

Read to Me: a psychometric collaboration with objects

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These photographs form part of a project 'Read to Me', which will culminate in an editioned artist's book in 2018. My fascination with psychic reading was piqued during a month spent at Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) in Rochester, NY, USA in 2002. It was there that I read about the history of the (now discredited) [Fox Sisters](#), who launched their careers as spirit mediums on 14th November 1849, at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester. As I sat at the table reading in the archive at VSW, I imagined that the Fox Sisters would have been at a similar table in a similar large mansion house over 150 years ago, thrilling their audiences with their tales and spirit encounters.

Since my time at VSW, I have been working with literary sources through an ongoing series of artists' books 'Flowers in Hotel Rooms' which pays tribute to the novels I read when travelling. The series was inspired by Richard Brautigan's novel, *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*, where a character grows flowers by candlelight in her hovel of a hotel room. Sometimes my tributes include small, performative acts such as eating the same food as a character in the novel, or staying one time in a room numbered 451, so I could make a complicated tribute to Ray Bradbury; burning a paper flower for Guy Montag (whilst reading Edgar Allen Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*).

In order to combine my love of reading novels with a creative project I decided to find my own 'reader', someone to collaborate with on an endeavour to communicate ideas, traces or messages through material objects. What I was looking for was a psychometric reader. Psychometry is a form of spiritualist object reading; it is believed that a psychometric reader has the ability to receive information spiritually through physical contact with material objects. For example, a photograph may be held in order for the 'reader' to make contact with or pass on information or messages about/from the person depicted in the image.

The thought of collaborating by reading novels and somehow relaying or transmitting that information through another medium as the Fox Sisters claimed to be able to do, stayed with me. It was an exciting prospect, to perhaps find someone I could 'read' to through a material object, who might potentially be able to then 'read' those objects back to me. Whether it would be a successful endeavour or not, I considered the performative aspect of the exercise would be an interesting experiment that I could certainly develop as an artwork.

Finding a psychometric reader doesn't just happen overnight, I considered it carefully for quite a few years, searching on and off for someone to work with who would be honest and also considerate of the objects and the idea. There were too many choices being advertised online and no-one I looked at seemed right. I wasn't looking for messages from loved ones or to change my outlook on life, what I needed was an empathetic collaborator.

This was eventually organised to my delight in autumn 2017. I was fortunate in mentioning the idea to a friend in the summer who recommended a friend of hers - a practicing psychometric reader in The Netherlands. After contacting her, she agreed to undertake the work and was willing to help with the experiment as a challenge not only to her physical reading process, but also in how her capture of the objects' messages would be translated in language, passing from Dutch into English.

I purchased the objects pictured here from second hand shops around the UK and Europe, without touching them (I wore gloves or chose ready-wrapped items). I also cleaned them to remove any other residue of human interaction. Two objects in the group were used as controls; each were personal items belonging to me; one washed clean of any human traces, the other touched often, as I was curious to see if this would interfere with or muddle

the message I was attempting to transfer. It did, but what I learned from that, allowed me to measure and understand how successful the rest of the experiment would be.

For the experiment itself, I read each of the objects a short story, fairy tale, or chapter from a book that I felt they could relate to. This idea can also be considered in part, as a homage to the Norwegian artist [Kurt Johannessen](#) who read stories about trolls to selected stones around the Finse area in Norway ([Steinar, 2002](#)).

The stories I read to my chosen objects ranged from historic novels: *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë (1847), to modern literature *All for Nothing* by Walter Kempowski (2015), a short story by China Miéville from his collection *Three Moments of an Explosion* (2015), and so on. For example – to the brooch of violets I read part of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and believe it was a success. *Wuthering Heights* worked very well too.

The remnants of the stories transmitted from me to these objects, and then to my 'reader' who relayed them back to me, have been edited into short captions/statements for this photo essay. The artist's book will be produced during a residency at the [London Centre for Book Arts](#) this summer, 2018.

Works cited:

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