(4120 words)

Clare Johnson

Searching for Lauren Berlant: reflections on writing, temporality and loss

University of the West of England

Abstract:

This article reflects on the difficulties of writing with/alongside creative practice during periods of lockdown endured as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It follows my search for insight in the work of Lauren Berlant and desire to make sense of the claustrophobic intensity of that time through their writing on attachment, precarity and 'cruel optimism'. In reflecting on the failure to write, this article journeys through temporal rhythms, critiques of neoliberalism, temporalities of care, and unending lists to argue for the importance of hidden work in writing and/as ordinary life.

Keywords: attachment, time, precarity, lockdown, writing, cruel optimism

The workshops that ignited this project on Ways of Writing necessarily took place online as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to find ways to open out our thinking about what it is to write about/with/alongside creative practice despite the limitations imposed on cultural activity during periods of lockdown. Most of us arrived at the workshops having been teaching Visual Culture online for an academic year. Within the rectangular iridescent space of the laptop screen we taught students

about writing, offered ‘shut up and write-style’ sessions to give permission for the activity of writing, and reflected on the circumstances in which our students were attempting to write, often with no space other than their bedroom in which to work and with inadequate bandwidth to sustain the needs of the household.

Like many colleagues, I had been supporting the writing of others, but had not managed to write anything myself. As a result, the workshops for the WoW project felt enriching and generous. They provided a space to consider different modes of writing about creative practice in the context of the pandemic, a context that was as extraordinary as it was brutal. In particular, the loss of physical proximity to others felt unbearable at times. Yet there we were, on Collaborate, trying to recreate some much-needed conviviality and social glue to sustain our fascination with unusual forms of writing about creative practice in the context of Visual Culture pedagogy. In what follows I reflect on the difficulties of writing during periods of lockdown, specifically how to gain a broader outlook at a time of claustrophobic intensity.

1. What would Lauren Berlant say?

In the summer of 2021, I was searching online for literary scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s writing on the COVID-19 pandemic. I felt sure they must have written something about this, perhaps an entry on their ‘feel tank’ blog or a commentary piece discussing nationhood in relation to fear of contagion. Berlant is one of my go-to writers when I am struggling to make sense of the world, and I wanted to know what they had written about this strange collective experience of lockdown. It is not only a question about what they were writing but how they were

thinking. This is what I find so utterly brilliant about Berlant's work. They have the ability to transcend the conventions of academic work on subjects as wide-ranging as citizenship, African-American literature, migration and psychoanalysis, by offering a different framework for thought. It is a generous form of work, which both respects and challenges more conventional forms of academic writing in its relation not only to thinking but also to feeling. To think through writing, rather than understand it as the reporting of something otherwise fully formed, is prevalent in some aspects of visual culture pedagogy, but to *feel* our way into it is a different proposition. I wondered how the pandemic was being experienced by someone who has spent so much time considering affect, sentimentality and public intimacy, particularly given that between 2019-2021 intimacy was so severely constrained and there was genuine fear about the consequences of touch. At a time when the parameters of working life were being urgently redrawn the insights of an academic who can operate within an institutional context, but without feeling bound by its norms, felt more prescient than ever.

At the time I had some ideas for a piece of work on maintenance, care, and temporalities of work during lockdown, but had not managed to put pen to paper. Somewhat ironically, the writing I wanted to do about forms of temporality such as interruption, repetition and ongoingness had been continually interrupted by the overlapping demands of work, childcare and household maintenance during the pandemic. Conceptual thinking is all well and good, but we had to eat. This experience was being replicated across academia. Women were disproportionately affected as submissions to peer-reviewed journals by researchers identifying as

women fell dramatically during 2019-2020, but submissions from male colleagues did not decline and in some cases increased (Fazackerley 2020).

I was interested in revisiting the work of New York-based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. I wanted to think with/alongside Ukeles' 'maintenance work', which included her work as artist in residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation. Works such as *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979-80), an 11-month commitment during which the artist visited crews of sanitation workers to thank them for keeping New York City alive and shake their hands, resonated with contemporary concerns about practices of care (Steinhauer 2017). However, the article had not progressed past a series of notes, false starts and good intentions. This had everything to do with a clash of temporal rhythms. The durational intensity required for sustained writing was incompatible with the fragmented maintenance time of lockdown for those with caring responsibilities. This time of maintenance and care (of loved ones, students, and the rituals of everyday life) resonated with the idea of ongoingness, which is a temporal experience examined in different ways by Berlant's critique of neoliberalism and Ukeles' demonstration of respect for sanitation workers. To pay attention to ongoingness is to value forms of time that are rarely celebrated in neoliberal cultures. It is to notice the durational and sometimes monotonous time spent facilitating the activities of everyday life.

