

HOW CAN THE SOLO FEMALE PERFORMER BE RENDERED PRESENT THROUGH  
ABSENCE?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through both practical and textual research, this thesis explores whether it is possible to be both present and a presence in performance time and space through absence. Within it, I offer a discussion of the concepts of presence and absence, and what they mean in a theatre/performance context, before questioning how present the female physical body can be to an audience, when seen or perceived through a screen, as a shadow form.

## CONTENTS

Introduction	P. 3
Chapter 1. Performance and Presence/Absence	P. 5
Chapter 2. <i>The Invisible Woman</i> and Female Visibility in Performance	P. 13
Chapter 3. Photography and Presence/Absence	P. 22
Chapter 4. Shadow and Space	P. 36
Chapter 5. <i>Skiagraphia</i> : A Practical Reflection	P. 45
Conclusion	P. 65
Bibliography	P. 69
Appendices	
i. <i>Skiagraphia</i> filmic documentation	P. 73
ii. Symposium paper	P. 74
iii. Conversation with Helena Hunter about <i>Tracing Shadows</i> .	P. 80

## INTRODUCTION

I have come to this exploration through my interest in solo female performers, and how they command a presence in front of an audience. Within my undergraduate dissertation I questioned how the moving female nude body could potentially disrupt the passivity of the gaze. It was through this enquiry that I was introduced to Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*, and became fascinated with the idea that invisibility, and particularly the invisibility of women, could be re-valued as a positive state. This thesis is an attempt to discover how my physical absence (through a literal form of invisibility: the shadow) can play a role in making myself present, or even more present in performance. Working with my body and shadow practically alongside the textual research, I intend to find how my corporeal female body can command a performance space through visual representations.

Yet, what is it to be present, to have presence and to *command* this strange quality? The first chapter offers a discussion of the terms which are so integral to this writing: presence and absence, while the following three chapters expand on how these terms can be applied in the contexts of photography and performance, seeking to find a way to make a presence out of an absence with the visual image of the shadow and body. Within these discussions, I will locate my practical research and within the final chapter I will present a reflection on the 'final performance': the practical product of this year MPhil study.

Both Jane Goodall and Cormac Power discuss what it is to have presence within the context of theatre and performance in two recently published books: Goodall's *Stage Presence* (2008) and Power's *Presence in Play* (2008). Both books are still only months old, indicating that seeking definitions and examples of what presence is appears to be a particularly present phenomenon. Now, at the point at which I feel I need to discover how I am present within performance space as a solo female performer and exactly how my presence can manifest itself, I find I am far from alone in wanting to explore the complexities of this remarkable force.

Indeed, Power begins his critique on theories of presence in the theatre with just the questions above: 'What is presence and what is present?' (Power, 2008, 2). This introductory question follows his account of seeing for the first time Robert Lepage's *Far Side of the Moon* in 2001. I too saw this performance and still remember each image in striking detail, it remaining a complete presence in my mind to this day, even though the live event is past, invisible and absent. Although Power does not dwell on the presence of the memory of the absent event (see Phelan below), it is evident through his detailed recalling of Lepage's actions and scenography that this performance still maintains some kind of presence for him. My interest in the memory's role in keeping alive a presence and what effect other mediums have on storing or documenting presence, specifically photography, will be the subject of further questioning later in the thesis. For now, however, it is important to look more closely at alternative definitions of presence and presentness in order to clarify how I intend to interrogate presence within the exploration of my body's command of it in performance.

## CHAPTER 1

### PERFORMANCE AND PRESENCE/ABSENCE

It is no easy task to define the word presence. In fact it seems to escape fixed definition. However both Power and Goodall introduce their analysis of theatrical presence with the relationship between the performer and the audience, signalling that in order to be perceived as present or a presence there must also be a witness to the effect. Theatre and presence are ‘so connected as to seem almost synonymous’ (Power, 2008, 1), as both rely on the audience, another body sharing simultaneous time and space. Peter Brook opens *The Empty Space* citing exactly these terms:

I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to take place. (Brook, 1990, 11)

Goodall’s introduction includes accounts of encountering presence, further emphasising that identifying presence is in the eyes, ears and hands of ‘others’. Through following ‘the narratives of many different writers’ (Goodall, 2008, 7), she is able to discuss reoccurring metaphors in audience member’s reflections of performances and performers that neither she nor the reader can bare witness to in the live moment. Writing about performance is a form of bearing witness, of providing a textual presence for the absent live event, and as this thesis partners a performance I find it particularly poignant that I am attempting to preserve the presence of my live work through this medium. Peggy

Phelan expands on the limitations of writing about performance in *Unmarked* (1993), observing that to write about a form that leaves ‘no visible trace afterward’ is in effect ‘to cancel the ‘tracelessness’ inaugurated within this performative promise’ (Phelan, 1993, 149). Performance is present in its particular ‘time/space frame’ (ibid.), and as a result resists reproduction.

Although Goodall’s borrowed narratives capture glimpses of presence within the richness of their description, the reproduction of a past moment contains a distinct sense of loss. In the search for presence we experience quite the opposite: ‘there is always something missing’ (Goodall, 2008, 5). This follows the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, who challenged the metaphysical quality of presence by promoting its binary opposite: absence and therefore questioned the usefulness of the binary. It is not surprising therefore that much of the criticism on theatrical presence engages with Derrida’s theories, relating the idea that presence contains ‘traces’ of absence, placing scrutiny on ‘the idea of theatre as a “live” and present phenomenon’ (Power, 2008, 5).

It seems obvious that there is a loss of presence in attempts at reproducing the live event through mediums such as writing, photography and film. Yet for Derrida there seems also to be a loss, an absence, in the moment of the live event itself, the moment one may presume to be the ‘most present’. Elinor Fuchs, in her analysis of Derrida’s influence on the understanding of presence, asserts that ‘Theatre is ever the presence of the absence and the absence of the presence’ (Fuchs, 1985, 172). Fuchs is here discussing Derrida’s philosophy as having a particular parallel with how contemporary performers are

negotiating theatrical presence, in which the illusion of spontaneous speech is exposed. She writes about performance groups like the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman's company explicitly using the written text (visually in the design of the set, as well as scripts in hand) and suggests that, by exposing the long-hidden text behind the speech, theatrical presence may be undermined (Fuchs, 1985, 163), as the illusion of character is broken. Derrida writes on the 'privileging of speech at the expense of writing' (Fuchs, 1985, 165), which makes for a deconstruction of presence centred on the linguistic component of performance, and specifically performance with a play-text and characters. Although I am using neither text nor character, and within this research I will privilege the visual image over speech as a sign of presence/absence, Fuchs's essay remains significant to my research. Theatre is ever the presence of the text/writing and the absence of the speech act, as well as the presence of the speech act and the absence of the text/writing. How can this translate to the image, or the spectacle in performance? Can I understand the graphic image itself to be a form of writing, especially as it is 'written' or 'drawn' or developed over the duration of the performance, like a script would be read and played out?

Power, discussing Derrida's essay on 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', also writes about the difficulty of attaining a theatrical experience, which is purely a 'living 'present' spectacle' (Power, 2008, 138). While Artaud sees the answer to attaining a 'present' theatre in rejecting drama and representation, Derrida notes this as an 'ambitious and impossible desire' (Ibid.) as theatre so much centres on the art of representation as to complicate any notion of undisturbed presence. Derrida's



essay sees presence and absence in play with each other in theatre, neither one cancelling the other out, but rather ‘as a “conflict of forces”’(Power, 2008, 139).

