply involves travel.

The method of life writing used in this project stems from the process of collecting sensations through images. The visual material is gathered in a spontaneous way. Afterwards, it is revised through an editing procedure and linked to theoretical ideas. These ideas prolong the thoughts that emerge within the creative timespan of each journey, transforming them into new working concepts. The research creation project *Drifting* (Vassileva Biliana. 2018 <https://bilidanse.wixsite.com/website-2>) has been presented at many events organized by *ITSLIQUID*, such as contemporary arts exhibitions in Italy (Bari), Spain, and Poland, and Performance Festivals such as *SIME* (dedicated to electro-acoustic music) at the University of Lille or *Pile ou Frisque* by Le regard du cygne/Le générateur in Paris, in March 2019. The project has been developed by collaborations with artists (Kate McDonald, Guillaume Tiger, Victoria Donnet, Collin Kluchman, and Pierre Jeong). It has also been presented at a culture heritage conference organised by the *Territorialités en France*, at the Paris College of Art conference *Contemporary Images Collection*, on 29th April, 2019: (cf. <https://graduatesymposium.weebly.com/schedule.html>), and in other events/publications by the intercultural aesthetics research platform LangArts.

The research creation project was constructed without additional funding; however, there have been collaborations with professional artists, some regular and some random. Since 2018, the professional video maker Victoria Donnet has regularly been involved in double feminine voice co-editing and choice making. The composer Guillaume Tiger (PhD in ambient music) has provided music for the unfolding scenarios. During travel, I have encountered many other body practitioners, dancers, choreographers, composers and arts professionals who have brought considerable input and distinct somatic flavour to each recorded gesture and body – and – mind altered state of consciousness.

The “crafting” aspect of the project was conceived as a deliberate choice, based on some postmodern arts trends. American choreographer Yvonne Rainer, who also created some experimental cinema, emphasized the importance of not making an artist specialise in one determined way (Rainer 2016). French choreographer Xavier Le Roy can be added to the list of those who “craft”

choreographies, for he has criticized the contemporary cultural policy of giving the right to legitimise to those who can hold the keys and the right to create only to prestigious institutions (Le Roy 2014). This old-fashioned point of view about legitimate creativity also questions the status of the artist and the history of art. During the Middle Ages, even the most talented painters and sculptors were considered as mere craftsmen. During the Renaissance, the art practitioner was considered as receiving the miraculous gift of “genius”. The slow emergence of the concept of the “modern subject” has ultimately separated the artist from God’s superpower. Nowadays, artists often have a much more ambiguous role in the society, for the mystery of their talent may be stripped away any time by mass media communication tools, such as the policy of reporting political and sexual scandals. Additionally, there are too many conventional and convenient narratives, incompatible with the messy nature of a real creative process, established artificially and meant to manipulate open-to-the-public processes of life writing. Artists can even be enslaved by the system, established initially on the basis of their own success, such as the public relations service requirement of how to adapt their work, and to communicate about it, adjusting it to the public opinion or to the common sense of what an artist should be. Thus, they can end up deprived of any decision-making rights instead of following their own wishes.

The research creation project *Drifting*, and the process of life writing it involved, began with a departure – that is, with temporarily leaving behind the usual geographical, social and cultural environments, with all the habits and invalidating crises they may contain, in favour of a new destination: “What is she going to Samoa for? She herself admits it is a flight from a difficult and tangled situation” (King 2019).

Thus, the project strives for the utopia of clean slate/tabula rasa or a simple distancing from habits and the environment that established them. The departure allows new points of view to appear or new elements to filter into previous stories, memories, chains of thought, and feelings. I recall the specific sensation of liberty, arising already in the airports and inside the airplanes, immediately rearranging my inner stream of consciousness. Therefore, many of the videos contain shots of flight, sky, clouds, and airplane windows.

The process of collecting images begins and evolves with a gradual interweaving with the new environment. This occurs regardless of the specific location. The action of using a mobile to take a photo or a short video is prompted by sudden stimulation or intuition. The process is close to poetry writing, based on the intensity of the perception and the flow of associations it may trigger. Therefore, there is a total lack of logic in terms of stable characters, predetermined narrative or scenario of events. Later on, the footage can be organized into more coherent sequences.

