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## ‘Berthing Bone’: A poem

### Keywords

sculpture  
kinaesthesia  
language  
film  
poetry  
performance

### Abstract

*Berthing Bone (Gray, 2014) is a poem composed during the devising, filming and editing of an artists’ moving image film. Conceived as a series of choreographed sculptures for the hands, the film performs a close-reading of the hand. Throughout the process of filming and post-production, a poetic text was written with the intent of performing an equally close, specifically kinaesthetic reading of the hand. During the exhibition of the film, the poem was performed live, alongside the screening. In the following artists’ pages, the poem is transferred from the mouth to the page, and is accompanied by four stills from the Berthing Bone film. The reader is invited to read the poem aloud.*

*Berthing Bone* is a poem written in the midst of a choreographic process, towards the devising, filming and editing of an artists’ moving image film of the same name. During a residency at *Yorkshire Sculpture Park* in October 2013, the film *Berthing Bone* (Gray, 2014) was conceived as a series of performed sculptures for the hands. The residency was an invitation to respond to the parks Open Air sculptures, of which there are over 100 sited within a vast 500-acre rural landscape. The

monumental scale of many of the sculptures and the sheer breadth of the park provoked a sense of physical and conceptual overwhelm. This sense of dissociation was compounded by the stature afforded male sculptors working within a twentieth century, British abstract modernist vernacular, in for example, works by Antony Caro, Henry Moore and their contemporary inheritors, David Nash, and, Antony Gormley – those for whom the park is arguably most well-known, but with whom I found it hardest to identify.

Many of these works evoke the human body, and despite their static nature, there is a tension between animate and inanimate states such that the sculptures imply an imminent sense of movement. However, in my embodied experience of these sculptures, the hard materials from which these works are rendered, such as steel, wood and bronze, undermined the sensuous, motile and kinaesthetic dynamics of a lived (and indeed living) body. In *Berthing Bone*, my approach to sculpting the body through the lens of film as a sculptural medium, was to adopt a rather more tactile approach.

Through choreographic and moving image techniques of slowness, stillness and close-proximity, both camera and my own performance attempt an anatomical study of the hand. Through this practice of close-up, one is reminded of the hand as a sculptor's tool, but moreover, is asked to consider the sculptural, sentient quality of a hands anatomy. Further, I sought to echo practices in sculpture whereby anatomical features are abstracted from the whole, to conduct technical studies of specific body parts. The resulting work is a long-form film, composed of four frames, each frame depicting a moving anatomical study; a performance-sculpture for the hands. The title *Berthing Bone*, with reference to the term 'berth', denotes a place whereby a transitory vessel (such as a boat or ship) is afforded temporary rest. In the films 'moving-stills' therefore, the hands become similar vessels. Whilst striving to rest in the berth of the frame, the bones of the hands still flicker on the cusp of movement.

Sensitive to the feeling of objectification produced by the camera, I invited camera operator Ollie to hold the camera in his own hands. Further, rather than use the zoom, or auto-focus functions on the camera, close-up was effected by directing Ollie to stand close to my body. By removing the stable berth of the tripod and the mechanising functions of technology, a rather more 'hand-held' quality is effected. This evidences the way in which both pairs of hands, mine and Ollie's, sculpted the pensive quality of the film, by virtue of our muscular exertion and the nervous tension of close-proximity.

This strategy of zooming in and scaling down was conceived as an intervention in the parks monumental sculptures and landscape. Paradoxically, however, within the landscape of the film, my hands inhabit most of the frame. As such, their scale is disproportionately large in relation to the dimensions of the screen. Furthermore, when exhibited at Bloc Projects (Sheffield) in May 2014, the film was projected at maximum ratio. Here, the film, and indeed the hands, spanned the 9m × 5m landscape of the gallery wall. In combination, the hands become monumental, overpowering an

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audience who viewed the film in close-proximity to the projection, whilst sitting or reclining on bean-bags on the floor.

