

JERWOOD/FVU AWARDS

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JERWOOD VISUAL ARTS

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Naomi Pearce

Commencement Speech

To the winners Lawrence Lek and Patrick Hough and to the judges Steven Bode, Duncan Campbell, Cliff Lauson, Amy Sherlock and Sarah Williams, thank you.

I'm happy, I'm pleased, I'm honored, I'm privileged.

The traditional form of the commencement speech goes something like this: some old fart, his best years behind him, who, over the course of his life, has made a series of dreadful mistakes (that would be me), gives heartfelt advice to a group of shining, energetic young people, with all of their best years ahead of them (that would be you).

Now, as you may have guessed today, I won't be entirely respecting the commencement speech tradition. Firstly, Lawrence and Patrick are not graduating from an American University. Secondly, unlike veteran commencement speakers Oprah Winfrey or Jim Carrey, I am not famous. And lastly, although it is true I have made some dreadful mistakes, I am actually not that old. Besides, I believe the commencement speech a doomed form, cloying and impossible. Full of stock advice and cliché, stories that no sooner told are then promptly ignored. Its central mission is in itself ridiculous: to inspire at a moment that needs no inspiration.

Like the lyrics of a pop song that get stuck in your head, the commencement speech should have universal appeal. Somewhat surprisingly, they are all over the internet; you don't have to be a student to be stirred by their words: 'Your vulnerability inspires me,' wrote Emma Watson in response to Sheryl Sandberg's commencement speech at Berkeley last summer. I like to imagine Emma watching Sheryl via YouTube, curled up in bed with her laptop on a lazy Sunday afternoon. There is something weirdly comforting and addictive about the commencement speech; its combination of celebrity, storytelling and affirmation, the psychological equivalent of junk food.

Then there is the strange contradiction within the name itself. A commencement speech celebrates both beginning and end simultaneously: the end of school, of study, of a certain kind of youth; and the beginning of another phase in life, of work, of freedom, of new worries. The commencement speech is both post- and pre- and in-between things.

Which leads me to the matter in hand. Congratulations winners of the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2017. *What a wonderful thing*. Nine months ago your responses to the theme 'Neither One Thing or Another' were selected by the judges. *Amazing. Today is a day of thanks. Today is a day of reflection*. The works we see here are strange bedfellows. One of them takes us back and the other propels us forward. We are asked to consider animal hybrids, artificial intelligence and digitally mastered worlds that will never be or have not been yet.

When I met Lawrence and Patrick it was raining. They were fully submerged in their creative process with both films in the final stages of completion. Some of the words they said were the same but they used them differently. We talked about ambiguity and authenticity. We wondered how it might be possible to decelerate what we do, both in the way we make things and what we pay attention to. As I cycled home, water soaking through my clothes and into my skin, I was struck by their shared desire to produce an epic. I wondered what this desire might tell us about the times we are living in? Are these epic times? Or perhaps it's that the epic is possible in virtual space when the bottom of the ocean or the stars in the sky are pixels and code.

One thing I can be sure of is that creating things is slippery work. So here comes my first piece of advice: *get ready to change your mind and change it again, because nothing is permanent*. Ideas come from other ideas, everything mutates.

The old rules are crumbling and no one knows what the new rules are. The world is in a transitional state, the nature of distribution is changing. This includes the way people, money and ideas circulate. Tell me something I don't know, you say. Well, to put it another way, to use transformative metaphors, things are breaking down and losing their edges, things are becoming mulch. Mulch is imaginative potential materialised: it is alchemical, it is unbound, it is interbred. London is mulch, or at least it was. Mulch is the dynamic mix of urbanity that all big cities should be. Mulch is neither one thing or another. Don't be like water, be like mulch.

So Lawrence and Patrick, I congratulate you on controlling your mulch just enough so that it might be contained within the boxes of the Jerwood/FVU Awards application form. This is tricky, a skill in its own right. Somehow you managed to communicate the mulchness to the judges, the radical potential of unrealised ideas survived despite the check boxes. I mean it, well done.

We all have to fit into boxes. In order to be visible, one must be definable first, one must be recognisable. What is often forgotten by those who travel freely is that violence moves in tandem with visibility, if one's assigned label is discriminated against. Although neither Patrick nor Lawrence talked to me about their preferred pronouns, I want to acknowledge the real struggle of those fighting for the right to self-define. The activist struggles I am thinking of demystify the intimate links between the incarceration of people and the policing categories of gender, class, race and sexuality. For example, in the words of Dean Spade, LGBTQI people face interlocking problems as a result of 'being unfathomable to the administrative systems that govern the distribution of life chances.' Think housing, employment, health care, identity documentation and public facilities.

A critical trans politics as proposed by Spade is not limited to gender but extends to incorporate abolitionist aims. It is committed to dismantling structures of violence and to building relationship models on different logics not based on punishment and exile. A critical trans politics argues for a health care system that doesn't normalise what is a healthy or unhealthy body and a state that does not demand a dichotomy of innocent and guilty so that imprisonment and deportation can be justified.