This conflict of presence and absence as emphasised by Derrida in relation to Artaud’s theatre serves also to complicate the audience/performer relationship. As Power observes, in contrast to Artaud’s vision for performance, within most Western theatre ‘the ‘world’ of the audience is separated from that of the actors’ (Power, 2008, 138). Each ‘world’ operates in its own present time and space, as well as interacting with each other’s. Power cites Gertrude Stein’s essay ‘Plays’ in which she suggests that the audience and the performance they are watching are operating in different time frames, the audience in ‘emotional time’ and the performance in ‘syncopated time’. As the audience is always either ‘behind or ahead of the play’ (Power citing Stein, 2008, 91) whether catching up emotionally with an event which has passed or thinking ahead in anticipation of what is to come, Stein’s theory suggests the audience and performers cannot share a presence in time.

Yet the power an audience holds in determining a performer’s presence is inescapable, and is more the subject of Goodall’s analysis. Throughout *Stage Presence*, Goodall offers metaphors for presence, formed and applied through performance history and developments in religion, philosophy and science. Focusing to a greater extent on the performer’s presence than the presence of the performance event, she discusses the imagery surrounding the human force. In her writing and in the testimonies of others she includes, the audience are frequently accomplices to the manifestation of presence.

Indeed rather than being separate ‘worlds’, they often fuse together in moments when exceptional displays of presence are taking place; when the awe inspired by the ‘balance between the audience, cast and theatre’ is marked ‘by a silence palpable as the theatrical velvet of an unvoiced echo’ (Goodall citing Norman Mailer, 2008, 40).

The metaphorical, poetic language of Mailer’s observation is far from unusual in attempting to describe presence. We search for feelings and forces, which can add texture to our experiences of the state of being. When responding emotionally to presence there can be no right or wrong definition and this translates as a challenge when writing critically about it. Power’s analysis of presence is far less concerned with the ‘magical’ qualities of presence than Goodall’s. Within his chapter on ‘auratic presence’, focusing on how an actor can have presence, he recognises this as the aspect of theatrical presence ‘most difficult to define’ (Power, 2008, 47).<sup>1</sup> It *is* the most difficult to define, as ‘auratic presence’ is that which can not be acted into being, or to use another term of Power’s, *fictionalised* into appearing as present:

The auratic mode of presence is...very different from the fictional mode; while the latter is concerned with the *making-present* of fictional phenomena, auratic presence refers to the *having* of presence. (Power, 2008, 47)

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<sup>1</sup> Power cites Walter Benjamin’s use of ‘aura’ within his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in which the aura of an artwork is ‘its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’ (Power citing Benjamin, 2008, 47). Benjamin’s discussion of the ‘aura’ is also significant in regards to my enquiry into photography (the subject of my first chapter). Benjamin writes of the cult value of early photography in preserving the remembrance of loved ones and observes: ‘for the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face’ (Benjamin, 2008).

The 'fictional mode' is emphasised by Power as the struggle in theatre between 'that which is present' and 'the present that is pretended' (Power, 2008, 44) and relates strongly to dramatic performance where an actor plays a character and in doing so merges different presences: the 'real' and the 'unreal'. Goodall also deals with the auratic mode within *Stage Presence*, with her specific focus on celebrity figures in recent performance history, including David Bowie and Bob Dylan. Similarly in Joseph Roach's *It*, Roach focuses his attention on the extraordinary and compelling power 'possessed by abnormally interesting people' (Roach, 2008, 1). Here too Roach is applying 'It' to famous historical presences.

How then can I command presence without the notoriety that seems to advance the auratic fulfilment? Within this introduction I can offer Power's answer to this question, yet within my practical work this will be one of the key motivations and so will be re-addressed through working with my own body in performance space investigating what expression and positioning of my body can command auratic presence. Indeed Power's answer is two-fold; the first part fulfilling the criteria above (the 'fame or reputation of the actor' (Power, 2008, 47)), the second part identifying that presence can be 'constructed *in the act* of performance'. However, I am not 'the charismatic actor' (Power, 2008, 49) and it is not my intention to find a way of commanding presence through dramatic performance; I intend neither to follow a play text nor devise a character. Rather, I propose an alternative method to investigate how presence works in

performance, one that will include both presence's 'other': absence, and my body's 'other': my shadow. Roach further identifies 'it' as:

The power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength and vulnerability, innocence and experience, and singularity and typicality among them. (Roach, 2007, 9)

Indeed Roach uses the self-titled 'pathetic wish' of Greta Garbo: that she wanted to be alone, as an example of absence only serving to compound and even enhance presence. Can my physical absence somehow play a role in making me both present and a presence in performance?

This question brings into account not only the 'auratic mode of presence', in which I investigate how my body or my shadow can literally command a presence, but also as Power further categorises: the 'literal mode of presence' (Power, 2008, 87). The literal mode of presence, more 'factual' (Ibid.) than the considerably more emotional sense of auratic presence, 'proposes to explore an emerging 'post-modern' concern with demystifying 'aura' and asserting instead the centrality of the spectator's experience' (Ibid.). It is significant that while Goodall and Roach write about the slippery nature of defining various models of auratic presence, they are wary of demystifying it with Goodall choosing alternatively to term her book a 'poetics of presence' (Goodall, 2008, 7), and Roach stating that 'No one can either find or forget 'it'' (Roach, 2007, 44). The process of 'demystifying "aura"' would appear to be as difficult as defining it.

While seeking a way in which to command a presence, which emanates from my performing body in terms of aura, I also wish to interrogate this literal mode of presence that concerns my visibility in front of an audience. Yet these two modes are linked: Can I be present through my presence? Can an audience perceive me as a present being if my body appears absent, but my presence is *felt*? These are not questions, which search to demystify presence, but rather seek to understand the complexities of being both physically present and emotionally a presence. In using my shadow as the principle performer, I ask to what extent my physical body still holds presence and is perceived as present? I arrived at the shadow by working with projector lights in my initial studio practice. Engaging with the space alone, I found myself drawn to the shadows I cast, almost as if in the role of a director. I could work with the shadow as a performing visual in its own right, manipulating its form, shape and size and through it could see or perceive myself in the space. In questioning how I could be most present in performance I wondered whether this absence of my body could render my corporeal body more present. The use of my shadow and how its image form as an ‘other’, a doppelganger, and even an alter ego affect these questions of presence is the subject of Chapter 2. However, it is important to illustrate here how visibility is affected by presence and absence, and specifically to interrogate the privileging of *seeing* a present body in performance in perceiving a presence to exist.

## CHAPTER 2

### ***THE INVISIBLE WOMAN AND FEMALE VISIBILITY IN PERFORMANCE***

In exploring this relationship between seeing and presence, I wish to refer to Robertson's (Etienne Gaspard Robert) presentation of his *Phantasmagoria* show for the first time in 1798 and most particularly to one of the preludes to the main event, the spectacle of *La Femme Invisible*.

Robertson's illusion of the invisible woman relied on the audience perceiving presence in absence: experiencing a heightened sense of the performer's presence through her corporeal absence. Yet the great sonic force of the voice demands to be located as present, as 'the *thereness* of sound becomes the *hereness* of sound in the ear of the receiver' (Smith, 1999, 8), connecting the performer to her audience in ways the silent image cannot so immediately convey. This is not to say that ascertaining bodily presence through the voice is uncomplicated, but its complexity is for another journey of exploration entirely. It is the visual presence in performance that is of concern to me within this thesis and my accompanying practice.