Writing about practices of care that take time, Lisa Baraitser has argued persuasively for the radical potential of forms of time that are considered economically unproductive such as repeating, staying, enduring, maintaining and waiting

(Baraitser 2017). In a highly unusual turn of events, these modes of temporality were made visible during lockdown and understood as not only productive but essential to the continuity of life. However, the weekly ‘clap for carers’ campaign, in which people came out of their houses at 8pm on a Thursday evening to show their appreciation for NHS and key workers, made clear that maintenance could be celebrated as long as it was understood as heroic and not ordinary. Maintenance and care work was understood as essential in the context of a crisis, which served to highlight its utter invisibility at other times. Unlike the published journal article, which can be understood as economically productive through endorsing mechanisms such as the UK government’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), the everyday unheroic maintenance work of lockdown was not celebrated. It melted into the continuum of life, into a sense of uneventful ordinary existence that keeps on going as if under its own steam. Berlant’s political commitment to noticing the character of ordinary life felt like an important aid in navigating this strange time, along with the place of writing and caring within it.

I was first introduced to Berlant’s work in 2003 when I was a doctoral student at Lancaster University in the UK. Berlant visited the Faculty of Social Science as a Leverhulme Visiting Professor to do a series of events including a public conversation with the psychoanalyst and writer Susie Orbach on ‘Women and their Appetites’. Their ideas about heteronormativity, affect attachment and precarity had gained traction within academia and felt important to the concerns of students within what was then the Institute for Women’s Studies at Lancaster University. It was a vibrant inter-disciplinary environment in which what was referred to as the ‘turn towards affect’ reframed the methodological landscape and presented a challenge to

those of us invested in textual analysis of visual artefacts. Having studied Visual Culture at a time when the post-structuralist critique of representation was foregrounded, the alterity of Berlant's thinking about attachment felt both challenging and liberating. Their work felt important to what I was doing in ways that I was unable to articulate at the time, but were crucial to my understanding of my own concerns in academia and in life. I was not alone in this. In her reflections on Berlant's work Maggie Doherty writes, 'I think everything I write is influenced by Berlant's thinking. Their work taught me to look closely at the ways people attach themselves to objects (lovers, nations), and to look too at the material conditions from which affect and attachment spring' (Doherty, 2021).

All of this led me to be searching for Berlant's thoughts about the idea of attachment in the reality of the pandemic: how this was unevenly experienced, how the mandated loss of touch elicited other forms of attachment such as 'window waves' and Zoom calls, and how the airborne virus rendered ineffectual any attempt at containment along national borders, all phenomenon that resonate with Berlant's work. To my horror where I had hoped to find analysis and critique, I found obituaries and reflections. Berlant had died in June 2021 of a rare form of cancer.

2. Attachment, wellbeing and precarity

The struggles of attachment as an indicator of wellbeing experienced during lockdown looped me back to Berlant's work, but this time with an intense feeling of loss. At this point in the pandemic loss was ever-present in the experiences of so many who lost loved ones to COVID and were unable to say goodbye or be with

their loved ones at the end of their lives. Loss was also represented in daily briefings about the numbers of deaths and infections recorded. The metrics of loss became unfathomable as the enormity of the public loss – of loved ones, of the life we thought we knew, of the patterns of everyday life – became apparent. I did not know Berlant, but like many others felt the loss of their presence as a critical thinker at a time when we needed it most. What an enormous loss to never know what a scholar who had written so insightfully on social proximity and precarity had to say about the fraying social fabric induced by the pandemic.

In Visual Culture teaching at the University of the West of England (UWE) we had seen an increasing level of interest in issues of attachment to objects and wellbeing, which, while predating the pandemic, gained traction and urgency during periods of enforced separation from each other and from the experience of university life. During the autumn of 2021, in our second year of teaching online, I was preparing teaching materials for a webinar on the topic of wellbeing and creative practice. The purpose was to engage students in a discussion about the histories, theories, literature and visual practices underpinning their interests in self-selected topics as diverse as the use of plants in interior spaces during lockdown, hospital art, and distorted time perception and memory in relation to COVID-19.

