Unbox Your Words Course - Session 1

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Materials

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On Vesical Work — and Why I Coined a Term
Cassie Fielding

A manifesto for the writing that lives in the overlap
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I kept running into the same problem.
I would encounter a piece of writing—or make one, or try to describe one—and find that every available category did something wrong to it. Made it 'off'. Called it a poem, you lost the argument. Called it an essay, you lost the image. Called it research, you lost the strangeness. Called it experimental, you implied something vague, meaningless. Every label was a diminishment. Not because the work was unlabellable in some romantic sense but because the labels had been built for something else — for work that knew which side of a boundary it lived on.
I spent a long time thinking this was a problem with the work. That if I could not name it clearly it was not yet finished, not yet sure of itself, not yet arrived. I now think the opposite is true. The work that cannot be named by the available categories is often the most finished, the most certain, the most fully itself. It is the categories that are unfinished. Built for a world that has not yet caught up with what the most alive thinking is doing.
So I coined a term.

Vesical

The vesica piscis is the figure produced when two circles of equal size overlap. You have seen it—in medieval sacred geometry, in the pointed arch of a Gothic window, in the shape of a mandorla around the figure of Christ in Romanesque art. It is ancient and it is precise. Neither circle alone produces it. It requires both, and it requires the overlap. The space no circle makes.
I call work that lives in that space vesical. Not hybrid—hybrid has become too loose, too available, applied to anything that combines two things without asking whether the combination produces something neither contains. Not interdisciplinary—interdisciplinary implies a researcher standing between two disciplines, borrowing from each, which is not the same as work that could only exist at the point where two disciplines collide. Not experimental—experimental implies the form is being tried out, which misses the point entirely. The form of vesical work is not tried out. It is discovered. It is the only possible form for what the work knows.
Vesical names the structure rather than the content. It does not tell you what the work is about or which traditions it draws from. It tells you where the work lives. It is a geometric term applied to an epistemological condition. I find that precision useful.

Why the term matters

I did not coin vesical because I wanted a brand. I coined it because I needed a word that did the right thing —that named the structural position of work I kept encountering and making and failing to adequately describe.
There is a particular experience I kept having. Reading something—a lyric essay, a surrealist criticism, a piece of practice-based research that had found an impossible form—and feeling a specific quality of recognition. Not the recognition of encountering familiar content or a known tradition. Something more vertiginous. The recognition of encountering work that had arrived somewhere new by refusing to choose.
I have felt this reading Anne Carson. Reading the Henri Michaux. Reading Maggie Nelson. Reading the thesis I am writing—which is itself an attempt to enact what it describes, a hybrid scholarly-surrealist text that refuses to separate the poem from the argument or the argument from the image, where the academic and the surrealist voices exist in genuine tension rather than taking turns.
What I was recognising was not simply interesting writing. It was vesical work.
The term matters because unnamed things are harder to find, harder to make, harder to defend. Writers working in this territory have been told for years that their work is 'not quite right for us'—too creative for

the academic journal, too intellectual for the literary magazine, too strange for either. The category problem is not just an inconvenience. It is destructive. When the container insists on separating the elements of vesical work—when it publishes the poem but not the argument, or accepts the argument but asks you to remove the images or, god forbid, ask you to relegate your creative work to the appendix which happened to one of my PhD colleagues—it destroys the knowing the work produces. The third thing requires both circles. Separate them and you do not have two halves of something. You have two different things, neither of which is what the work was.

What vesical work produces

Vesical work produces knowing. I want to be precise about this because it is the claim I am most committed to and the one most easily misunderstood.

For the creative practitioner this is probably the more familiar register—the poem that changes how you see without telling you what to see, the image that arrives before the understanding, the making that reveals what you were reaching for only in the act of reaching. This is knowing rather than knowledge. It is not vaguer or less rigorous than knowledge. It operates through a different cognitive mechanism, produces a different quality of understanding and changes what can be thought in ways that propositional knowledge cannot.

Knowledge aims at objectivity. It aspires to the view from nowhere—the claim that holds regardless of who is making it, that can be tested, replicated, cited, built upon. This aspiration is not without value. But it rests on a fiction. Pure objectivity is not available to us. Every knowledge claim is made from somewhere—from a body, a history, a set of assumptions so deeply embedded that they do not appear as assumptions at all. The view from nowhere is always a view from somewhere that has forgotten it is somewhere.

Knowing does not pretend otherwise. Knowing is not purely subjective either—it is not merely personal, not merely the report of an individual experience that has no purchase beyond itself. Knowing is what happens when the subjective and the objective are understood as entangled rather than opposed. The vesical does not report on the creator's inner state. It produces an encounter—between the maker and the material, between the text and the reader, between what was known and what is now known differently. That encounter is real. It changes what can be thought. But it does not pretend to have arrived from nowhere.

