

## The Embodied Life Writing of Aynsley Vandenbroucke

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Aynsley Vandenbroucke's "And" (2017) (all photos by Ian Douglas)

In a 2005 performance piece influential in experimental literary circles, “‘& and’ and *foulipo*,” poets Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young make a case for writing that “engage[s] the [r]elation between fo[r]malism and body.” Arguing that restrictive procedures, of the kind practiced by the French Oulipo group, tend to close down possibilities for such a relation, the two poets look instead to feminist, process-oriented art of the 1970s, exemplified by the work of figures such as Shigeko Kubota and Carolee Schneemann, as models for the kinds of corporeal relation they

desire in formalist literature. To dramatize their point about embodiment, Spahr and Young got undressed and re-dressed as they performed their procedural manifesto in the customarily staid environs of an academic conference, the 2005 Noulipo conference at CalArts.



In the decade since Spahr's and Young's performance, choreographer and dancer Aynsley Vandenbroucke has been exploring the relation of literary formalism to the human body in a way few writers, if any, are doing. Her latest performance in this vein, *And*, considers the role of uncertainty in our private lives at the onset of the Trump era. The Abrons website describes *And* as "a series of live, three-dimensional essays" created using "experimental literary devices." This description, difficult to visualize, hardly does justice to the multi-layered complexity of the piece, which incorporates elements of dance, music, writing, film, and theater in order to take a playfully serious philosophical look at the nature of everyday life.

Aynsley Vandenbroucke's "And" (2017)

Like a chef who succeeds on a competitive TV cooking show, Vandenbroucke rises to the challenge of finding a way to combine these seemingly disparate ingredients into a coherent and accessible dish. *And*'s performed written components, witty and engaging, encompass procedural forms such as an autobiographical list poem in the style of the "Harper's Index" ("Number of emails in my gmail inbox=9253") and "A Lecture on Form" that begins, "I do not believe in lectures." These light-handed touches in the writing allow Vandenbroucke to address sensitive personal matters — divorce; miscarriage — with remarkable poise.



Aynsley Vandenbroucke's "And" (2017)

Alongside and within these written pieces are dance, theater, and film pieces. In one such scene, Vandenbroucke — always alert to the rhythms of domesticity — dumps a bag full of kitchen implements on the floor and then bangs a ladle against a frying pan, faster and faster, louder and louder, until it becomes impossible to hear her spoken words. In another, quotations about artistic form float across the theater walls like lily pads on water. In several pieces, Vandenbroucke dances on film, ecstatic, to an infectious techno pulse. In another series of films, she carries a desk on her back through different outdoor settings. As you would expect from an artist attuned to the usages of domestic space, all these performance elements make thoughtful, well-conceived use of the theater space.





Aynsley Vandenbroucke's "And" (2017)

This rich and satisfying procedural stew, which never sticks too close to any one recipe, takes Spahr's and Young's notion of an embodied literary formalism further than most writers have the training or imagination to take it. Part theater, part literature, part dance, and part film, *And* is environmental writing in the most literal sense of the term: writing that produces its own built environment. Among poets, CAConrad's (soma)tic exercises, elaborate self-designed bodily rituals performed in private to generate poems, perhaps come closest to Vandenbroucke's work in both spirit and method. But even Conrad's bodily exploits are in service of a page-based literary practice. Vandenbroucke wants to practice life writing with her body as the stylus and the room as the page. In these uncertain times, one thing we can be sure of is that a practice as original as hers will have more surprises in store for us on the other side of *And*'s conjunction.

*Aynsley Vandenbroucke's **And** took place at the Abrons Arts Center (466 Grand Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) between March 30 and April 2, 2017.*