“These individuals are consigned to the periphery of public consciousness because by failing to conform they violate social norms and offend public sensibilities. We deal with them by dissociation, distancing ourselves to minimize or displace feelings of resentment, fear, contempt, guilt, shame, or conflict. In doing so a cycle of disinterest and disaffection is generated, allowing us to shun collective responsibility. We compartmentalize and place barriers between “us” and “them”. We tend to see some things and ignore others. As a dehumanizing process, the extent of this dualistic dissociation is manifest in the terminology used to describe homeless individuals. Common use of the term “the homeless” instead of “homeless persons” or “people without houses” facilitates the distancing process. “They” become an amorphous, remote, alien mass lacking individuality or even humanity. A sense of community is lost. Definitions and descriptions of “the homeless” expose our personal values and beliefs, especially when homelessness is characterized by what it is not. ... By exercising our power to name, we construct a social phenomenon, homelessness, the criteria used to define it, and a stereotype of the people to whom it refers.”

from
‘Homeless: Policies, Strategies And Lives On The Street’
by Gerald Daly  Pub: Routledge 1996

I want to talk about and show something of a performance of writing, occurring in stages between 1996-1999. It is the outcome of collaborations between more than six hundred customers of a winter night shelter for people who would otherwise have to sleep rough and the eleven staff and two hundred volunteers who worked there. A mesh of handwritten
descriptions, messages, interactions and thoughts of the staff team subsequently became annotated through an extensive process of erasure by the night shelter’s former manager. In the process acquiring an author function for other contexts from which both poetry and poetics seeps out. The work is *pyr(rh)ic solution* by Kirsten Lavers and that substantial quote is one attached to the work in every instance I’ve encountered, on all documentation and in the frontispiece of each of the three books marking three occurrences of the work. So it felt a solid place to start.

My interest stems from softly grouping indicative works in writing that make location appropriate interventions into critical conversations about collaborative writing production and circulation. The pertinence of writing strategies thereby developed is to engender perception of demotic politics in social context; often with purpose of critiquing society’s institutions, its formalities and civic ethics.

Other works that I want to mention here as preface in this specific respect are; Fiona Templeton’s *Cells of Release* (written and installed at the abandoned panopticon Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia in 1995; *the*
table leaks its object, Tertia Longmire’s transcriptions from graffiti found on thirty school examination desks abandoned in south London during 1996 and Caroline Bergvall’s Say: Parsley (2002), in Spacex 2 on Exeter old quay shown last night and on which I’ve written extensively elsewhere. Asides from knowing that Gary Winters’ document from Say: Parsley would be shown here it is also highly likely that many of you will have accessed the works mentioned by Templeton and Longmire either in book form or on the internet already.

Further I want to bring into the frame other works in which the endurance of durational detail is foregrounded, such as John Cage reading Empty Words, Alastair MacLennan’s Still Tills (One concentrates on what one's doing as one does it, to 'fuse' with the activity, at the same time keeping the mind open to the potentiality of what might develop. One can, by remaining 'receptive', make ongoing alterations, as appropriate. (Variant Magazine No 4. ( Spring ) 1988 OUT THE IN Malcolm Dickson and Billy Clark interview Alastair MacLennan), Brian Catling’s The Blindings at the Serpentine Gallery, Kenneth Goldsmith’s Fidget and most obvious of all Ann Hamilton’s Tropos 1995.
Kirsten Lavers’s *pyr(rh)ic solution* #1, #2 and #3 is the other work in this soft grouping and I’ll come on to concentrate most detail on *pyr(rh)ic solution* #2, a five day performance/installation in The Boots Library, Nottingham, 10 - 14 November 1998 forming if you like the central panel of a triptych under that title book-ended by a private domestically situated performance and a symposium version at the Performance Writing event Ephemeralities of Writing at the Theatre School in Utrecht in 1999. This proto-paper interweaves some contextualisation, material quoted from an as yet unrevised interview with Kirsten Lavers and from my own account of #2 posted to the Live Art mailbase shortly after the work occurred contributing to that listserv in a thread focussed onto works made for unconventional spaces.

Books one, two and three of *pyr(rh)ic solution* are part of a larger mesh and I’ll mention some other works all too briefly. From 1992-97 Lavers made a series of site-responsive collaborative works, as *The Zwillinge Project*, with Melanie Thompson, the twelve episodes of which
considered the site of each episode as a third collaborator. The final episode they term a *site-book*.