This is why vesical work is not simply a middle ground between the objective and the subjective. It is not academic rigour softened by personal voice, or creative expression given intellectual ballast. It occupies a different epistemological position entirely—one in which the entanglement of the subjective and the objective is not a problem to be solved but the condition of the knowing. The knowing produced in vesical work is always situated, always made from somewhere, always carrying the marks of its making. And it is none the less rigorous for that.

For the academic practitioner—the researcher whose practice generates claims that the available frameworks cannot contain—the distinction between knowing and knowledge is the distinction between what the practice produces and what the institution can receive. Vesical work holds both. The knowing is present in the work itself. The knowledge—the translatable, citable, assessable version—is one face of something larger. To insist on only the knowledge is to flatten the work. To refuse the knowledge entirely is to make the work inaccessible to the conversations it could most usefully enter.

The essay that thinks in images produces knowing that the essay-as-argument cannot produce. The poem that makes an argument produces knowing that the critical essay cannot produce. Practice-based research—where the making is the inquiry—produces knowing that conventional academic research cannot reach.

The alchemists called it the coniunctio—the conjunction of opposites that produces something neither element contains. Not the harmonious union in which differences are dissolved and edges softened. The monstrous coniunctio—the union that maintains the distance between its elements, where the spark is generated precisely because they have not merged. Vesical work is monstrous in this sense. It exceeds the categories. It makes readers uncertain how to receive it. It does not resolve into either of its elements. This is not a flaw. It is the condition of its existence.

For a deeper look at the monstrous coniunctio in action—and what it looks like when alchemy meets cinema—take a look at my essay Bodies as Alembics over on Origami Chicken.

I think about this in relation to my own writing practice. My thesis is a hybrid scholarly-surrealist text—phenomenological accounts of the creative process interrupted by surrealist irruptions, alchemical stages

structuring a practice that is simultaneously the subject and the method of the research. The scholarly apparatus and the automatic image are not taking turns. They are conducting the same inquiry through different instruments simultaneously. The knowing produced in the surrealist irruption is not illustrating the scholarly argument. It is producing a different quality of understanding by different means. Remove either element and you do not have a shorter thesis. You have a thesis that no longer knows what it knows.
This is what vesical work does. It holds the tension. It refuses to choose.

A note on rigour

Coining a term and arguing that vesical work produces genuine knowing could sound like a license for anything—as if any work that refuses categorisation is automatically serious. This is not what I am arguing. The monstrous coniunctio is not chaos. The alchemists were precise. Genuine conjunction requires that both elements are fully present and genuinely in tension—not one element with a token gesture toward the other. The third thing is produced by the collision of two serious things. Vesical work has its own rigour. It asks whether both elements are genuinely load-bearing. Whether the collision produces something neither contains. Whether the form is the only possible form for what the work knows.
Not everything that calls itself hybrid can answer these questions. The decorative image inserted into an academic argument. The lyric interlude that softens the essay without deepening it. The creative writing appended to a research project as evidence rather than as inquiry. These are not vesical. They are two things in proximity.
If you are wondering what surrealist criticism actually looks like on the page, take a read of The Hijacked Dream—a collaborative paper by me and fellow vesical inhabitant Faith Harkey.

The space no circle makes

I set up Vesica Press because I needed the container to exist. Not as a service to writers—though I hope it serves them—but because the thinking required a home and I could not find one that had been built to its shape.
But this essay is not a pitch for the journal. It is an account of why I coined a term and what I believe it names. The term came first. The press followed from it—the natural consequence of taking the thinking seriously enough to act on it.
Vesical work has always existed. Carson and Cahun and the JAR and the thesis that refuses to separate the poem from the argument. The work that accumulates in drawers because the labels do not fit. The piece that gets the admiring rejection—not quite right for us — from the journal that genuinely wanted to publish it.
It has always existed. It has simply been waiting for a word and a home.
Both exist now.

https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/ways-to-change-your-life/