“Practice as research” in life writing

The project began in 2012 with a trip to Bali. It has been encouraged by the research platform LangArts, which specializes in comparative intercultural aesthetics, mainly between East and West. The project’s first aim was to document a research creation collaboration with local dancer and teacher Debix Lupz Witha in 2012 (renewed in 2019). It took the form of a short documentary involving poetic slides. The hybrid nature of the project slipped progressively into more creative dimensions, and it was then referenced in an academic paper. The paper “La notion d’itinérance à travers une performance dansée”, published in 2013, described new ways of expressing academic ideas about arts research in a more detailed and accurate manner (Vassileva 2013).

The videos mainly contain sensations of mobility and sensations of revival. They were chosen according to their property of “étrange/strange”. This aesthetic phenomenon, defined by Massin (2001), is the very precious moment of moving away from one’s usual perceptual supports. One of the project challenges is to capture and attempt to describe visually this phenomenon, which is difficult to seize.

Hubert Godard (2006), French theorist in dance and movement studies, described “vertigo” as a remedy for the installed neurosis of repeating only familiar gestures. The vertigo state has been documented in the field of intercultural movement-based anthropology in relation to dance gestures. It has also been a subject of linguistic studies, including “the kinetic life stories” by Swiss researcher Guillemette Bolens (2008), focusing on vocabulary and depicting loss of social control over the body in many European literature chefs-d’oeuvre.

Collecting sensations of mobility is probably a result of my long practice as a dancer. I have developed specific kinetic awareness of an improvised or composed narrative based on motion rather than just thinking. Collecting sensations of revival allows images of darker emotions to be somehow set into motion or transformed within the emerging new script. This “life writing” represents traveling sketches and notebooks of sensory memory. It can be argued that this kind of memory is everlasting, compared to rational constructions/contractions of meaning, which may easily stumble down whenever displaced in alternative contexts. The reality of the image sometimes goes beyond the initial intention and takes the story further as if independently. The process of life writing and self-fiction involves a dynamic inner structure of poetic and imaginary inner workings. It may provide a new foundation or structure in return by deconstructing or reconstructing the starting point or the necessity of departure.

According to Baudelaire's (1885) principle of "flânerie" (strolling carefree in an urban environment), there is no pressure to capture everything. This principle is preserved in all journeys. Flânerie results in surprising juxtapositions of imagery, mixing timings and blending spaces. It allows fiction, composed of real elements: "There is a poetics of editing. Now we invite you into this space of poetics and performance (your entry, another beginning N.A.) to follow the double helix interweaving the conventional and radical, methodological and experimental, critical and creative. And as you move through (step, leap, fly) we solicit you to find your own connections and make your own meaning. There is poetics of reading" (Allsopp & Kereider 2015).

The research creation project: theoretical foundation

French dance historian Laurence Louppe (2004) has developed a theory of the evolution of prose, poetry, and contemporary dance styles through the twentieth century. Her essay discerns how the new freestyle methods of composing literature – such as James Joyce's work or Kerouac's *On the Road* – resemble contemporary dance methods of renewing movement vocabulary and choreography constructing. Old codified rhetoric has been deconstructed by abandoning traditional grammar structure and storytelling. The creation of new meanings and surreal vocabulary is similar to the improvisation practices that emerged in all twentieth- and twenty-first-century art forms.

The current research creation project is built on a free flow of associations in order to work with sensory intuition. It documents in a new way a journey from a somatic (first-person point-of-view) perspective. The autobiographical elements (if indeed there are any) do not strive to achieve a full account or detailed description of any single experience, as discussed above. The narrative slides on the edge of what emerges in a most fleeting and spontaneous manner. Therefore, the sequence of quotes from "On Poetics and Performance" in *Performance Research* (2015) seems to be an appropriate description of life writing-in-the-process:

On Poetics and Performance concerns itself with *poiesis*, or acts of making and giving form to the interplay of material and immaterial content intrinsic to any act of communication our aim is to position poetics in relation to the contexts of contemporary culture, open concepts of performance and performance making and an expanded view of what "poetics" may mean. Suggesting that both poetry and dance operate in excess of the functions of language, Allsopp foregrounds the importance of embodiment in the meaning making procedures of both writing and choreography. Jaeger employs strategies and tactics of

found poetry and conceptual writing to borrow. Through a richly imagined tapestry of figurative metamorphosis, Manchev practices the poetics inherent in our materialization of thought. (Allsopp & Kereider, 2015)

The idea of “found poetry” within the *Drifting* project is developed through certain graffiti – words scratched on walls and other urban environments – which has been captured in the videos. There is no hierarchy between verbal and non-verbal languages – during the editing process, the choice of where and how to place a comment, line, or gesture was made according to visual logic as much as storytelling. Storytelling itself avoids pointing out factual data, which may ruin the intention of inducing a daydreaming state of mind.