A few months earlier, during the third lockdown to be endured in the UK, I had collaborated with Keiko Higashi, engagement producer at the Arnolfini contemporary art gallery in Bristol, to produce a film of short vox pops on the concept of wellbeing, which I used as a teaching resource. We had asked artists and academics drawn from different disciplines to each film a five-minute vox pop on wellbeing from the

point of view of their discipline and in the context of the health and wellbeing exhibitions that were on show at Arnolfini from autumn 2020 to spring 2021, namely ‘A Picture of Health’ and ‘Jo Spence: from fairytales to phototherapy’ (VCRG 2021, Arnolfini 2021). The range of disciplines represented included photography, appearance studies, psychology, visual culture, performance art, and arts facilitation. Some of the contributors articulated a much-needed critique of the commodification of wellbeing, including artists Racquel Messeger and Rosy Martin and visual culture specialist Clair Schwarz (see ‘Iris in, Iris Out: Reflections on the production, exhibition, and viewing of a bisected-eyeball hand-puppet’ in this issue for Schwarz’s reflections on her contribution). Their comments pointed to the ways in which the concept of ‘wellbeing’ or ‘wellness’ has been co-opted by neoliberal forms of capitalism in which subjects are rendered individually responsible for structural inequities.

This critique of the ‘wellness industry’ resonated with Berlant’s brilliant book *Cruel Optimism,* in which she argues that our attachment to the promise of the good life is an obstacle to our ability to flourish (Berlant 2011). This is to evoke an imagined future such as the notion of a ‘better life’, better than the one presently experienced, as a fantasy that is ideologically produced and perpetuated at the expense of the fulfilment and contentedness of the very people it purports to serve. However, it is impossible to feel content if our attachments to the upwardly-mobile aspirations that promise to secure this feeling, such as personalised self-care, stability at work and fulfilling personal relationships, remain continually out of reach. It is an attachment to a dream even though we know we are likely to be disappointed. *Cruel Optimism* won, amongst other awards, the Rene Wallek Prize of the American Comparative

Literature Association and became a highly influential book. Berlant was writing in the context of American citizenship in the wake of the US economic recession of 2007-2009 when she asked, 'Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?' (Berlant 2011: 2). Our attachment to some of these fantasies was severely stretched during the pandemic as the promise of a good life felt increasingly fragile.

Berlant reminds us of the inequity built into cruel optimism, which places responsibility firmly on the individual to improve their own lives and disregards the structural inequalities that underpin such a commodified version of the good life. Cruel optimism is about hope that sustains in the face of precarity, the enduring feeling amongst Americans and Europeans that upward mobility, job security and 'durable intimacy' are realistic aspirations despite evidence that neoliberal societies cannot make good on such promises even if you 'do the right thing'. Writing for the New Yorker, Hua Hsu explains the relationship between hope and precarity in Berlant's thinking:

> We like to imagine that our life follows some kind of trajectory, like the plot of a novel, and that by recognizing its arc we might, in turn, become its author. But often what we feel instead is a sense of precariousness – a gut-level suspicion that hard work, thrift, and following the rules won't give us control over the story, much less guarantee a happy ending. For all

> that, we keep on hoping, and that persuades us to keep on living. (Hsu 2019)

In my search for Berlant's writing about the pandemic and the subsequent realisation that I would not find any (another form of cruel optimism), I was led via obituaries to Berlant's previous work on attachment, hope and precarity. Despite being written about a different moment in time and in a different cultural context, it speaks volumes about the experience of trying to write about creative practice during lockdown. It alerted me to the privilege afforded to those of us who could work from the relative safety of home as well as the spatial inequalities that separated the experience of the crisis along lines of class, economic dependency and material conditions of daily life. Above all, it spoke to this moment in time, characterised by fear of contagion and the realisation that our attachment to others, including objects, could not only be an obstacle to our wellbeing but cause us immense harm.

3. Writing and time

What started as a search for Berlant's thoughts about the pandemic had turned into a rhizomatic meandering through obituaries and reflections on their life and work. It led me to a series of short pieces of writing on and by Berlant. On Twitter there were countless tributes posted, for example 'Every piece of writing I read by Lauren Berlant changed my life, with every repeated read. Rest In Peace' (@t1fanny4scale) and "Thank you, Lauren Berlant, for showing us a way" (@mjmimages). Writing for the *New York Times,* Alex Traub focussed on the significance of the concept of cruel

optimism, the way in which it 'broke out of the confines of academic theory and became a device for understanding a colorful array of disappointments' (Traub 2021). In the *Chicago Tribune,* an obituary by Bob Goldsborough quoted the political philosopher Michael Hardt on the affectual appeal of Berlant's work, which transcended the boundary between academia and everyday life: 'Lauren's work is important for so many inside and outside the university because she (was) able to analyze politics not in terms of people's interests but their hopes, fears, dreams, and desires, which are complicated and often contradictory' (Hardt in Goldsborough 2021). Time and again, commentators reflected on Berlant's ability to override the boundaries between academia and everyday life.