Whilst the film was edited to 40 minutes for this initial screening, throughout the remainder of the exhibition, the film was screened on a continuous loop with no specified duration. As such, by having no beginning or end, the potentially 'endless' timeframe of the work exceeded an audience's capacity to experience it in full. However, at the same time as these temporal and spatial devices effect an ungraspable scale, my fleshy, humble hand preserves the tactility and human scale oft lost in grandiose monumental sculpture. *Berthing Bone* thus affirms a more fragile monumentality, whereby the rather more un-monumental qualities of smallness, softness, hesitation and intimacy are deemed virtuous, which is to say, significant too.

In dialogue with the film, throughout the process of filming and post-production, a poetic text was composed from numerous sources, including stream-of-consciousness texts scribed post-filming, and anatomical reference books on the hand. My approach to writing echoed my approach to filming, zooming in on specific kinaesthetic sensations, intimate reflections and acute anatomical detail. When the film was exhibited, the poem was performed live alongside the screening. As a companion to the film, the poem and my live reading of it is critical. Standing beside the film, the height of my body is less than twice the size of my projected hands. Yet, my live presence brings the film back to a human scale. In this way, my otherwise disembodied hands – first, for being cut off from my body, and second, for being projected – are re-embodied. As my hands hold the paper on which the poem is printed, they nervously shake. As such, the audience is reminded that it is these same hands that tremble in the film, and that *this* body belongs to *those* hands.

By recuperating the physical, and indeed, personal experience of performing the hand, the poem evokes a fourth, embodied dimension of experience, one that is arguably difficult to grasp in three-dimensional image. Articulating kinaesthetic experience via words, be it on the page or in the mouth, is, however, equally challenging. Object-tethered language, perhaps like sculptural objects, too often betrays the kinaesthetic dimension of movement. Rather than pit words against the languaging of kinaesthetic experience, by reading the poem live simultaneously with the film, the symbiotic, 'back-and-forth' relation between language and movement was performed.

The following artists' pages are designed to perform the very same 'back-and-forth', symbiotic relationship between poem and image as in the live reading and screening. Accompanied by four film stills from *Berthing Bone*, the poem, like the image, performs a close study of the hand. Like hands, the pages are deliberately composed in pairs of either text or image. Each time the reader turns a page, they are presented with two pages of text, followed by two pages of image. Given that text and image seemingly reside on separate pages, the relationship between the two might be read as parsed. On the contrary, text and image share a close relationship, indeed they constitute one side of the same page. Pages, therefore, turn like the hand. To read the palm, we must turn the back of the

hand, to read the text, we turn to the underside of the image. Inseparable, therefore, palm and back of hand, text and image, coexist as two sides of the same thing.

Like the duet between camera operator and performer, the 'back and forth' relation between my own hands and those of the reader is performed in the act of page turning; the sculptural qualities of the reader's hands, in the sentient act of reading, are brought into focus. Echoing this, the poem meditates on the 'back-and-forth', symbiotic relation between language and movement, whereby language plays a hand in sculpting kinaesthetic experience, just as kinaesthetic experience plays a hand in sculpting language. In these pages, I place the kinaesthetic experience of the poem in the reader's hands, or perhaps, the reader's mouth. With an invitation to speak the poem aloud, one is encouraged to sculpt the words through a re-performance of the poem.



## The Terminal Segment of Free Upper Limbs

With the Latin the Anglo-Saxon shares her hand  
Forth they bring sense toward  
eye, nose, ear, and, mouth

A primitive power of grasping with prehensile hands,  
delivered dread to her possessor's attention

Theyprehend,  
                    they flay hold,  
                                    they seize

Due to their language over her sense hand,  
it became necessary to develop  
a terminal segment

A free upper limb

## **A Small Brace for Lateral Support**

Ulna is divisible into a body and two extremities

The upper of which is for great thickness and strength

The lower, diminished in size, is excluded by interposition,  
which is meaning – a projection onto a bone

The first is a larger eminence

bent forward at a summit so as to present prominent lip,

which is received, by the second,

which is,

a triangular project,

Whose ossification is considerable strength

Behind and a little lateralward, narrow and oblong,  
the Semilunar and Radial notches are large and lesser suppressions – respectively