Each element in the videos’ composition can exist and be exposed independently, as it contains enough sensory intensity to do so. It is a game of rearranging what may otherwise be too obvious, factually precise, and chronologically linear. Thus, each video can be reshuffled as a play of words, which holds many potentials simultaneously.

Strolling through the material, as with Baudelaire’s *flânerie*, involves taking random impressions to work on. This collaborative co-editing was conducted with filmmaker Victoria Donnet, music composer Guillaume Tiger, and video artists Collin Kluchman, Pierre Jeong. Authorship rights regarding what is included and excluded from an intimate journal must be respected; however, the hidden elements are still somehow there. Life writing has been used in German choreographer Pina Bausch’s creative process. Her unique technique of questions and responses digs into the intimacy of her dancers. Protecting her dancers’ privacy, she puts on stage the found material in an impersonal manner.

This multi-voicing may resemble Carlson’s practice of “self gaze”, combined with the filmmaker’s viewpoint as witness and decision-maker. Co-editing then becomes co-writing, a process based on affinities about the visual “stream of consciousness”.

Flow of sensations as life writing and self-fiction: collaboration with filmmaker Pierre Jeong

The dance video *Phuket 2021* (Vassileva. 2021, Research creation project *Drifting/À la dérive*) was coauthored with the filmmaker Pierre Jeong (Macao/Paris/New York, cf. Vassileva & Jeong. 2021. *Phuket 2021*, Thailand. Web link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl5uxd2yT5A>). Pierre Jeong’s work is dedicated to experimental cinema (cf. Jeong Pierre. *Art website*).

Pierreieong.com.). The following description gives its basic key elements – the poetic image, the kinaesthetic issue, and the theoretical reference. The concept briefly describes the process of experience/traveling. It offers each viewer the possibility of free interpretation. This part of the study is not meant to fix meanings and give a thorough account of each journey but to highlight the *saillances* of it. *Saillances* is a French aesthetic “concept opératoire” (working concept). It means “tracking arising peaks of interest” within the composition of any art work. These peaks can be identified when perceived intuitively and analysed afterwards.

This journey begins with blending images from a foggy beach in Phuket and some movie cuts found in an airplane entertainment program – *Tale of the Nine Tailed*, a Korean TV drama (2020). In this video, the process of life writing is presented not only as geographic displacement, but also as an inner trip into the “stream of consciousness” of both artists, me and Pierre.

This specific dynamic is stirred in a different way by each new, or newly re-found, context. In this particular case, the new context is Phuket, Thailand. The island reopened to foreign visitors in 2021, with the special post-pandemic program *SandBox*. The latter has opened perspectives of newly found mobility with the question, already asked within the research creation project: “How to Walk on the Slippery Earth?”. This question is answered by the following academic quote: “Knowing is performative, creative, and participatory, not discursive, passive or theoretical” (Nichols 2010). Therefore, the poetic insertion “Warm water, divers” in red neon, found on the street is all about the simplicity and the powerful nature of being set into motion. The ability to differentiate between motion as qualitative dynamics and movement as shape creation was proposed by American choreographer Alwin Nikolais’ studies of dance/Laban heritage.

The choice of adding a phrase as an outside voice each time, which communicates a personal and intimate experience, also occurs in the rest of the research creation project. “This is poetry. I never know what I am going to say next”, says the poet Rumi in another video. The term “academic here denotes practicing reflection. All the academic material selected from the special issue of *Performance Research* (2015) gives the accumulated sensory and sensitive experience multiple perspectives. Their particular “elusive something else” goes beyond the forms visible and apprehensible to us (Allsopp 2015).

In *Tale of the Nine Tailed*, fantastic creatures and phantoms lead the storytelling. Later on, I trained as a traditional Korean dancer, which was a source of inspiration for few movement fragments, combined with the training with local somatic practitioners and artists. The narrative of the video displays specific characters and events from the K-drama. These imaginary figures are embodied through glimpses of dance improvisation such as a snail crawling on the wall or a still lynx, present in the next part of the trilogy.