Although I am here addressing the way in which the female voice renders the woman present, I believe it provides a useful and interesting commentary on female visibility in a performed context. I offer the invisible woman for just this reason, as some of the questions it raises are integral to this thesis.

The Invisible Woman Show displayed a contradiction in terms: a spectacle in which there was nothing to *see except absence*. Spectators were herded into a room containing an elaborate contraption supposedly conducting sound from the glass ball (or box) hanging from the ceiling. A chosen spectator was invited to converse with the girl whose bodiless essence was claimed to reside in the suspended container. To the amazement of all onlookers, the unseeable woman could describe spectators, name objects held up below the glass, and even make her breath felt through the tubes. (Matlock, 1996, 175) [Italics mine]

How can we *see* absence? Can a female body be present through her corporeal absence? In Robertson's *Invisible Woman Show* it was the female *voice*, supposedly trapped and emanating from the central glass orb, which commanded the performance space and served to provide a certain proof of presence, or 'acoustic presence' (Matlock, 176). With the female body absent in the space of performance, the crowds were tantalized by the voice, which could respond to the questions they asked. In providing answers to the audience's questions 'they learned that she could see them as perfectly as they failed to see her' (Matlock, 1996, 176). The invisible woman was present in that she could prove she shared the audience's time and space, so that even though her body remained absent, through the act of dialogue with the voice the audience could perceive the female body as a presence. Indeed, it would appear that it was the woman's ghostly ability to be both present and absent that made this attraction so compelling: her shifts between presence and absence granted her a certain 'auratic' presence to use Power's term. This command of both states of being (literally being both present and absent before the audience) is

what I wish to explore in my practical work as a possible route through which to discover how I may hold ‘auratic’ presence.

French crowds flocked to see the latest spectacle in the form of a room with a central ‘glass ball’, and marveled at its genius for concealing the body whose voice emanated from within. As the attraction grew in fame and the form multiplied across Europe, criticism of the hidden woman emerged, questioning the gender politics inherent in this concealing of the female body. As Jann Matlock notes in her essay *The Invisible Woman and her Secrets Unveiled*, a pamphlet guide to Paris in 1801 asked ‘Why hide a woman?’ (Matlock, 1996, 191) and she very rightly adds that this is still a question we may ask now. Indeed, it is important to ask the same of my research question – why do I want to hide my female body in performance?

*The Invisible Woman* was Robertson’s conception in as far as the construction and design of his spectacular show, yet the significance of the ‘invisible woman’ in both art and life pre-dates his illusion’s title by many centuries. The history of female presence in theatre practice alone tells the stories of many invisible women, for as Sue-Ellen Case identifies ‘for most of the history of patriarchal culture, ownership of property, the public arena, written language and theatre itself have been exclusively, or almost exclusively, male’ (Case, 1988, 28). While the absence of women in theatre, from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance stage, was imposed by a history of male domination over and within the form, now after a series of critical female interventions and, most crucially for this discussion, women’s performance art of the 1970s (which made explicit a female



presence) a shift has occurred. Noticing an increasing number of solo female performers who use an explicit absence of their self or their body in varying ways (Helena Hunter, Oreet Ashery, Claire), I have been drawn to this phenomenon: this re-location into the realm of the unseen, as a contemporary form of empowerment, and paradoxically a way in which to heighten their presence in performance.

It is my intention that through exploring the presence contained within absence, I will find a way of commanding the performance space as a solo female performer.<sup>2</sup> What form of visual absence can render me most present? What are the political implications of hiding myself in order to be ‘seen’? Although at first it might seem obvious to equate being seen/being visible with being present, within *Unmarked* Peggy Phelan writes about visibility politics as being far more complex, and indeed identifies the presumption that ‘increased visibility equals increased power’ as one ‘bear[ing] further scrutiny’ (Phelan, 1993, 7). For Phelan, ‘visibility is a trap’ and ‘there is a real power in remaining unmarked’ (Phelan, 1993, 6). Within the ‘unmarked, unspoken and unseen’ there is a power, which the entrapment of visibility denies. This is especially explicit when relating to performance, as ‘without a copy, performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility’ (Phelan, 1993, 148).

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘commanding’, I mean successfully holding the attention of an audience in the performance time and space.

In Peggy Phelan's identification of an uneasy notion – that of the woman as unmarked – I find myself attuned to both the problem and the possibility of visibility as a feminist issue. It is through Phelan's thesis and her clear articulation of how both Lacan and Derrida have informed her analysis that I have been able to see a way to investigate the thorny territory of visibility in my own work. I have been struck by the generational difference between myself, as a reader, and an older generation for whom Phelan's analysis was regarded as a ground-breaking and important mapping of an urgent feminist concern. I came to the ideas of the woman as *other* and the risk of representation as already familiar tropes. And yet, in reading the theoretical debates within *Unmarked*, I was both intellectually and emotionally moved to the realization that the learned attack on a patriarchal system of attribution of visibility is as urgent now as ever. It is the present day urgency of Phelan's thesis that has informed much of my own explorations, at a time when female visibility seems both a trap and an escape. It is by engaging with the notions of visibility that I have aimed to include myself in the visibility and even audibility of this most resistant of texts.

By escaping visibility, one may escape categorisation, judgment and projected meaning. Phelan writes of an '*active vanishing*' (Phelan, 1993, 19), signaling that, conversely, invisibility can also be the state of painful passivity. An active vanishing, however, implies a movement, a non-passive *action*, into and out of invisibility: a purposeful shift from seen to unseen and back again. As 'a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility' (Phelan, 1993, 19), the active vanishing is a political action charged with self-determination. Within my practice I am keen to exploit this notion of the active

disappearance, being the director of my own body's (in)visibility in front of an audience – choreographing *my own* vanishing.

Phelan's assertion that 'visibility is a trap' has been especially significant in my choosing to explore how my unseen body may hold a heightened presence in performance time and space. I am making the decision to remain unseen in my practice in order to disrupt the passivity of the gaze on my female body. Phelan's concern over the 'forgetting' of the articulations of the 'feminist film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s' (Phelan, 1993, 6) is particularly relevant here, as the discourse those theorists initiated – most notably in Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* – specifically problematised the positioning of the female body as a site onto which male desires could be projected. Mulvey draws particularly on Jacques Lacan's essay *The Mirror Stage*, extending and discussing the idea of *le regard* – which Lacan identifies with an infant's early reaction to their own reflection and its significance to the entry into a symbolic order – in relation to the 'male gaze' and the cinematic representation of femininity.

Woman...stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (Mulvey, 2003, 44)

It is 'the silent image of woman' as 'bearer, not maker, of meaning' which urgently highlights the potential entrapments of visibility. The male gaze constructs the meaning of the woman offered as image on screen. I have chosen within my practice to interrogate how the visual representation of my own body can command a presence by being at once visible and invisible, and in this way I have attempted to challenge the fixed position, or

trap, of visibility. It is the slippage between the visible and its other that is for me the only resistant possibility in remaining unmarked while still being present and in command. In avoiding the use of my own voice, I will be offering a “silent” image. The risk of arousing the fantasies and obsessions of the male gaze is a calculated risk I wish to take. By both making and bearing meaning, through performing within my own conceptual conceit, the intrigue for me is exactly how resistant this attempt will prove to be in its live moment of performance.