The search through obituaries led me to the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart and a book co-authored with Berlant in 2019 called *The Hundreds*. In a series of poems, Berlant and Stewart restrict themselves to 100 words, or multiples of 100 words, for each piece. It is a poetics exercise, which breaks with familiar academic protocols in both its form and content and addresses what the authors refer to as the 'new ordinary' (Berlant and Stewart 2019: ix). With few clues as to how to make sense of the writings and no explanatory introduction to orientate the reader, *The Hundreds* is a magical wandering into different forms of writing, affect, and ways of inhabiting the world. We are invited to read anew and attend to that which often passes without comment, in other words, that which appears ordinary: 'Ordinaries appear through encounters with the world, but encounters are not events of knowing, units of anything, revelations of realness, or facts. Sometimes they stage a high-intensity tableau of the way things are or could become' (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 5).

The brevity of these poetic exercises speaks to the fragmented time of lockdown as it was experienced by many, predominantly women, with caring responsibilities. In one of the hundreds called ‘Writing, Life’, the authors speculate on how to feel your way into writing through the fabric of everyday life:

> Making money, making dinner, taking care of people and stupid shit, getting sick or getting well, getting into and out of what presented, I ended up with a writer’s life. I learned to write in thirty-minute episodes on my frail mother’s dining room table with a three-year-old playing with old plastic toys underfoot. (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 10)

This was written before COVID-19 had taken hold, yet it feels strikingly familiar when read through the lens of the pandemic. On almost every day during lockdown, I wrote a list of the activities that needed to be completed that day. They included a combination of work, childcare and household tasks: curriculum meeting, complete home learning tasks with my daughter, help her to do a jigsaw puzzle, make scrambled eggs, read a doctoral student’s methodology chapter, make sure my daughter is online for the daily Zoom call with her classmates, update my appraisal form, go for a walk, make dinner, do bedtime, call my sister, catch up with emails. The domestic/familial and academic/professional were almost indistinguishable in the continuum of everyday life experienced as a series of overlapping segments. It is never as simple as compartmentalising into boxes of discrete skills and mindsets, hard as that is. The boxes are more like mirrored polyhedrons, which reflect the

affective complexity of day-to-day life back at you in such a way that you are always in more than one space at any one time.

Reading *The Hundreds* took me back to the countless lists I made during lockdown in multiple attempts to organise my time (as if it were my own). If only I was better at time management, I would find time to write. However, when I look back at them now the lists read more like collections of stuff to think with rather than anything that could be achieved and ticked off in linear fashion. They appear productive of a way of thinking rather than a failure to write, but only because I have returned to them in the light of Berlant and Stewart's innovative approach to indexing and referencing *The Hundreds.* Instead of including one definitive index, the authors invited Andrew Causey, Susan Lepselter, Fred Moten and Stephen Muecke to each contribute their own indexing contribution, which is followed by Berlant and Stewart's own version of a reference list called 'Some Things We Thought With'. The latter includes entries such as:

> Immersions – unintended, serial, unnoticed.
>
> Impeckable Aviaries. Johnson City, Texas.
>
> Ingold, Tim. 2015. *The Life of Lines.* London: Routledge.
>
> Instagram.
>
> "Jack and the Beanstalk"
>
> Jackalope Coffee & Tea House. 755 W. 32nd St., Chicago, IL 60616.
>
> Storefront.
>
> (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 164)

Paying attention to the ordinary and experiential alongside that which is usually considered academic or scholarly makes more sense of the confusing experience of trying to write in periods of lockdown. Here there is no attempt to move beyond the interruptions or tangents, but to incorporate them into a different form of writing. I wish I had not thrown away so many of the to-do lists I wrote, but developed them as a form of fragmented writing that speaks of the context in which it was written.

Even in the gaping void left by their absence, Berlant's work on the precarity of life offers an insightful framework for thinking about trying (and failing) to write during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a correlation between Berlant's arguments about attachment in the face of precarity and the experience of trying to write in lockdown, which was infused with the temporalities of fragmentation, interruption, maintenance and care. The futurity of cruel optimism that promises a better life only for this to be thwarted by our desire for it, the ongoingness of this hope, and the brevity of the hundred-word thought experiment chime with the uncelebrated temporalities of care, which are present at all times, but exaggerated during periods of lockdown. The reflection on attempting to write during COVID that I was searching for was there all the time, hiding in plain sight in Berlant's previous work. I still haven't written the article on Ukeles' maintenance art in the context of the pandemic, but I am forever grateful to Berlant for helping me to navigate the reasons why.

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Contributor details

Clare Johnson is Associate Professor (Art & Design) at the University of the West of England where she teaches Visual Culture. Her primary research interests are in feminist art history, and maternal representations in art and popular culture. She has published on the work of Tracey Emin, Vanessa Beecroft, Adrian Howells, Eleanor Antin, Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramovic, Eti Wade and Lena

Simic amongst others. Clare is author of *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013) and is on the editorial board for the *Journal of Gender Studies*.