Phuket 21/Bangkok 22 is the second video from the trilogy. Web link: Vassileva & Jeong. 2021/2022. *Phuket 21/ Bangkok 22, Thailand* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFcELS0yDMo&t=70s>.

It is made in Phuket six months later, with the intention of deconstructing meanings, which may stiffen the way in which we perceive the fluid, ever-changing nature of life. The video was co-edited with Pierre Jeong later on, in Paris as well. The field recording of serene ocean views and a night garden is combined with the following warning (drawn from the content of an airplane entertainment program):

The following program contains material
That may be offensive or disturbing to some viewers:
Adult situation.

These words are related to a similar idea of “warning” in the next video of the trilogy (*AsieSudEst, 2022*, discussed further, airplane entertainment program content):

This feature contains adult themes and,
language unsuitable for anyone under 18
years of age. Viewer’s discretion is advised.

It is combined further with a poetic and more constructive reflection, a quote from a bank insurance advertisement (drawn from the content of an airplane entertainment program):

Remain loyal to
the original aspiration,
Compose a masterpiece of the future.

This restates a poetics of transformation and process, a poetics of measure – “what uses me is what I use” – and a poetics of traps, and inventive perception (Allsopp 2015). The importance of being available to adventurous drifting can be emphasized by an anonymous poem found on a boat, (in another video, a part from the project as well: “No still sea has made a skilful sailor.” The sensitive content is actually a mobile connection established by overlapping Chinese shadows of body fragments. The peaceful harmony of the garden is torn apart by the disruptive motions of the dancing body and the raw breeze. Techno sounds are acoustically overlapped with euphoria-based based moving images as the night life sparkles again on the island after the confinements. The spiral

patterns of dance improvisation resonate with the fluid stream of traveling snapshots. Thus, the multi-voicing and the multi-sounding “conjures up a vision not only of writing-as-voice but of the world made flesh”, “a vision that resonates with a choreographic poetics – a material poetics that articulates the body or the tongue” (Silverman, 1988), as an academic-based argument.

A similar process of life writing as self-fiction is developed in the third video, *Asie Sud Est, 2022*, from the trilogy, made in Phuket three month later. Web link: Vassileva & Ieong. 2022. *Asie Sud Est, 2022*, Thailand, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZQMCnZAZzw&t=5s>.

The experimental music is remixed with the street graffiti poem: “Connect”. This poem summarizes the woven shortcuts, because the structure of Phuket trilogy consists of three different visual phases – a night walk through the city of Patong in *Phuket 21*, the emergence of an arching body juxtaposed by shadows in a ghostly garden in *Phuket 21/Bangkok 22*, and a shaman’s flight through rising sunshine in *South East Asia 22*. It refers to new trends in aesthetic practice, which are inspired by research methods of inquiry: “Observe not only a field where sensing is foremost in the ensemble of the experiences, but the very transformation of this field” (Louppe 2004). This post-qualitative approach goes beyond mere immersion in an artwork or in a process of creation as a subjective journey, because it abolishes any hierarchy between the elements put into play. The focus is placed on the reciprocal transformation, which not only involves walking on a Phuket street, but also considers how the vibration of the steps and the hands or the dancing movement would affect the ocean waters.

Another video of the research creation project, Vassileva. 2018. *Turkish coffee, 2018* Turkey (Web link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77aVj9UncdI>), is also conceived as a city stroll, this time in Istanbul. It shows how fantasy is nourished by displacement. Beginning with the flight of arrival, it triggers new connectivity as new ways of “shuffling” what is on our daily mind:

Yet there are moments when the walls of the mind grow thin;
 when nothing is unabsorbed,
 and I could fancy that we might blow so vast a bubble
 that the sun might set and rise in it
 and we might take the blue of midday
 and the black of midnight
 and be cast off and escape from here and now

writes Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* (1931), quoted in *Turkish coffee, 2018*.

The “ghostly” aesthetics once again conducts us to another “real world” as it refers to Derrida’s concept of haunting experiences of alterity. In other words, “A metaphor can change the world”, as Levi-Strauss wrote, paraphrasing Rimbaud, quoted in “On Poetics and Performance”, *Performance Research* (2015).

