

IWWA Falmouth Conference Proposal

Dr. Louise Bell

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Bio:

Louise Bell is an artist-academic based in the South West of England. Her interdisciplinary practice spans image-making, writing, walking, and curation, using creative methods to explore how the past is encountered through embodied experience. She completed an AHRC-funded practice-led PhD at Falmouth University, developing illustration as a methodology for engaging with histories of place through empathy and material encounter. Louise is a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies at Falmouth University, where she teaches across visual culture and creative practice, and continues to develop research that bridges artistic and theoretical approaches to landscape, memory, and feminist methodologies.

Title: **Utterance and Silence: Feminist Phenomenologies of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich**

Abstract:

This paper examines the encounter between two fourteenth century Norfolk women, the mystic Margery Kempe and the anchoress Julian of Norwich, as a moment of transmission between two distinct phenomenologies of female mysticism: one grounded in vocal, mobile embodiment and the other in enclosed, contemplative stillness.

Kempe, often regarded as the author of the first autobiography in English, dictates a text marked by movement, affective excess, and vocal disruption, in which weeping, speech, and pilgrimage constitute modes of devotional knowledge. Julian, by contrast, writes from within the spatial and sensory constraints of the anchorhold, producing writing grounded in stillness, the small, repetition, and interior vision. Bringing these figures into dialogue, the paper argues that their writings articulate divergent yet complementary modes of lived experience: one outward, relational, and acoustically expansive; the other inward, iterative, and contemplative.

Drawing on feminist phenomenology, this paper is not a theological or historical analysis of the texts but an artist's examination of medieval women's writing as a form of embodied knowledge production. It proposes that voice and silence, movement and enclosure, are not merely oppositional states but gendered strategies through which authority is negotiated, constrained, and reconfigured. By considering Margery Kempe's visit to Julian of Norwich as a moment of contact between two alternative modes of female experience, the paper suggests that medieval women's mysticism offers not a singular model of subjectivity, but a spectrum of phenomenological possibilities that complicate modern distinctions between expression and interiority, and agency and containment.