Part of this book is ring-bound in a hand-cut cardboard rubber-stamped cover, contained in a plastic box folder, alongside which are ten white and ten manila envelopes numbered for each of the previous episodes. These envelopes contain reflexive correspondence between the collaborators and further photographic documentation of the works addressed. Some of this makes uncomfortable reading as the creaky boundary between collaborative discourses is rehearsed in raw form. What surfaces dramatically in a reading of Episode 4 *Workspace*, in Leeds, 1993, for example, is a tension between collaborators in respect of performance and site. The published documentation contains the following reflection from Kirsten:

I remember long discussions in which I was really pushing you to examine the possibility of another way of approaching yourself as a performer. I wanted you to accept the possibility of being yourself when you were performing and to let go of what you called a ‘sub text’ but what I perceived as pretending to be someone other than yourself. We spent a lot of time talking about your relationship to the material that we were uncovering and deciding upon strategies that would keep you rooted in what you
were experiencing in performance.

Reflecting on Episode 10, Archipelago in Bristol, ‘a live art walk through nine sites in the city centre (which included ‘an underpass where rough sleepers often gather’ – the city Library’s newspaper reading room and a nightshelter between February 18-24th, 1996 (performance duration: 7 days for 6 hours each day) Lavers writes that:

The performance work in Underdown House of a person making telephone calls asking the question “what is the difference for you between a house and a home?” whilst being watched through a perspex screen resolved for me the conflict between the kind of task-based performance which is framed, focussed and watchable with my desire to perform in a way which is informal, personal and interactive.

Responses to the 827 phone calls made asking this subtle question “what is the difference for you between a house and a home?” formed the basis for her first post Zwillinge Project work, a limited edition artists’ book Two Words Beginning With H (1996), the dimensions of which were based upon the size of a standard house brick. Collected within a sleeve made from grocery cardboard boxes, one hundred pages each present one of one hundred selected replies to the question above (No 10: “house is an objective word, home is a subjective word,” No 13: "a mother," No 43 “warmth, shelter, safety, you wouldn’t necessarily feel safe in a house” and No 62:
"the spelling"). Other pages interleave a statistical analysis of the 867 responses. The whole is handcut and assembled, bound together with swatches of wallpaper, net curtain, blanket, silver foil, diy colour charts, tablecloth and newspaper by steel bolts and wingnuts between a backplate of 3mm glass and a front page of black abrasive paper.

Lavers again:

Nine people’s immediate response to the word home was some kind of reference towards an institution, like a care home or an old people’s home. And then there was a huge response that people make the difference between a house and a home, people and friends. It’s nothing to do with stuff and fabric and double glazing or anything like that.
The former Library in Mill Road, Cambridge was closed by the council in 1995 and reopened for use as a winter night shelter under a team managed by Lavers for Winter Comfort in 1996-97, the bottom line of which was and I quote her:

enabling twenty five people with completely chaotic and very mixed situations and needs and temperaments and whatever, to sleep under shelter, warm, fed, safe – not scared that some yobbo is going to come bundling out of the pub and decide that they’d be fun as a punch bag. And that’s your main aim, it’s base line first aid. There’s lots of other things that need to be done and should be done but the night shelter is just about very simply trying to make that happen. Whereby
you’re safe and everybody else is safe and most people get the night’s sleep that they want to have.

Reopening the library as a night shelter engaged the community in fierce debate before planning permission was granted.

There were lots of people who were anxious about homeless people in their neighbourhood. There were lots of people for whom it reactivated their distress about the failure in the campaign to save the library but also it’s quite a right on middle class neighbourhood, with people who are very kind of pc and politically active in different ways, who were very torn and caught in *nimbly* territory; they knew that they should ethically support somewhere for rough sleepers over the winter but they were distressed and angry about the loss of the library and they were utterly selfishly not wanting it in their back yard.