The research creation project *Drifting/À la dérive* emphasizes the value of situated knowledge through Donna Haraway’s voice, as an active ecologist and feminist: “The facts are not optional, and the empirical strikes back” (Haraway 2017), quoted in Vassileva. 2018. *Drifting Space* (Web link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9M03XBP9JwQ&t=201s>).

This quote from Donna Haraway refers to the rare knowledge that can be gathered and accumulated during travelling. The vibrating hand gesture of a local shaman, directly filmed during a ritual by the author of the study, shows how performative language is actually “situated knowledge”. Donna Haraway and other cultural anthropologists have stated that: “Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating...” (Hejinian 2000). Donna Haraway defines that kind of knowledge as rare and specific literacy (or literacies in plural, when the fieldwork is conducted in multicultural dimension), which can be gained only through embodiment (2017). The fieldwork in the South islands of Thailand, showcases this knowledge.

Asie Sud Est 22 drifts through visual glimpses during a flight such as the night time lights, designing an arrow in the harbour of Dubai. There is no attempt to identify any city as a historical heritage site or tourist attraction. Mobile frontiers between light and darkness are constructed by the sliding motion of the dancing narrator. Passing through the garden shadows and the bright zones of the wild ocean transforms the dancing figure into “the scriptor – the embodied writer as choreographer, moving, forming and transforming” (Allsopp 2015). It is impossible to distinguish which elements are to be classified as “reality” or “imaginary” (Vassileva 2019).

Summarizing the evolution of the project as a sequence of journeys, *Phuket* trilogy conveys my artistic intention of drifting, both as life writing and as self-fiction, which is nothing more or less than the traveling essence, the vitality of “the sensuous and emotive contamination of one zone by another” (Deleuze 2005). Thus, the concept of visual and performative life writing as self study is maintained in the research creation project. A poem by Edgar Allan Poe (1849) points out the thin frontier between what can be defined as real or as imaginary:

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

Daydreaming as “drifting” in journeys of self-discovery through the content of the video abolishes the voluntary intention of achieving or providing. Riding the floating motion of the sensory stream on the edge of what appears and disappears is enough: “Poetry is made of language but is not a use of it” (Bruns 2005). It is this pleasure of the text, *The Pleasure of the Text*, according to Barthes (1975), which can bring “attention to a poetics of materiality – to the material conditions of both writing and movement” (Barthes 1975).

Life writing and self-fiction still in the making

“We should be able to train an anthropologist in all directions”, claims King (2019). Intercultural aesthetic studies are supposed to produce “entirely unexpected results and (make) the whole problem appear in an entirely new light” (King 2019). Self-inquiry through the writing process is a subjectivity check: “It is a common observation that we desire or act first, and then try to justify our desires and our actions” (King 2019). The anthropological standpoint, in regard to that, requires honesty and modesty. To put it in old fashioned words, “the proper way to compare the fickleness of the savage and that of the white, is to compare their behavior in undertakings which are equally important to each” (King 2019), such as dance training or the creation of a piece of art.

The unresolved issue of subjectivity versus objectivity, especially when life writing or self-fiction practices are at stake (Vassileva 2019), has been tackled by many life writing theorists: “But then came the kicker: what if our experiences and observations are themselves the problem?” (King 2019). The genuine aim of anthropology seems to be “not just to catalogue the many different ways of being human but also, in a way, to love them” (King 2019), therefore accepting the inevitable affective links too, which are part of the sensible artistic material. This research creation approach also allows “getting your hands dirty in the empirical data and building hypothesis out of what you could actually observe” (King 2019). It holds on to the importance for any creative or academic endeavour of considering that “the world is collection of potentialities, not givens” (King 2019).

The concept of drifting reveals the bewilderment of the soul. Taking the opportunity to travel leads to new editing procedures based on the fascination of discovery: “imagine a world in which everything you think of normal

becomes strange and unfamiliar” (King 2019). Thus, life writing on the road becomes a long story of differentiation and mingling. The in-and-out research positions result in establishing local relations (or sometimes nothing at all): “practices that might appear irrational – risking life and limb to give and receive decorated shells or disc beads – were in fact a part of a well-defined network of political authority, obligation, trust, and partnership” (King 2019). Inevitably the traveller is confronted also with denials: “Many persons who practice (conjuring or hoodoo) will tell you at first there that there is no such thing, and laugh at the ignorant who spend their money on ‘root’. They are terribly afraid, so they dissemble” (King 2019).