The head of Ulna, the medial, narrower and more projecting,  
is now a non-articular eminence

By a depression for the attachment of the apex,  
and by a brace by a shallow groove



*Figure 1: Film Still 1, Berthing Bone, 2014. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Copyright Victoria Gray.*



*Figure 2: Film Still 2, Berthing Bone, 2014. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Copyright Victoria Gray.*

## A Gliding Surface of Irregular Rotation

Eight irregular shapes wrist collectively,  
they call Carpals for bones. Scaphoid,  
being the largest, with name from a fancied resemblance to a boat –  
or, its being boat shaped

The Lunate, like a half-moon, is 'distinguished' by its deep  
concavity,  
and, crescentic outline; its crescent-moon-ness

By its pyramidal shape, the third is a triangular bone which brings with it,  
'a distinctiveness.' But,  
by a small size makes known one singular articular facet – its pea shape

The Greater Multangular, distinguishes for her,  
a deep grooved volar surface

Whilst,  
the largest of the carp occupies the centre,  
which she finds not new

For, say Carpel for Carpal and language hands us a flower's womb  
A stigma not wrested from her by a fist, or a net, or a clasp

The surfaces glide slightly over each other, allowing three-dimensional movement  
All can be flexed and extended, moved,  
from side to side

But rotation is limited

## **A Concave Separated by a Shallow Groove**

The cross shaft with staff, stake and rod spoke of wheel  
Made her circular area of defined distance (around some place)  
It is a long boned space, prismatic in form, and slightly curved longitudinally

On head, a shallow cup or fovea folds acuity for  
articulation of,  
an intense transversal plane

Off hand, a circumference is a smooth neck,  
on a round but constricted portion,  
a tuberosity having small pit

Like in the world,  
each consists of a body that tapers articulation from above,  
downward. Ending in a nail, which,



by a toughened elevated surface of a horseshoe,  
form behaves (a hook or a claw)

Gnawed, from side to side, two extremities occur,  
which become to mean,  
'two bodies bones'

For all might,  
each ends her in two, separated slightly  
by a furrowed rut

The distal extremity,  
of each of which occurs, serves,  
to support,  
her sensitive pulp



*Figure 3: Film Still 3, Berthing Bone, 2014. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Copyright Victoria Gray.*



*Figure 4: Film Still 4, Berthing Bone, 2014. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK. Copyright Victoria Gray.*

## A Common Palm Characteristic in Form

The Palm has long strides of Metacarpal

They are cylindrical and of five,  
she names them from her lateral side:

The First, is stouter than the others,  
diverging a prismoid toward the reading surface

To a greater degree, the Second is the digital,  
just lesser of the longest, which is,  
the Third, a little longer than the Second

The Fourth, the bone of the ring finger, is shorter, smaller and,  
(weaker than the indexical)  
The Fifth is just the littlest finger

### **The More or Less Rounded Mass**

Sesamoid bones, after the seeds Sesame,  
are small and more or less  
As rounded masses she embeds them, in  
certain virtual palmar surfaces

Probably, they are to modify pressure,  
probably, they diminish friction  
Two are constant at the thumb,  
while one, is frequently hesitant in the little  
One or two gesture with the index

Occasionally,  
seeds are said at joints,  
on pronouncement of the ring finger  
articulating provenance of a non-specific force and/or pull

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## Contributor details

Victoria is an artist and practice-led researcher. Her primary medium and material is the body. Her performance work includes actions, interventions, time-based sculpture and video, being presented in museums, galleries and festivals in performance art, fine art and choreographic contexts. In addition to a performance practice, her research has been published in peer-reviewed journals, and edited books in the fields of performance and choreography, including articles in *The Drama Review* (MIT Press, 2015), *Choreographic Practices* (Intellect, 2013) and *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practice* (Intellect, 2012); and chapters in the edited books, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative & Cultural Practices* (2012, Intellect) and *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance* (Routledge, 2016). Currently she is a Ph.D. candidate at Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. Her research integrates affect studies, process philosophy and somatics.

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