Lavers talks of using skills and craft developed from working in various arts contexts when making the installation of the shelter’s working fabric and in the training of the staff chosen to run it. Issues such as spatial flow, how and where important information might be accessed (the answer was above the toasters alongside the tv), where things needed to be and how observations and acquired understanding of human behaviour in different spaces, conditions, orientations, were brought into play.
Part of the staff training process included working on the use of the Communication Books, which enabled one shift to communicate with the following shift concerning events and issues of importance. Kirsten again:

At the beginning of the shift at six in the evening it was a ritual for everybody that the first thing you did was go and look at the Communication Book to read what happened the night before or the morning and the night before. Immediately you were looking for the message from the person who’d done the overnight shift about what food they had prepared for the meal, what still needed doing for it so that you then knew what to tell the volunteers. So there’d be practical information. Plus:

_The night took a bit of a downward turn at 3.30am. _______ lay on top of _________, who rightfully was very upset, she was asleep. _______ kicked off in a big way, chairs tables went. _______ got a bite in the head. Basically _______ managed to manhandle him out the door, not without him trying to turn on me. So I think a hefty-ish ban is in order._

In the night shelter if you know somebody’s name you’re already in a much stronger territory if they’re in a state, if they’re pissed up or angry with you or freaked out or whatever. If you don’t know their name it’s really really difficult and that’s your first aim is to try and get their name.
There were also people who would tell you their real name but tell you that you had to refer to them in public using another. Most people had an alias, some people had an alias or a nickname for different contexts.

You’re writing your notes for the night and everybody tended to do that slightly differently and you can get a sense of that just from the handwriting or the way that the night report’s laid out by different individuals. You know some people would write as things happened. Other people would keep kind of notes and then they’d wait for a quiet time in the early hours of the morning and they’d write up the night so far. Around 3-4 in the morning, when most nights you’d be doing well and you’d got everybody to bed and the television would be off and you’d be trying to just stay awake and stay with it, one useful way would be to write in the Communication Books. Some of the staff would just go off into their writing of the night and they were partly entertaining themselves and partly the person on the next shift. It wasn’t really conveying useful information or overtly useful information – but was enabling them to reflect on the night and how they were feeling and get through that dead hour.
SAT - SUN
29th - 30th MARCH

EN:

ON:

Em:

6:00pm: [Redacted] in laundry - claims to have permission from the owner. Can't verify this. I've left him.
6:10pm: Called to find out real last name. She's been nicked for begging and held until Tuesday. Doing all he can to arrange bail.
6:30pm: Asked to leave the laundry... no longer there. 6:45 all back in there plus [Redacted] - left ok. Phoned the nicked will be in court Tuesday.
8:00pm: Having a go at [Redacted] - very wrong. Picked up an ash tray at one point but it seemed like show to me so I left it - any more and he's out. Calmed down after he had a few days at me. [Redacted] said he was ok afterwards.
8:00pm: Gang on a tinnie early on in the evening. Said cheers. That later... put my name on it, we did that and stashed it. Whereupon [Redacted] demanded it.
intentionally, headless!

Don't know, why there is potentially a
volatile situation.

Now Bob has killed in a HK gun [with
no number on it] and gotten hismployees
to fill in their blank to will return it now. I haven't
read the form at all because we may be able
to get it backdated.

7:30 PM went to house with bit of needle
case, going atmosphere despite the few problems.

Spoke too soon — plot is about to happen.

Tina is currently about something. Says the story involves a car and
bit of a house — the two that someone will try to kill him tonight.

Bob has left the book to his new employer
(Sutton) to wait if he can speak about the
restaurant.

Two men who came a killed HK
members in. They now the remains of the usual,
scotched their beds out. Near the store in his shop
in one, he'll get a few more
burned up so I have give him with his wadders
one and he is furious about me telling them
Went out for an hour at 3-30. He didn't. Reminded him of rules, behaviour etc. throughout. Became abusive again at 4:00, spat on floor again at which point I gave her a warning. He calmed down and went to bed at 5:00am.

Food donation: Lonzia sarries & pizza slices from a student party.

Lounge door: Old hinges. Tastes a lot better.

Telecom gear: Behind the office door is still there because I can't find a box to put it in (see earlier messages).

Saturday's menu: There's a tray of mashed spuds in fridge. Some chopped onions & grated cheese for tomorrow's meal. Baked and melt cheese over it, serve with beans or peas.

---

**Important:** He has a fixation about sex says he's in love with her, any female workers - lead him to believe you're named/attached - is probably safer for all. BUS warned of this too.

Tinie at 1:00am and 7:45am.

Snoozed all the way through until 6:30pm, up for a wee and then back to bed.

Only the ants were busy during the shift.