Academic research, based on creative processes, or the mere creativity within academic research, narrows down the “distance between homework and fieldwork” (King 2019). In search of “something vibrantly, chaotically, brilliantly alive [...] she was making data, not just gleaning it” (King 2019). The openness and the generosity experienced during life writing makes work self-fiction, inclusive of anything and anywhere – “I have a heart with room for every joy” (King 2019).

ANNEXES

The Silky Road, Revisited

This sequence of journeys in South East Asia, featuring Laos, Thailand, and Bali, is part of my ongoing research into dance gestures originating from local somatic work, blended with elements of different dance training and local environments.

Vassileva Biliana. 2019. *Ko Tao, 2019* Thailand
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mYuZmFc45Y>.

This video features the intimate and introspective voice of American photographer Francesca Woodman.

You cannot see me
from where I look at myself.

It broadens the perspective of what performance is, or could be: “Performance now runs through all art forms (...) their origins take in all times and all places” (Rothenberg 1981). It was co-edited with Victoria Donnet and features the music *852 Hz AWAKEN Crystal Clear Intuition* by *Meditative Mind*.

Vassileva Biliana. 2019. *Bali Luwak*, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTqoQ2nDCXk&t=12s>, displays fantastic creatures and phantoms which lead the storytelling. I trained as a traditional Balinese dancer, which was a source of inspiration for the movement fragments. The narrative consists of specific characters and events. These imaginary figures are embodied through glimpses of dance improvisation:

Gods of living water
Let down their hair
And now you must follow
A craving for shadows. (Apollinaire 1995)

An academic and poetic research-based quote describes how mixing all these traditional and contemporary sources for creativity produces a sophisticated process of alertness:

a silent tongue sounding/
an eye scanning/
polyphonic skin of event/
through gesture and posture. (Cobbing 1999)

The video was co-edited with Victoria Donnet and uses Guillaume Tiger's original music *Ondée*².

Vassileva Biliana. 2019. *Bangkok, 2019*, Thailand
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcKrjz1Ct4&t=4s>

The video uses original music by Guillaume Tiger. Each movement is associated with a sound from urban field recordings in Bangkok. The dancing body is confronted with closed space. This requires constant "push and pull" efforts while gliding between the surfaces of the wall. Despite the muscles' tone resistance, the motion is fluid, as the poem underlines:

Rivers and shores
Are under my skin
Always inside...

Many sources that inspired and nurtured the improvisation continuum are evoked (but not declared openly) by a research statement referencing contemporary dance academic Laurence Louppe:

² I have performed this piece twice with the composer: in the Performance Festival *Pile ou Frasque*, organized by Le Regard du Cygne/Le Générateur, March 2019, Paris; and in a trans-disciplinary performance evening at the Arts Center Tiasci, *Musiques du monde*, May 2019, Paris. Vassileva Biliana, Tiger Guillaume. 2019 *InFlux*. Paris: Isothesis.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJBcEQiMIKw>.

As Louppe points out, there are many aspects of contemporary dance processes that are 'Invisible', as they take place in regions 'upstream' of what is usually recognized as visible. *On Poetics and Performance*, 2015.

Vassileva Biliana. 2020. *Laos, 2020*, Luang Prabang, Laos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwO1-9WREf4>. In this video, the mountain wilderness of Laos has inspired erratic and speedy improvised movements. However, they stay precise at their edges. Science fiction writer Terry Pratchett is quoted:

Light thinks it travels faster than anything but it is wrong.
No matter how fast light travels,
it finds the darkness has always got there first,
and is waiting for it.

The meeting point of light and darkness naturally brings "shadow" aesthetics and gloomy ambience, reminiscent of "fantasmata" performances. The latter were created in the Middle Ages by special light effects in streets during nighttime festivals to make visible the parallel existence (to that of human beings) of the fantastic creatures that everybody believed in at the time. Those who:

...come from a place other
than the one where legitimated conducts of thought and knowledge
usually recognize themselves (Gardner, 2009, quoted in *Performance Research*,
On Poetics and Performance)

Vassileva Biliana. 2020. *Mekong, 2020*, Vientiane, Laos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk1N9hsf2fM>. This video was also made in Laos. It was shot by the riverside of Mekong and follows the slow motion of the river's heavy, dense waters. The improvisation blends layers of different sensory memories: western adages and local folk dance training in Luang Prabang. Its gesture rhetoric unweaves dreamy streams of consciousness, "like amber, musk and frankincense and myrrh, that sing the soul's and senses' ecstasy" (Baudelaire, "Echoes" in *The Flowers of Evil*); or, in more academic terms, "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception", in a flow of kinesthetic associations (Olson, quoted in *On Poetics and Performance*, *Performance Research*, vol. 20.).