The challenge for me then is to create an image of woman in performance, who is complicit in the making of meaning with the spectator through subverting the presumption that we know everything from what we are able to see. Phelan's *Unmarked* celebrates the politics of invisibility, as the state in which one may escape categorisation, or being “fixed” into any one meaning. While Mulvey theorises within a psychoanalytical framework on cinema, her writing is relevant to both my thinking and my practical research in that I am working with my shadow, essentially as an image on screen. I am indebted to both these writers for an understanding of something I thought I knew. The dangers of female representation are for my own generation slipping from view. Coming from a generation that has assumed a post feminist ease with masquerade it has been a vital reminder of the fetishization of the female by a patriarchal system which shows few signs of abating. It is Peggy Phelan's insistence to remember, to not forget, the ground breaking work of resistant feminism of an earlier time, for her the seventies and eighties feminist film theorists, that has caused me to identify my own indebtedness to her own theoretical debates. My practice is I hope a way of acknowledging the continuum. The

indebtedness to earlier feminist texts being not so much a nostalgic exercise but rather an attempt to incorporate a vital and still pertinent analysis.

My body's active vanishing in performance will echo the vanishing of performance itself, as Phelan observes it plunging into 'a maniacally charged present' and then 'disappearing into the realm of invisibility'. This is a feature performance shares with photography, as like the moment at which the camera shutter clicks and the present moment is already dead, each live act is rendered invisible at the boundary lines on which it occurs. Within Power's discussion of *The Presence of Liveness* he cites Derrida for whom 'the theatre is always born of its own disappearance', alongside Phelan's assertion that 'performance becomes itself through disappearance' (Power, 2008, 171). Both theatre and performance escape reproduction or immortality as 'perpetually present' documents. Of course performance 'disappears into memory', while photography creates a document: the photograph, which lives beyond the live moment as a reproduction.

Within the next chapter I interrogate in detail the photograph as a space in which presence and absence shift, as well as its function as a medium of reproduction. The photograph has the potential to multiply both presence and absence, and is further complicated when the subject matter is already absent (as in photographing a shadow). This is valuable to my practice in live performance, as not only is photography repeatedly used by female artists to make performance work specifically for camera, but also photography is the medium in which many live events exist in the after-life of the performance. The way in which women artists have used photography is of particular

interest here, as it almost serves as a claim to or a certificate of presence, a proof of having 'been there and made that work', a proof of being visible.

## CHAPTER 3

### PHOTOGRAPHY AND PRESENCE/ABSENCE

#### **‘Taking’ the Live: The photograph as an object of presence and absence**

Writing about photography and the representation of subjects brings me to the curious fact that as a student of performance and as someone who has attempted to study the female performer I am highly reliant on photographic evidence of performances that took place in times past and despite insistence on the ‘one time onlyness’ of performance (Phelan) my research is heavily dependent on these frozen images. Therefore, there is a demand on photography to ascertain that which is impossible to experience in the conditions intended (i.e., an experience for an audience in real time and space with a real living body).

I will consider seminal images from female solo performance that have haunted the history or back-story of this area in the light of Barthes’s observation ‘that the rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph [is] the return of the dead’. Barthes’ term ‘punctum’ will also be considered as his assertion that ‘a photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (Barthes, 1981, 27) would seem to be essential in any attempt at determining what constitutes presence in a photograph. Indeed of specific significance to me (with reference to the discovery that

Barthes makes of his mother's photograph) is that presence is understood to be in the eye of the beholder.<sup>3</sup>

Susan Sontag describes Honore de Balzac's fear of being photographed: a fear of the camera stripping away a layer of his self. Balzac's poetic idea of the body being made up of many layers of 'ghostly images' (Sontag, 1979, 158) imagines that to capture a likeness, a representation in the photograph inflicts a kind of death of the subject. The term 'to capture' resonates with the definition of possession, of a body being forcefully stolen from its own command. Balzac's reckoning is with his image being taken captive by way of the particular mechanism of the camera: the image maker which creates 'an extension of [the] subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it' (Sontag, 1979, 155).

The magical quality of the photograph - to capture an image of the past, a visual souvenir of time lost - is simultaneously the freakish property, which holds time (and the subject) silent and still: the recording of the 'that-has-been' (Barthes, 1981,). Balzac's fear of his own image being 'taken' is an ancient fear, and one recorded in anthropological writings. In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer describes the traditional idea of the

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Metz has also asserted that 'the punctum, which is the part of the photograph that entails the somewhat uncanny feeling of off-frame space, depends more on the reader than the photograph itself' (Metz, 1985, 87). While acknowledging that the photographs I will consider have already been selected and have entered the canon and the history of performance, I will approach them with some degree of subjectivity.



‘shadow as the soul of the owner’, and the photographer as a threatening figure, with the ability to entrap the ‘shades in his box’ (Frazer, 2000, 191).<sup>4</sup>

How do we determine presence in absence? The Photograph, as an image containing ‘both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’ (Sontag, 1979, 16) encompasses a shifting movement between the two states. For Barthes, searching for his mother in old photographs, ‘truth’ is what will determine her unique presence. He describes how none of the photographs seemed “‘right”: neither as a photographic performance nor as a living resurrection of the beloved face’. However, what he poignantly asks of the perfect image is that it will *speak* (Barthes, 1981, 27). Presence then is defined here by the possibility of a connection between the photographic object and the viewer, a relationship which holds the promise of speech and its connective properties of conversation and dialogue. Barthes demands a human action from the photograph, just as ‘being present’ is the action of the live body. Barthes’ mother will never speak or be present in death, but through the particular essence of the photograph she may do so symbolically. That Barthes finds the perfect Winter Garden picture signals a triumph of sorts, yet his mother’s presence, and photograph’s ability to speak is peculiar to him. Barthes holds back this picture; it will inflict ‘no wound’ on the reader. This chosen photograph therefore ‘becomes the absent (and hence more potent) referent of Barthes’s paean to presence’ (Perfloff, 2003, 33). Identifying presence therefore is always particular to the eye of the beholder.

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<sup>4</sup> Relating a story of villagers on the Yukon River being photographed by an unnamed explorer, Sir Frazer identifies the villagers own words as “He has all your shades in his box” (Frazer, 2000, 191)

Barthes never knew his mother as a child, but in that photograph identified a ‘bright gentleness’ or essence or presence that he was searching to find after her death. It is noteworthy that he could identify presence in a photograph from a time in which he simply wasn’t there. This corresponds with my looking at the photographs of performers whose actions and presence have reached me via these frozen images. Unlike the private experience of searching through a collection of snap-shots, all the photographs I will refer to in this chapter have been already selected as those that hold presence and will live on after the life of the performer and the actual time and date of the live performance.

In such cases where performers are no longer alive these images of work that is all about being live and in the present have an uncanny resonance. The artist whose images I will look at in this category is Hannah Wilke. Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono are still alive but altered by age and status. To look back at their former selves is also in some way to view the deceased. It is only via a combination of reports, testimonies, transcriptions or recordings that the presence of such vital artists and commanding solo performers can reach across the years.