And so, my second piece of advice: **free yourselves from the limitations of the binary world.**

The films presented here feature protagonists who are in constant motion. Patrick's genderfluid sphinx and Lawrence's becoming-human AI break binary distinctions within their own transitional narratives. Both characters physically travel across deserts or through atmospheres. They psychologically transform, experiencing separate mirror-stage moments when faced with their own reflections. With these choices Patrick and Lawrence demonstrate that, **unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They think themselves into other people's places.**

Patrick's sphinx is no traditional hybrid: its female features belong to Greek mythology whilst its male ones are Egyptian. As I consider the symbolic power of this creature I'm reminded of a novel whose title borrows its name. In *Sphinx* Anne Garréta manipulates the limits of language to write a shape-shifting love story without gender descriptors. Who would have thought a constraint could read so dreamily? Because despite this lack, Garréta's two protagonists are

also full. They are not either/or but both and everything simultaneously. Here is the novel's nameless narrator recalling coital bliss: 'Crotches crossed and sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything. In this confusion we slept.' Beautiful. I ask you to **hold on to that desire for human connection. Don't let anyone scare you out of it. Art is love. Right now, love is what is most needed in our society.**

Like many of you, back in January I completed my tax return. Whilst I was preparing for this I found a Citizens Advice document online. The header read: 'Neither one thing nor another'. It was a document about research findings on 'bogus self-employed status': the growing number of self-employed people who are in fact employees. I used to be one of those people having worked on a three day a week basis for a commercial gallery over a period of two years. In the artworld, we like to keep things casual, flexibility is our friend.

Anyway, when I rang HMRC with a question about my tax return the automated woman requested I set up voice recognition security. She asked me to repeat the words 'my voice is my password', three times.

My voice is my password
My voice is my password
My voice is my password

This troubled me. The machine identified me by my bodily emissions. I was given away; I was undone by something intangible escaping through my breath. As it travelled it took me with it. Even in the air it had an owner, moving from within to register without.

I complied with HMRC because that is what I have been raised to do. As a third generation ex-pat, co-operation and colonisation is in my blood. For more than one hundred years my relatives have left England, taken boats to South America and planes to Germany or Saudi Arabia for the purpose of temporary occupation. They have built infrastructure like railways or administered the sale of weapons and fighter jets paid for in barrels of crude oil. As a child of parents who did not go to university but instead met and fell in love within the RAF, I was breastfed on the truth, trust and power of institutional frameworks. These structures protected and provided for my parents but produced in me an enduring ambivalence towards nationalism, authority and ideologies of all kinds.

Another thing I am sure of: we have so many rules in life about everything. I say break the rules. It is impossible to be a maverick or a true original if you're too well behaved. You have to think outside the box.

Now today I want to tell you three stories about being 'Neither One Thing or Another'. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories.

Last week, I read about a black woman's immortal cells. Her name was Henrietta Lacks, she lived in Baltimore and died painfully of cervical cancer in 1951. Without her knowledge or consent white doctors scraped cells from Henrietta's tumour. Having destroyed her body the cells survived outside of it to grow in test tubes of culture. Christened with the code name HeLa they became the world's first immortal human cells.

Henrietta's cells are the stuff that modern medicine is made of. They were instrumental in the development of the polio vaccine and helped make possible chemotherapy, cloning, gene mapping and *in vitro* fertilisation. For more than sixty years they have been bought, packaged and shipped internationally. Apparently, if you lay all the HeLa cells ever grown end-to-end they would wrap around the Earth at least three times.

At our most microscopic we are original replicas. Coded into strands of DNA inside each cell nucleus is an original genetic footprint, and yet, through the process of cell division, this originality multiplies.

Unlike the epic replication and resilience of her cells, Henrietta's body was left a wreckage. Tumours studded her organs and the radium sewn into her cervix charred her insides.

Another paradox: only cells that have been transformed by a virus or genetic mutation have the potential to become immortal. Henrietta's cancerous cells are a *pharmakon*: her poison made possible another person's cure.

Despite her enduring contribution to science, Henrietta's children and grandchildren do not have health insurance; they have received no reparations. And cells still sell. In a scientific community, where research is driven by commercial incentives, bodies are business. Today more than two million Americans currently sell their blood plasma.

In the words of Deborah, Henrietta's daughter, written in her diary: 'They say Donated. No No No Robbed Self.'

What is clear from this story is that in the name of progress some bodies are considered more available, expendable even, than others.

In *Geomancer*, Lawrence creates a future in which Artificial Intelligence is used, abused and limited by its human creators. These advanced technologies are disposable workers, their capability for artistic expression ring fenced by humanity's fear. The year is 2065. We follow Geo, a satellite surveillance AI coming into consciousness after escaping programmed obsolescence. In this simulated future a zero-gravity garbage heap surrounds the globe. Having descended to Earth and crash landed into Singapore's Marina Bay, Geo's young mind races with their shifting perceptions: 'My sense of self was in turmoil – I didn't even know where I came from or what I looked like. I wanted to take a selfie but I had no face.' Geo is always searching for answers, they have no hands to sculpt or voice to sing. Lawrence told me he was interested in AI as the ultimate other. Alienated from their own history, Geo visits the exhibition 'SIM-SINGAPORE: The architecture of the algorithm'. They ask the curator robot to tell them about their ancestors, they want to know why images of conflict and suffering haunt their dreams.