Vassileva Biliana. 2020. *Klong, 2020*, Thailand

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlblaxP8FOQ&t=32s>. This improvisation is also inspired by the presence and movement of fluids, this time involving those of Klong Banglumphu in Thailand. Its motion reveals the outcome of somatic surrender to sensory “night dreaming”:

and into the ocean I go
to lose my mind
and find my soul.

The visual setting investigates Asian concepts of space as a delicate balance between emptiness and abundance, which is to say, the empty parts underline the details of the “filled in” apparitions.

Michel Foucault, quoted in *On Poetics and Performance*, Performance Research, vol 20, disguises the author beneath the self-fiction writing similarly: “*écriture* creates a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.”

Vassileva Biliana. 2020. *Bali Rain, 2020*, Bali, Indonesia:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLUyKQ9YupA>. *Bali Rain* was shot in the rice fields of Ubud, Bali. The images reveal the immediacy of powerful tropical sensations and instant sensory and emotional soft openings:

In the living morning
I wanted to be myself.
Heart.
And at the fall of evening
I wanted to be my voice.
Nightingale.
(*Ditty of First Desire*, Federico García Lorca, Selected Verse)

The research resources have natural and cultural origins. Some of them are stimuli for sensitive oblivion:

“givens” that converge in a logic of sensations
are “sensations with intensities: colored, textured,
flavoured, shaped, accumulated, coagulated
(Slack, paraphrase of *Deleuze*, in *On Poetics and Performance*, Performance Research, vol. 20).

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Figure 1. Screenshot *Phuket 2021*. ©Biliana Vassileva (dancer) & Pierre Jeong (video editor)

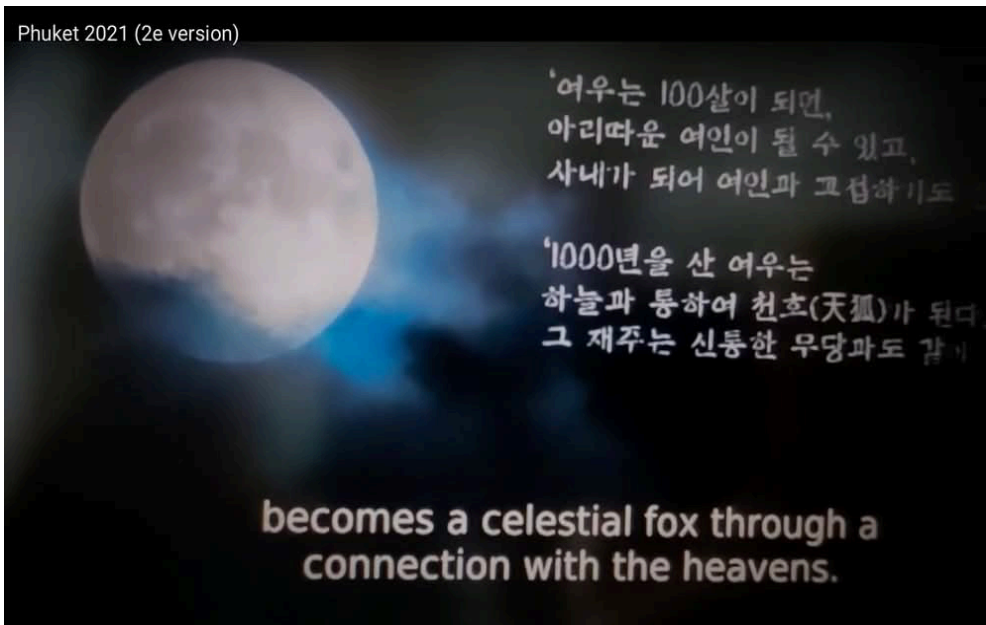


Figure 2. Screenshot *Phuket 2021*. ©Biliana Vassileva (dancer) & Pierre Jeong (video editor)



Figure 3. Screenshot *Phuket 2021*. ©Biliana Vassileva (dancer) & Pierre Jeong (video editor)