Hannah Wilke’s final performance for camera: *Intra-Venus* (1992-1993) is a haunting selection of images of the artist with cancer taken by her husband. The presence of Wilke in these pictures is powerfully manifest as is her inevitable absence as a result of her death (the photographs were only exhibited after her demise), and also by the absence of her former ‘self’: her youthful, healthy body which she had first used in the 1970s to articulate her explicitly feminine presence in the art world. Although criticised by certain

feminist critics, (most notably the feminist art collective *Heresies* to which Wilke belonged) for using an iconic, beautiful and desirable body to define her presence, her early performances for camera play with the contradictory qualities Roach describes: ‘singularity and typicality’, and furthermore when viewed with hindsight alongside *Intra-Venus* contain the inescapable contradiction of life and death. That Wilke presents her body for camera in both stages of its being emphasises an acknowledgment of the vulnerability of the human form.

The exhibition of *Intra-Venus* took place posthumously (Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York 1994). The omnipresence of the artist in the photographs perpetually reminds of the physical bodily absence in the here and now. What is also consistently provoking is that her photographic presence or representation is the result of a conscious record of her journey to physical absence. In the photographs below, Wilke poses, performing her altered body for the eye of the camera and her husband behind it. With these pictures, as with the narrative they contain of her personal and artistic history, she needs assistance and support in capturing her image. The intimacy of these pictures as the engagement between Wilke, the camera and her husband Donald Goddard create a very different presence than her defiant attack on ‘fascist feminism’.

Barthes re-iterates the mysterious fear of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*, defining what he seeks in the self-portrait as ‘Death: Death is the *eidos* of that photograph’ (Barthes, 1981, 15). The inescapable presence of potential absence feeds the notion of the portrait imbued/invested with death. Amelia Jones writes on the ‘simultaneity of

absence and presence' in the self-portrait, observing 'the inexorable passage of time rendering all seeming presence as absence – giving shape to the profound paradox of being human' (Jones, 2002, 13). In capturing through photography the presence of a living body, the result is a representation and documentation of the living presence, which will survive after death. Peggy Phelan writes, 'portrait photography tries to make an inner form, a (negative) shadow, expressive, a developed image which renders the corporeal, a body-real, as a real body' (Phelan, 1993, 36). Phelan is here stressing that the subject of photographic portraiture performs to the camera in order to express 'what we think we look like' (Ibid.). The (negative) shadow could be aligned with Benjamin's notion of 'aura' and Power's definition of 'auratic' presence, in that we can construct presence 'in the *act* of performance' (Power, 2008, 47). When being captured by photography, we (re)create ourselves in order to be represented as having presence, perhaps perpetuated by the subconscious knowledge that this document will be an 'auratic' presence after we are no longer a living presence.

The photographs of Wilke in *Intravenus #4* seem to possess the elusive quality that is presence, very knowingly performed to a camera in the proximity of her own impending absence. In her nakedness, bald and bearing the signs of her intravenous drip Wilke's eyes are open and engage the camera eye and therefore the viewer's. This creates a tension of reciprocal looking or returning the gaze. It also seems to be a way of staring at death, death itself or the tiny inevitable death of every photograph taken. The presence of her own shadow reiterates the corporeal presence. Wilke is inviting us to look at her 'now' at this stage of her life or death. Her ability to return the gaze with unflinching eyes

confronts the viewer with both her strength and vulnerability; a combination that recalls images of her from the seventies albeit in a very altered body and state. When her eyes are shut and her head and shoulders are covered, in what looks like a soft blue hospital blanket, the tension is dulled. The beatific silence of her closed eyes recall not only a religious expression but also the shut eyes of her own final sleep. Her body is bare in the first, her flesh and eyes are revealed, whereas in the other she is concealed: her eyes closed, hidden from the viewer. These two images offer an insightful comment on an effort to construct presence and absence through a posed image. The eyes act as a connective feature, whereby their position in addressing the viewer determines what could almost be like a physical presence. It seems to make the images more real.

While Wilke's photographs are performances for the camera, in which she has constructed the poses purposefully, the two iconic images of Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono are documentary photographs. They have become the enduring images of two now legendary performances: *Interior Scroll* and *Cut Piece*. As photographs taken from the live, they live on as the representation of what was once in full motion, still images which carry the trace element of the performances they represent.

In conversation with Alice Maud-Roxby, Schneemann stresses how much the history of her performance 'relies on archives of photographic documentation' (Maud-Roxby, 2007, 8), and how even if not explicitly constructed for camera, like *Eye/Body*, are all 'potentially alert to the camera' if an audience is present. Although there is always the possibility of camera use within spectatorship, Schneemann's account of being photographed during performance describes a moment of fusion, of connectivity when the flash 'blinds' her through the darkness: 'when the

flash goes off – it is vibrant, participatory – like some kind of lightning bugs, opening space within space’ (Maud-Roxby, 2007, 9). The action of the camera for Schneemann would seem to serve as a confirmation of presence: the flash illuminating her position in space, among an audience who she can’t see. As a document of a moment defining presence, the photograph of Schneemann performing *Interior Scroll* below captures her own affirmation of being ‘present’ in the here and now of her long ago performance.

The image, described by Lucy Lippard as ‘one of the icons of feminist art’ (Lippard, 1995), has become so famous through reproduction as to be a sine qua non of the history of Performance Art itself.

The image of a very young Yoko Ono is one of almost unbearable passivity (taken while she performed *Cut Piece* in 1964). The eyes are cast down or closed; the ambiguity heightens the discomfort for the viewer who is aware of the scissors and the potential for violence that the performance invites. It is, however, an image, which is dominated by the presence of the still figure who has after all created the entire situation and is, despite appearances, the force behind it. The extreme celebrity that has attended Yoko Ono since her marriage to John Lennon has added a further dimension to the images of her as a young Fluxus artist whose attitude and sensibility allegedly set the troubled Lennon ‘free’. Any reappraisal of her early performances and images thereof are almost impossible to view without the commanding presence that is Yoko Ono Lennon, widow of one of the most famous men ever. The restaging of *Cut Piece* in 2003 shows the youthful seventy year old looking out with an air of confidence, a wry expression and a direct return of the gaze. It is noteworthy that this photograph was taken by Bob Gruen,

known worldwide for his iconic Rock and Roll images, and for the last ever photograph taken of John Lennon with Ono. In another from the series, *Cut Piece*, 2003, she is seen with son, Sean Lennon Ono, thus reiterating her connection to the dead John. Her presence is intensified by the mythology and celebrity which now attends her.

### **Cindy Sherman: Photographing the ‘Other’**

Derrida experiences punctum: ‘it is the referent which through its own image I can no longer suspend, its presence forever escapes me, having already receded into the past’ (Jones citing Derrida, 2002, 961). Presence in photographs can never be without the threat of absence. The moment the shutter clicks, the captured moment is past: ‘taken’ from time and preserved. How does presence in the photograph alter when the image is fictionalised? What occurs when the performer constructs an identity for the camera’s lens? The double, which the phantasmagorical nature of the photograph promotes through creating what Phelan terms the ‘(negative) shadow’ or the self one may perform for camera, will be discussed through looking at Cindy Sherman’s photography.

Cindy Sherman’s performances for camera are never substitutes for the live. The performance lasts as long as the ‘shoot’, and lives on as the image selected from contact sheets of various poses. Unlike Schneemann’s frozen action in the *Interior Scroll* image Sherman is an actor who poses: her images are not interrupting the fluidity of live performance. Yet Sherman constructs images which, while being self-consciously staged, invite and indeed depend on a wider narrative to contextualise her body in

photographic space. Within her series *Untitled Film Stills*, instead of interrupting the fluidity (the trajectory of the live), the viewer is invited to look on an image interrupting a historical narrative and definition of the female body in film. While ‘we are free to construct our own narratives for these women’ (Cruz, 2001, 3) as the characters she presents are unspecified, the context of the female body’s role in film is inescapable. This is most explicit in Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* as her performance/pose of the female body references iconic female images, made so by male directors in the specific aesthetic of Film Noir. In this way Sherman usurps the male lens focused on the female body, reclaiming the photographic representation of the female body for herself by being both the photographer and the photographed.