**Needle found in a book on bookshelves. Used, don't worry if this has been said before in earlier report but I can't find any mention of it. It was mentioned at hand-over and I'd assumed it was written up somewhere.**

Toodle Pip.
And then the night shelter comes to an end and there’s the packing up and reflecting on it and saying goodbyes and feeling concerned about these people for whom one night you’re giving them a bed and the next night there’s nothing. And everything disappears, except for these books. And they’re kind of knocking around in a cardboard box. I was told to shred them because of the issue of confidentiality but found myself reluctant to do so.

And the books in a way, which were arguably the thread of ephemerality through the duration of the shelter, became the things that last.
pyr(rh)ic solution # 1 was performed in Cambridge July 1998, in the shed in the middle of Lavers’ garden that she used as a studio. It was a preparation through private exploration, a rehearsal of public potentiality.

Working out the logistics and learning how to do the stripping down of it binding-wise and then rebinding it.

Party to that exploration was bringing attention to the action. Initially she was thinking about what she would try to do each time she reached a name, to burn the name out. Her intention was clearly to exophone the whole book. However she would stop voicing out each time a name was written. There was going to be an irregular sequence of sonic lacuna, valedictory silences interpretable as cenotaph moments, during which there was a not reading, but the surge of what had previously been background sound and the sonic eruption of the pyrographic tool burning the name from the page.

For the first sessions that I did on it I was trying to remember to be burning the name and to be talking about the person whose name I was burning out. I quickly found that uninteresting however.

Later the radio that she had playing while she worked provided an increasingly important commentary and paying attention to the possible synchronicity emerging through juxtaposition she began to choose times of the day when particular programmes would give propitious intervention.

And of course there wasn’t a silence because I was in a shed in the middle of the garden and this is an extremely laborious process, one book takes about four eight hour days. I started putting the radio on and then became quite interested in what happened to be being said on the radio – because my mouth was quite near the microphone so that I was blotting out the radio when I was reading the book; the little snatch of news or whatever that was on the radio in the silence entered the text when somebody’s name was being burned.

Where the writing is in these projects is the question centrally of interest to me. Is the writing in the books from day to day the writing, in
which case I don’t find it particularly of interest other perhaps than as a social document that will be of future archeo-sociological import. Is the writing in the erasure? Is the writing in the speaking, in the recordings thereby produced – all of which are archived? Is the writing in what cannot be written or what passes undocumented, what cannot be caught, does not make it to the archive? Is it in the conversations occurring around the Communication Book entries, the conversations informing the making of the various pyr(rh)ic solution versions? My suggestion of course is that the writing lies between and that when reading work such as this I plunge into the gaps, I become feverish with potential closures, I experience the seams and that in the resonance of those seams is the poetry.

These are social-historical documents that pay the price of becoming redundant as such in order to become interesting as writing
pyr(rh)ic solution # book two
In the foyer of a library in Nottingham a woman is seated at a table working. Apprehended from a distance it can be seen that she is engrossed in an act of doing but quite what she's doing can't be seen until you walk up to the glass that partitions this foyer from the street. Better still, enter the building and approach the area where she is working. As an initial guess she might be a librarian or bureaucrat conducting a customer survey or a census-like exercise. In fact she's diligently burning holes into the pages of a book with a pyrographic tool.

Passing into the foyer and sitting down opposite to her on a chair evidently inviting a one-to-one inter-relationship, I become an intimate witness to work being made. What she is taking great care to isolate, initially through highlighting and then through erasure, from hand-written entries into an A4 hard-backed ruled notebook are names. She is protecting confidentiality.
The issue of confidentiality from my own recent experience in a primary school in Lowestoft is extremely serious. Childrens’ names cannot be mentioned in connection with a school as any such information could lead to an estranged parent locating their child and abducting them -- for example, there are many such issues.

As she burns through the names, revealing further layers of social documentation she reads the handwritten entries into a microphone plugged into a small cassette tape recorder. Each time she comes across a name in the document she burns it from the record and verbally replaces it with a playful representation; The Judge, the Company Director, the Truck Driver, the Youngest Son, the Lucky Winner become ciphers inserted as an improvised nominal commentary. Her measured reading can be listened to as acoustic source or through headphones provided.

In the library foyer borrowers and foragers come and go with a regularity that ensures the opening and closing of sliding doors to the street. The openings and closures converse with the reading voice and its concentrated pauses and named erasures.