Ways to Change Your Life

by Margaret Grayson • January 13, 202611 Comments

I could have a baby or I could buy a banjo I could write down my dreams each morning instead of eagerly surrendering them to the abyss of unmemory I could read the labels on food packaging buy organic eggs from happy chickens force myself to care about microplastics I could be Tiktok famous (if you ask my best friends who love me more than I deserve) or I could throw my phone into the river I could subscribe to the local newspaper I could do the crossword in pen I could volunteer my time for the needy or I could finally try psychedelics I could read a book about geology I could take a nap in a public park I could learn what a mutual fund is I could pretend I believe banks will still exist by the time I'm old enough to retire I could grow candy-colored dahlias and sell them by the stem at a roadside stand I could move to Lincoln, Nebraska, because I saw a really good sunset there once I could go to grad school (again) I could spend hundreds of dollars dying my hair blonde I could swear off mirrors swear off meat swear off men I could redownload Hinge and try harder this time to be enthusiastic about the hobbies of strangers or I could spend the rest of my life writing elegies for the hand I once held on a basement dance floor I could talk to my therapist about how thinking about death makes me lightheaded instead of spending 50 minutes overanalyzing minute social interactions I could sell my soul for the low, low price of $120,000 a year and a health insurance plan or I could plant garlic in the backyard (there might still be time before the first frost) I could be less sarcastic I could be less judgmental I could call my grandparents every week I could memorize a poem I could clean out my car or I could study witchcraft for the sole purpose of putting a hex on whoever decided white cloth seats were a reasonable choice for a Subaru Forester I could hold more grudges in general I could write letters to the editor and become known as a local political gadfly I could delete the news apps and go live off-grid and learn to hunt learn to draw learn to whittle bird figurines out of willow boughs I could start a pyramid scheme I could bike across the country I could sail across the world I could learn to paraglide I could literally learn to fly I could summon some real ambition for once I could live up to the promise of my second-grade report card I could die for a noble cause I could hand make all my Christmas presents I could unspool a tidy and sensible life or I could snap its threads between my teeth I could chase my fifteen minutes I could change the world for a day or I could wait to see how the afternoon light will move across my living room wall I could wonder how long it's been since I sat and watched the earth spin.

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https://thediagram.com/26_1/jurjevic.html

FULMINĀRE

Andrea Jurjević

sometimes nightmares come true: scanning obits, you
come across a dear name, the tapestry of birdsong
caves in, falls over the bedroom mirror—a scrim
parting this world from the next. the birds

fly left to right. the woods cry out
in tongues. I can't think *dead*, so I
conjugate high school Latin:
fulminō, fulminās, fulminat
fulminámus, fulminátis…

it used to be like this:
wading that bayou
the shadow-maps
of cottonmouths

shifted, and the
sky convulsed.
you said *Lady,*
the Delta can
make folks
disappear,

our feet
already
out of
sight.

gubile
se već
nam
noge

ljude
pojelo
ušće bi
rekao si
nebo grč.

premetala,
mokasini se
sjenovita karta
gazeći rukavcom

evo kako su stvari išle:
fulminámus, fulminátis…
fulminō, fulminās, fulminat
konjugiram latinski iz srednje škole:
u jezicima. ne smijem misliti *mrtav*, pa
letjeti s lijeve strane na desnu. šuma zacvili

što dijeli ovaj svijet od sljedećeg. ptice počnu
padne mutavo preko ogledala u sobi—ta prevlaka
prepoznaš drago ime, tapiserija ptičje pjesme se uruši,
ponekad se ružni snovi ostvare: dok snimaš osmrtnice i

I wrote this piece after hearing the news of a sudden and premature death of a former love. It's part of a series of bilingual shadow poems in which the English and Croatian versions of the same poem appear next to each other. In this case the Croatian version reads from the bottom up.

Pieces to translate/transform/play with

Kristin Omarsdottir, Icelandic

3 morgnar í röð

á morgnana drekk ég darjeeling te
tvo eða þrjá bolla með hunangi
og stundum laga ég tvo bolla af kaffi
handa vinkonu minni sem stundum gistir

og rista beyglu sem við skiptum á milli okkar
áður en ristavélin bilaði
nú hita ég beygluna í ofninum

vinkona mín er læst úti
hún er búin að vera læst úti í þrjá daga
og þess vegna er ég búin að laga bæði kaffi og te
þrjá morgna í röð

Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska

Ciotki

Ciotki nie były piękne, nie miały nic z wróżek.
Były dzielne, szczawiowe, barchanowe żony.
Nie miały złotych włosów ani cienkich nóżek,
ani oczu złowrogich o rzęsach zdziwionych.

Brały serio swe dzieci, kwiaty i owoce,
mężów trzymały krótko, perfum nie lubiły,
zasypiały spokojnie w księżycowe noce,
pełne kurzej tężyzny i jaglanej siły.

Jedynie ciocia Jola wiotka i pachnąca
przypominała wróżkę i paryską lalkę.
Chodziła w piórkach ptasich i tiulach ze słońca,
całowała, podnosząc gwiaździstą woalkę...

Wkrótce ją jakieś wichry żałosne rozwiały
wśród wiosennych błyskawic i szumów ponurych...
Zgrzebne ciotki płakały – lecz nic nie wiedziały,
jaki był smak miłości i... trutki na szczury.

Maria Barnas, Dutch

Jaja de oerknal

Jaja de oerknal hoor ik mezelf zeggen.
Hoe is het mogelijk dat dit in mijn mond past?
Het ontstaan een klont op mijn tong.

Stil. Angst is een zwerm die rust in een boom.
Of zijn het woorden die zich inktzwart
op de takken verdringen. Het is een vorm

van paniek die opwelt in mij en als opvliegende
zwerm uit mijn keel breekt. Het heelal slaat
de vleugels uit. Wij klapwieken en juichen schril.

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