The dual-role of being both behind and in front of the camera eye is further complicated by the duality of Sherman’s body as artist and acted character. Sherman’s shifting between either side of the camera in turn shifts her presence within the final image she creates:

She is an actor at the centre of the scene, creating an illusion, but not necessarily revealing Cindy Sherman. (Qualls, 1995, 27)

That Sherman should not reveal *herself* in these images (by which I mean Cindy Sherman, the artist), is a feature of her work much documented, as her photographs interrogate the fractured ‘self’, particularly the female self, admitting to ‘the ultimate unknowable-ness of the ‘I’ (Grundberg, 2007, 170). It is this aspect of her work:



Sherman performing multiple selves, which I intend to discuss here with specific reference to her *Film Stills*, in which the photographic medium is exploited as a means of playing with familiar representations of women on screen. While acknowledging that ‘much ink has been spilled over Cindy Sherman’ (Jones, 2002, 33), my intention is to question which, if any, ‘self’ holds a primary authority in her images. Introducing the mysterious theme of ‘doubling’, which is a significant feature of my practical work (in asking whether an ‘other’ self can hold more authority or presence in the performance space), I intend to locate Sherman’s photographs as instances of ‘representation itself [acting] as a form of doubling’ (Warner, 2004, 165). Looking at Sherman variously as photographer/artist, subject for camera and masquerading performer/actor, I will endeavour to seek which of these multiple selves is most commanding, most powerful and ultimately most present in the space of the photographic image.

Marina Warner dedicates a chapter to ‘doubling’ in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (2004). Within it she emphasises the long literary tradition of doubling the protagonist, which ‘offers another disturbing and yet familiar set of personae in ways of telling the self’ (Warner, 2004, 163). The spectre of the double is indeed fuelled by a sense of horror: while it ‘embodies a true self’ it is an illusion, a shadow of an ‘other’. Photography offers this double, this ‘(negative) shadow’, as the photographic image ‘is living with your identity’ (Warner, 2004, 13) in a captured visual state. Sherman’s appropriation or re-framing of Film Noir is of interest on many levels concerning the presence of the double. Within her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman re-interprets the female body in Film Noir, a genre which represented the duplicitous woman in the form of the

femme fatale: 'the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress' (Place, 2000, 47). In addition to the femme fatale, whose sexuality is at once her power and her ultimate downfall, the characteristic aesthetic of Film Noir ('silhouettes, shadows, mirrors and reflections') as defined by Janey Place 'suggests a doppelganger, a dark ghost, alter ego or distorted side of man's personality' (Place, 2000, 50).

The aesthetic of Film Noir promotes doubling, indeed manifests doubling in its shady corners and dark streets. Furthermore the female on the Film Noir screen controls the camera: 'they are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame' (Place, 2000, 55). The femme fatale is undeniably present, the camera moving with her and for her. Yet her presence is haunted by her predestined absence, as the threat of her sexuality results in 'active or symbolic destruction' at the hands of the Film Noir man. In her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman absents the man. Being the woman on film, and the director she freezes the female character commanding the shot. Like the femme fatale in Film Noir, the characters in Sherman's images 'control camera movement' (Place, 2000, 56), indeed they are the commanding subjects of the *Untitled Film Stills*. Yet Sherman's characters are suspended in their photographic frame, and as a result are without the threat of ever losing 'physical movement' and 'influence over camera movement' (Ibid.), unlike their Film Noir predecessors.

The characters in the *Untitled Film Stills* are already doubles, re-imagined heroines of the 1950s black and white screen. Although her characters are unspecified and not directly lifted from particular films, Sherman is acting characters which are recognisable as

ghosts, or silhouettes themselves of a female representation of the past. Sherman's appropriation of Film Noir characters are 'concealed within another shape' (Warner, 2004, 164), a different shape or state than that in which they were originally present (the moving film). Returning to Warner's discussion of what the 'double can entail', she writes that it is to be 'shadowed by another, and that someone else is living with your identity' (Warner, 2004, 163). Sherman (or the character in the image she represents) lives with the nameless identity of the borrowed female image from Film (Noir). She shadows the femme fatale, and through this shadowing promotes the presence of the character she plays the part of over her own. The women who played the parts long ago are preserved within the images. As well as the very present Cindy Sherman and the character she represents, the ghosts of Gloria Swanson, Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth, and film noir characters Gilda, Cora, Norma are all present.

Yet Cindy Sherman, the artist, does not disappear, she is not absent even if multiple female doubles occupy any one image. In her later work, Sherman absents her physical body completely from the shot, and in a notebook entry before making it, writes: 'What could I possibly do when I want to stop using myself and don't want "other people" in the photos?' (Sherman in Cruz, 2001, 163). One of the answers she writes is 'shadows'. While Sherman does not explicitly use shadows aesthetically in the *Untitled Film Stills* (although in some they are present), the images are loaded with the 'shadows' of multiple representations of women. Through Sherman's masquerade of various female 'types', she is akin to the psychic medium, the channel through which images (shadows) of the past can manifest themselves. For the moment that these alternative images are present

Sherman recedes, but never into absence, as she is the vector through which we can perceive these other images (the 'other'). As we perceive these through her own representation in the photograph, these 'other' images become 'other' *selves*.

To return to Quall's statement above, he situates Sherman as 'an actor at the centre of the scene, creating an illusion, but not necessarily revealing Cindy Sherman' (Qualls, 1995, 27). Cindy Sherman 'the artist' is elusive. As a result of claiming multiple identities in her work, they are simultaneously all *her*, and not her at all. She performs with masks, which enable the 'real' Cindy Sherman to retain a kind of anonymity. However it is this masking: the representation of 'other' women, which I would argue serves to make the viewer look more carefully or more deeply for who is actually representing these other women. As the image-taker and the image-maker: the camerawoman and the subject on the other side of the lens, Sherman is in authorial control and this presence is inescapable. Grundberg writes that Sherman's images 'deny the self', and through this 'they challenge the essential assumption of a discrete, identifiable, recognisable author' (Grundberg, 2007, 170). I would add to this that the 'challenge' is itself manifest in the images through the shifting presence and absence of Sherman herself. Furthermore, through 'denying the self' in representing characters, which allude to cinematic heroines she creates doubles that serve to re-define her own presence. Indeed her presence becomes all the more powerful as a result of its shifting state.

## CHAPTER 4

### SHADOW AND SPACE

Through practically questioning how my own body commands presence in performance space, I have become increasingly aware that my body *in motion* commands a force of ‘liveness’, ‘hereness’, a proof of presence, which my still body in photographic representation can not so easily convey. While photography offers a presence of my (past) body through absence, the photographic object remains as a still document. Although a performer can shift between presence and absence within photography’s static boundaries, as I have discussed above with reference to Sherman (making for a heightened sense of presence), performance space invites movement. *Shifting* itself implies motion: the movement from one position in time and space to another. Could I shift between photographic space and theatrical/performance space? Performance space demands movement, re-affirming life through the live body’s physical presence. Working with my shadow, my spectral double, within both photographic space (black and white film) and performance space (a black-box studio), I have been able to find relationships between these two spaces which propel my research into how I can command a presence in performance through my absence.