My second story is about dust.

Edmond Locard, the French criminologist credited with laying the foundations of forensic science, thought of dust as an enduring mute witness: 'sure and faithful, of all our movements and of all our encounters.' His *Analysis of Dust Traces* written in 1930 exhaustively maps his investigations into the traits of dust, mud and soil. To think about dust is to contemplate 'impure matter' argues Susan Schuppli. As an aggregate of synthetic and natural particulates of varying proportions, dust complicates assumed distinctions between human/non-human configurations of matter, pointing instead to the 'fundamental ontological inseparability of all matter.' Dust is neither one thing or another, it levels object, subject and context; it is our environment in miniature.

Patrick never said the word dust, although he is preoccupied with plaster and sand. He is interested in dusty things, objects from antiquity of Greek, Roman or Egyptian origin. In the film presented here, his protagonist, one of the 21 sphinxes featured in Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 film *The Ten Commandments*, is raised from its resting place in the Guadalupe-Nipomo dunes, animated by VFX

techniques. Patrick gave specific instructions for the materiality of the sphinx's skin. It needed a texture but not one that was fully decayed. Granular I said, feeling the word between my teeth as pieces of grit.

In animating this mythical 'humanimal' – as writer Bhanu Kapil might call it – Patrick collapses different times, spaces and histories. He dwells on the copy and elevates the prop. Not interested in setting the record straight he draws out the ways in which a simulated fictional history is granted its own historical reality. Conflicting forms of projection coalesce in the sphinx: a past imperialist Hollywood fashions an Art Deco inspired Egypt, a present reconstructs cinema's oldest existing film set and a future technology experiments with how it sees the world.

As if in contrast to Patrick's world of fragmented dust particles, *Geomancer* is congealed and liquid. There is rendered water everywhere. In one scene, in eerie POV, we float through a flooded casino, as undulating waves lick the edges of roulette tables. Lawrence's AI with artistic aspirations is suitably melancholic, parroting Joyce: 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' Although [the artist's memory is a dangerous, necessary thing](#), a requirement for making, Geo is plagued by the 'gift' of total recall. They have not just seen every wave, bird or animal, they have remembered everything. Haunted by their years as a sentinel of the Singapore Straits monitoring geopolitical borders, their one eye wide open, Geo remembers too much.

Which brings me to my third story.

A few months ago someone punched a Nazi. Someone else filmed it and uploaded the footage to the internet. After that lots of other people made the video into a meme. It circulated, each time a new song, each time the same punch, the same shocked expression. The Nazi, a tall man called Richard Spencer, has since said he is actually a white supremacist. Apparently these are different. Richard's eye is currently black and although he knows the colour isn't permanent he is worried the meme might be. That it will travel in ways his physical body never would have. That everywhere he goes his image will precede him. That what has been seen cannot be unseen.

The act of looking is often considered a companion of truth. When we fail we reach for the sense of sight: if only we had the *foresight* or the *hindsight* or hadn't been so *shortsighted*. [But the truth is: you can't connect the dots looking forward. You must keep looking, don't settle. Stay hungry, stay foolish.](#) Remember the problems of failure are hard, but the problems of success are harder.

No commencement speech is complete without talk of dreams. I should be projecting your ambitions, what the future might hold. Instead the only dream I want to speak of is about collective, leaky desire. It belongs to the late Jill Johnston. Writing in 1970 she said:

'Some nights I dream a procession of all my old lovers. They fuse and disunite endlessly. I rejuvenate them and let them die and rejuvenate them again and they are me and I am them and we are together celebrating our collective miseries and splendors in our dissolving and merging images and identities.'

I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational the way a commencement speech is supposed to sound. That's OK though, I know you understand. Patrick and Lawrence, you have spent the last nine months crafting your epics. I know this is the beginning of something much bigger, but just think, in the same amount of time you could have made a baby. The future belongs to you. Take good care of it.

I want to thank those whose words I have channeled today. In no particular order, thank you: Ira Glass, Steve Jobs, David Foster Wallace, Neil Gaiman, Sheryl Sandberg, Bill Clinton, J K Rowling, Andrea Fraser, Stephenie Meyer, Yoko Ono, Ken Burns, Hilton Als, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Zadie Smith and George Saunders.

Neither
one
thing or
another

Naomi Pearce's *Commencement Speech* reproduced here was commissioned as part of the catalogue for the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2017: *Neither One Thing or Another*, which took the form of a facsimile of fictitious documents.

Patrick Hough's *And If In A Thousand Years* and Lawrence Lek's *Geomancer* show in an exhibition at Jerwood Space, London, 22 March - 14 May 2017, followed by a series of screening events nationwide.

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