

Bon Nadja Joy Mott, *Lightning in the Middle (LIM)*.

Thesis for Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Art

[The Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, the University of Melbourne \(VCA\)](#)

This dissertation maps a singular exploration of the electrifying cross-fertilizations between the artist's own experiences of identity and artistic practice, the ghost of an Australian rock star, feminist and queer theory, and physics, all against an international background of sexual, racial, and environmental oppression. In the resulting collage a number of important themes recur, like the non-transparency of language and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledges and subversive countercultural figures. Bon Scott, AC/DC's first lead singer who died in 1980 at age 33, is redefined as secretly paradigmatic of the poststructuralist question of self-differentiation despite the restrictions of interlocking cultural hegemonies like heteropatriarchy, gender essentiality, and imperial whiteness. The fact that the student's neurodiversity and childhood difficulties have been given a context incrementally, with the help of recent professional diagnoses as well as artistic and intellectual collaborations, and that they came to certain fundamental insights about themselves even while working on this dissertation, serves as the starting-point for relaunching generalizable discussions about creative individuality/individuation within a broader societal and activist matrix. Bon Mott's artistic research aims at critiquing power structures and at social transformation by embracing their own personhood and embodiment as vehicle. Many forms of autoethnography and reflexivity can be found in many projects across the arts and humanities, but here there is also the declaration and exploration of a nonbinary scholar's and artist's life as retrospectively emanating from, or at least inventively inspired by, the life of a musician usually considered to be securely male, Euro-Australian, and only interested in hedonism.

This refreshing originality of the central premise of an existential project repurposing AC/DC's prematurely dead frontman for a radically different artistic-political here-and-now needs to be highlighted. It is fair to say the affective impetus of AC/DC and similar commercially successful hard rock bands of the 1970s and 1980s appears objectively sharply at odds with both cultural studies scholarship (since it scarcely considers this genre, far more interest going to the more obvious subversions of punk, disco, and rap) and the intellectual and avant-garde projects commonly found in arts schools and departments (since the hard rock aesthetic with what seems to be a preposterous working-class machismo serves as one of the clearest "others" for defining which musical, sartorial, and lifestyle tastes and eroticisms are academically acceptable). In the Australian context there is in addition a certain tendency of looking overseas — the UK, the US, France, Italy, or occasionally early Soviet Russia or contemporary Japan — for one's fundamental artistic-existential orientation, making AC/DC for many the last place where one would expect to derive a platform for imagining the new. This does not mean Australianness is the concern or destiny of Bon Mott's projects. Rather, it is within the ongoing de/reconstruction of Bon Scott as an iconic singer to which so many confused stereotypes cling that progressive ways of thinking about national, racial, gender/sexual, creative, historical, and neurological identity can present themselves.

On the conceptual plane Bon Mott is strongly inspired by the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, whose post-Lacanian concept of sexual difference is the most influential within feminist thought, and itself already engages the arts, myths and cosmologies, questions of cultural globalization, and (inter)personal discovery, themes which Bon Mott's practices deepen. One highlight is their performance at the Venice Biennale 2017 which integrated performance and video art based on Irigaray's *Marine Lover*, a loving deconstruction of Nietzsche's impossible relationship to the femininity of water and the sea. Importantly, the thesis addresses the widespread concern, which only grew with the recent international resurgence of transgender activism,

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that Irigaray's concept of sex is determinist and essentialist (page 181ff). While Irigaray has often insisted on the twoness of difference, a more complex reading understands there is underneath the two a generative primordial difference which evidently manifests itself into sexualities or genders other than traditional male and female, as well as into what occurs inbetween these. Another conceptual fixture in the thesis is the mythological notion of the trickster, well-known in Africana, Black, and American Indigenous studies. The humor in Bon Scott's parodies, self-parodies, role reversals, sexual innuendos, and challenges to the moral order becomes a source for giving consistency to Bon Mott's investigations into in-between identities and ludic invention of new genres of being.

It is plain from the dissertation that Bon Mott's artistic practice has for many years been organically based in strongly multimedia and collaborative configurations and not easily placeable within one particular tradition or methodology. From performance/dance/song events, to conceptual autobiographical drawing and note-taking, to working with mentors on Aboriginal cosmology, astrophysics, and political activism, to participating in conferences on Irigaray, and finally to the blurring of the boundaries between artistic practice and profound quasi-therapeutic self-discovery, the originality of this body of work derives from the rhizomatic interpenetrations of all the subprojects which is then further refracted into the public sphere (Instagram) and the reflections and cross-referencing in this thesis itself. These refractions could make for somewhat bewildering reading for some scholars, especially if they read according to the more conventional standards of dissertation writing. However, apart from the struggles with dyslexia acknowledged at the start, insofar as a thesis in and on artistic creativity is to provide a kind of testimony to the very processes of the thinking particular to art, this relative distance from linear writing and convention is arguably part of what makes the dossier lucid and rigorous in its own way. There is the required contextualization of the key ideas behind the student's intervention through concepts drawn from academic and professional literatures, even if that contextualization happens across sections, references, and heterogeneous visual materials.

Altogether, this dissertation seems a culmination point of many years of wide-ranging curiosity, of tirelessly developing skills, and of serious work on self-identity in order to become a true artist, that is, an artist true to life's ironies, pitfalls, and intrinsic conceptuality.