Comparing the camera box to the theatre box and the still image to the live image in motion I will endeavour to chart a process of discovery within this chapter, which combines both my practical and critical research. Both areas promote illusion making and I am concerned with how I can merge the photographic space into the performance

space in an attempt to emphasise my presence as a performer while remaining absent or unseen. Beginning with my initial research into performing for the camera and how this has shaped my conceptions of the performance of my shadow double, I will then discuss Robertson's magic lantern spectacle: the Phantasmagoria with reference to my initial practice in the performance space. Within the final part of this chapter I will question how these two practices could be combined in order to accentuate my presence in performance.

### **Shadows and the 'Other' in motion**

In an initial exploration I photographed myself with my shadow, questioning how the capturing of both images of my body (my actual body and my silhouette form) would impact on the sense of my presence. Would I double my own double by photographing my elusive shadow form (the shadow and the photographic image both being reflected 'doubles' of my actual body)? Would the shadow be as commanding as my actual body in the token of the photograph? Returning to criticism of the photograph, in which the stasis of the photographic image is explicitly linked with death and mortality, the 'capturing' of the live serves at once to preserve a ghostly presence as well as emphasising the absence of movement, action and ultimately life. Looking at my performances for camera, I was most struck by the locked potential movement I had captured. Rather than construct poses, I had purposefully allowed the camera to shoot while my shadow and I moved and danced together. What resulted were abstract shapes, *traces* of my body and shadow. Henry Fox Talbot, who produced the first photosensitized

paper for use inside a camera, and thus the first manifestation of the reproducible negative, wrote of photography as the 'art of fixing a shadow' in 1839 (cited by Nagel, 2001, 24). It is as a result of such early commentary on photography, identifying the shadow as the captured image of the photographed body, that I have come to use my shadow as a performance double: my reflected presence, which can appear with my actual body remaining unseen. Yet, ultimately, a shadow cannot materialise without the presence of the body to block the light and create the negative form. Indeed it is just this paradox which I wish to manipulate within the performance space to promote the potential for illusion making.

Peggy Phelan, writing on the brief career of photographer Francesca Woodman, identifies in her work a 'refusal to be still' (Phelan, 2002, 985). Woodman's images appear to contain ghosts, or ghostly fragments of a body (mostly her own) unbound by photographic limits, which are all the more sensitised in knowing that Woodman committed suicide at 22. Almost as a rehearsal for death (Phelan), Woodman captured her own image repetitively. Indeed in looking at her photographs, to return to Barthes's terminology, 'we are really looking at a return of the dead' (Perloff, 2003, 21). It is Woodman's motion, her 'dramatic force' (Phelan, 2002, 985) that most fascinates me, as she manages to transcend the boundaries of the photographic frame. Capturing movement in photography, as I have been exploring practically, produces abstractions of the subject to the point of absence: 'blurs' which are the ghostly exposures of the human form. These 'blurs' in turn mimic the form and substance of the shadow: they represent both a presence and an absence of the body. This is most explicit in Woodman's *Study*

*for Space*, a contact sheet in which not only does Woodman make herself into a shadow form through moving in front of the camera, but also, intriguingly, she locates her blurred body in space by drawing rough 'frames' around her body. These hard pen lines contrast with her soft bodily image, and almost serve to re-locate or re-define her within the image. The marks are proof of an after-life of the photograph and Woodman's need to affirm herself as present within the photographic space: her image was captured before she marked herself as present within them. In diagrammatically offering another dimension (another perspective) in which the figure can exist within the photographic frame, Woodman not only expands photographic space further, but re-frames herself. Francesca Woodman's work is particularly important to me in terms of my enquiry into the presence of the female body in space, as she makes the photograph (through her markings) into a three-dimensional performance space. Woodman is also relevant in terms of my concern with the materialisation of illusory doubles or others in order to command presence on behalf of the actual body.

In shifting herself *within* photographic space as well as outside it (being both photographer and photographed like Sherman), she commands multiple presences within her images. She moves through photographic space as a ghost, a shadow, and a female body changing her form within the stillness of each frame. It is almost as if Woodman becomes an illusion of herself by (dis)figuring her corporeal form into a shadow form. In *Rhetoric of the Image* Barthes, writing less emotionally on photography than in *Camera Lucida*, states that 'claims as to the magical character of the photographic image must be deflated' (Barthes, 1977, 44), dissuading his reader from experiencing the photograph as



illusion. Seeing the photograph as an absence (a token of death he concedes in *Camera Lucida*), Barthes writes 'it is in no way a presence' (Ibid.). Yet the photograph *is* an illusion: in its 'relation to past presence', it displays a 'massive illusion of 'presence'' itself (Crick, 1976, 269). I appreciate the photograph as a visual image of absence containing the presence of that absence. As a result the photograph (or at least in terms of a performance for camera) is a space in which illusion is very much at play, as highlighted by Woodman's pictures.

In an *Untitled* picture from 1976, Woodman's lower body is seen next to a silhouette of her body on the floor below. Here she creates another shadow, an impression of herself, though this time not through movement: the floor is coated in white powder, and Woodman's body has made the dark imprint. The proximity of Woodman's actual body to the ghostly stain serves to emphasise that it belongs to her: *is of* her. Only displaying the lower body in the shot, especially the black shoes emphasising the feet remind me of Wendy sewing Peter Pan's shadow back onto his feet. I am struck by the conceptual image of the shadow belonging to the feet. Of course as our feet make the most contact with the ground, this is where most shadows meet our body through blocking natural light. Within my practice I have been using artificial light, particularly the theatrical spot light (and the magic lantern which is discussed below) to create my performative shadow, and as a result have focused mainly on separating my body and shadow, in an attempt to 'detach' it and in doing so allow my double some autonomy as a performative figure.

Within *Phantasmagoria*, Marina Warner re-tells the story of ‘The Corinthian Maid’ (included in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*) in which the maid Dibutades draws round her lover’s shadow reflected on the wall, craving a ‘memento’ in anticipation of his impending absence. Her father then ‘pressed clay on this and made a relief’ (Pliny the Elder cited by Warner, 2006, 159). Fabled to be the first portrait created and thus ‘the origin of painting’, the impression of the lover, as Warner observes is more akin to a ‘cameo profile’: ‘closely related to silhouettes’ as ‘both play with inverted light and shade, relief and contour, and explore the inherent recognizability of an outline’ (Warner, 2006, 159). Indeed in one depiction of the tale, the representation of Dibutades’ lover is able to convey enough of the recognizability of the actual man, that ‘the very absences’ of his representation creates ‘psychological space, where the experience of the image grows so intense as to surpass its subject’ (Warner, 2006, 161). This is the experience I wish to elicit in the audience through detaching my shadow, and allowing it to perform through my absence.<sup>5</sup> Can my shadow image surpass my actual body to claim presence in the performance space?

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<sup>5</sup> The word ‘elicit’ is Latin in origin, in which it originally meant ‘to be drawn out through trickery or magic’.