It was actually like being publicly private in a space that people were familiar with travelling through. I was just to one side of this thoroughfare. A lot of the time I was allowed to be in quite a private bubble. Occasionally I would sense that somebody’s journey through that thoroughfare was being slowed down by their curiosity about what was going on or they actually had stopped and they were looking and I would acknowledge that by breaking
off from what I was doing and allowing them to follow through with that curiosity. Sometimes that would develop into conversation. Other times I would be very deliberately giving off the signals *I’m just getting on with this and you can witness me if you like but I’m just going to get on with it.*

The erasure of all the names, both customer and staff from these unbound pages have a sinister tinge, invoking the darkest of interpretations from the solution metre of Lavers’ title. Those represented have in their instances of homelessness been all but erased from the body of society. They are at its very margins, all too often treated as already invisible. But in extinguishing their actual name and recreating them lies carnivalesque potential too. A heroin addict can be socially repositioned as The Judge, an ex-judge fallen on hard times is given a new handle as a Taxi Driver. These performances of reading and re-writing project appropriate diligence, humour and tenderness. They assemble a process of dealing with the consequences of one’s action.

The work provides a glimpse into and a critique of the strategy of reducing the visibility of homeless by getting people off the streets into shelters, through attempts to make this document available within the public domain. Resultant versions do provide some measure of understanding of what it is to be homeless, with its underground codes; yet the way that measure is achieved honours the initial promise of confidentiality and by doing so people who would otherwise have to sleep rough become invisible once again. That’s the deeply ambivalent pyrrhic victory informing this work, when as much is lost as gained.

To burn a hole deliberately in one side of a double-sided notebook, necessarily creates chance erasures on the other side. As such the disruption
of the surface loggias of the text acquire new urgency, echoed in punctuation
topographies formed up on sections of cardboard boxes used to protect the
tabletop on which the burning took place; the by-products of burning-
through.

The holes are what make the writing of interest to me, not the auratic
documentation of arguably exotic demotic materials as such. So much is
missing here, as it is too in the Templeton, the Longmire and the Bergvall.

All of the tapes of the reading and the rebound book itself are now re-housed
in the site of its performance. Process and product are plugged into each
other at every stage of these five-day-long performances editing towards the
gestural closure of perfect binding.
pyr(rh)ic solution # book three
was completed at In The Event Of The Text - Ephemeralities of Writing: A Symposium
Utrecht  May 1 1999

The Utrecht version was like collapsing the shed with library. Headphones were hanging from the door of the partitioned space within which Lavers sat burning the names from the third book.

The image of her here echoes with the perspex screen through which researchers could be witnessed asking the question about houses and homes from Underdown House in The Zwillinge Project.

On the headphones could be heard her reading through of Book Three and when a name was being burned, instead of the radio from the shed version of the opening and closing of foyer doors, cassette readings of the following novels came more into the foreground punching other narratives into the fabric of the still emerging text.

Jonathan Swift’s Gullivers Travels  Read by Neville Jason
(Naxos Audio Books)
Franz Kafka’s Metamorphosis and The Judgement Read by Steven Berkoff
(Penguin Audio Books)
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein  Read by Daniel Philpott, Jonathan Oliver and Chris Larkin
(Naxos Audio Books)
Feodor Dostoyevsky’s Crime And Punishment  Read by Michael Sheen
(Naxos Audio Books)
George Orwell’s Animal Farm  Read by Patrick Tull
(Recorded Books Inc)
Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe  Read by Nigel Anthony
(Naxos Audio Books)

I love you very tenderluy, remember me with affection should you never hear from me again Gulf War Veteran

Your affectionate brother Robert Walton
Stropped off out then came back in

Usual nil manners

He asked for a complaints form because Professor and I Barrister to Mrs Saville England August fifth

Can’t cope here apparently
So strange an
It should only be

Accident

Something something has happened to us that I
Cannot forebear recording it comma
Although it is very probable
He filled it out and then
Sat there saying as I was just staying near to
That you will see me before these papers will come into your possession
Last Monday, July 31
We were nearly surrounded by ice which closed in the ship on all sides

The school inspector

Scarcely leaving her the sea room in which she floated
Our situation was somewhat dangerous

 Especially as we were compassed round by very thick fog
We accordingly lay to
As she stayed quiet this way ‘you just can’t cope can you’
Really head game stuff
It was interesting that the other customer’s back
Hoping that some change would take place in the atmosphere and weather
About two o’clock the mist cleared away
And we beheld, stretched out in every direction
Vast and irregular plains of ice
Which seemed to have no end