## Photographic space to Performance space

Frederick Burwick cites Marian Hobson's discussion of the 'bipolar and bimodal conception[s] of illusion' (Burwick, 1991, 3) in his study of illusion in the Enlightenment and Romantic Era. While the bipolar conception of illusion sees the audience deceived 'mistaking art for reality', within the bimodal intention 'the spectator becomes an accomplice in conjuring illusion' (Ibid.). The French audience mistaking art for reality is what the first Phantasmagoria shows created by Etienne-Gaspard Robertson in the late Eighteenth Century thrived on. Robertson saw the potential of an early predecessor of the slide projector, the magic lantern (invented by Athanasius Kircher, a German priest, in the mid seventeenth century), to conjure spectacular phantom images before a horrified public whose collective consciousness was still haunted by the recent Revolution and Reign of Terror. Robertson was able to produce spectral figures, including 'recent agents and victims of the Terror' (Warner, 2006, 149) by projecting images both onto smoke and a screen coated in wax. Most poignantly in regards to my study in this chapter concerning pushing the static image into motion to enhance presence, he termed these images 'ambulant phantoms'. What Robertson achieved, which made his show not only original but scarily believable, was making static pictures *move* in front of an audiences eyes:

As well as moving the projector, he experimented with arrangements of lenses, and the play of shadows and the superimposition of one picture upon another to

create certain special effects: ghosts rolling their eyes, the flickering flames of hell, a ghostly dance of witches. (Warner, 2006, 148)

For the captivated audience movement was proof enough of validity, which is of particular interest to me here in deciphering the difference between the potential of a live body and a pictorial image to command presence. What is made clear from both Marina Warner and Terry Castle's writing on Robertson's Phantasmagoria is that these moving pictures were the commanding focus of all the spectators' eyes and minds. The illusion held authority in the performance space, yet Robertson (along with assistants), akin to the conceit of the Wizard of Oz in which the great magician's power is revealed to be nothing but humbug 'sorcery', was the actual body performing behind his spectres, directing them into being. While his magical spectacle played out, with ghosts flying over the audience's heads, he introduced each one with dramatic speech while creating elaborate potions: 'two glasses of blood, a bottle of vitriol, twelve drops of aqua fortis' (Castle citing Robertson's memoirs, 1998, 35). Robertson was undeniably present as the conjurer of his images, yet the popularity of such shows led to multiple imitations, where the public flocked to see not primarily the facilitators of such phantoms, but the phantoms themselves.

With reference to my questioning whether my shadow can command presence in the performance space, the reactions to Robertson's illusions would initially point to this being wholly possible, as his performances seem to emphasise the potential for the spectacle of illusion to focus attention over the corporeal body we encounter every day. Yet there are a number of features, which separate mine and Robertson's use of illusion.

Most significantly, Robertson's performances relied on the bipolar conception of illusion, illustrated above, in which he did not discourage his audiences from immersing themselves in his optical trickery and (mis)taking art for life. Working before people had access to photographs and cinema, Robertson could amaze with painted slides and smoke creating special effects, which today could never be received with so much investment of belief. With mass exposure to photography, cinematography and special effects digitally rendered for screen and occasionally stage, a contemporary audience's eyes are trained to 'see through' such optical tricks. The bimodal idea of illusion is more accurate to the contemporary audience's relationship with illusion, or at least in the case of drama. The spectator has to 'become the accomplice in conjuring illusion', through the suspension of disbelief.<sup>6</sup> The questions this advances in terms of commanding presence through my shadow, an illusion of my self, are (i) in taking an active role in creating the illusion, to what extent are the audience a commanding force in themselves? (ii) To what extent does the audience have the potential to render my self or my shadow-other more or less present?

While these are questions to be answered later, it is of importance to acknowledge the audience as playing a substantial part in the creation of a theatrical illusion. Indeed, aesthetic illusion happens in drama when both the spectacle and the spectator are present,

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed discussing Coleridge's aesthetic theory concerning the boundaries of dramatic illusion, Morrill condenses philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried von Herder's contention that the 'state of mind of an audience in a theatre' is akin 'to the condition of the mind in a dream' (Morrill, 1927, 440). This echoes Castles note, with regard to the Phantasmagoria here being discussed that 'nineteenth century empiricists' saw the 'mind as a kind of magic lantern capable of projecting the image-traces of past sensation onto the internal "screen" or backcloth of the memory' (Castle, 1988, 30)

‘when the sign’ can be ‘identified with the thing signified’ (Burwick, 1991, 107). Within my practical research I have been asking how the performance of my shadow affects the performance of my actual body, whilst questioning whether it is my body commanding presence in the performance space or the illusion of it. The use and design of the space I perform in, and the audience’s location within the space, are crucial aspects in determining my presence. Through projecting my shadow onto the walls and floors of the performance space, I have become aware that the performance will demand the widest scope of vision possible from the audience.

## CHAPTER 5

### **SKIAGRAPHIA: A Practical Reflection<sup>7</sup>**

The performance studio is a room I have got to know over five years.<sup>8</sup> Working in the space alone, I am overcome with the memories of past actions performed at various stages in my undergraduate degree: In just one corner of the room I identify myself imagining walking down the streets of my childhood, holding the ‘downward dog’ pose, auditioning with a Leonard Cohen lyric. Within this space I am aware of my past presences impacting on the present: my multiple selves through my whole life in Glasgow mapped out on its uneven floor. I cannot escape this immediate reaction to the space in which I have been working on this project, as in questioning my presence I am haunted by memories of presences I *have been* or *once was*. Cormac Power, whose critique of differing forms of presence in the theatre has been so instrumental in shaping my initial enquiry, taught me in this room when I first started University. I want to acknowledge this complex manifestation of presence, as although this has not been the fore-grounded approach within my work, my past presences have collided in this time I have been searching for an answer to understand how I can be present through absence. Using the studio space as a palimpsest of my historical actions is not the subject of this enquiry, but serves to re-iterate that no space is neutral. Recognising this, I made a conscious decision at the start of my practical work to figure the space as a ‘blank

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<sup>7</sup> Skiagraphia, which I chose to title my ‘final’ performance, roughly translates as the art of painting or drawing with shadow. Warner writes in *Phantasmagoria* of Plato’s use of the Greek word and how it ‘recurs in his writing to express illusion, visual and intellectual’ (Warner, 2006, 161)

<sup>8</sup> The performance studio is a black box performance space within the Theatre, Film and Television Department at the University of Glasgow, also known as Gilmorehill, which during this year has been the dedicated space in which I have worked on my practical research.

canvas' and in this way avoid complicating this current enquiry, which is using specifically my shadow and photography to investigate presence in performance.

While briefly addressing the individual preparatory explorations I carried out in the studio in order to closely examine how my shadow and body's presence were variously affected by aspects such as the light source I used, I will reflect on the final showing of my year's practical research. I will discuss how it has both informed and been informed by the textual research contained within the former parts of this thesis, and ultimately, in conclusion, how it has answered my initial questioning of how I can make my solo female body most present through my own absence in performance.

I identified two distinct, yet interconnected challenges to work with over the course of the practical research. The first concerns the form of my shadow and how, by varying its texture, size, movement and so on, I could effect its reception as a stronger or weaker presence. The second challenge, which I introduced in the preceding chapter with the proposal of translating performance space into photographic space, was how and if I could create and design a camera within the studio I was working in. Could I literally make the studio into a camera? Through doing this would I be able to multiply my presence through capturing my shadow in photographic form?

From using my shadow in the initial stages of this project as a visual form with which to express both my presence and absence simultaneously, I sought out a method to quantify how I could appear most present through my shadow form. What kind of shadow could



render me most present? The most complex challenge in assessing the shadows I make is that working by myself, I have very often been my own audience. Making shadows I am a witness to my silhouette's performance alone, and, as a result, during this process would design and direct the shadow's choreography in the space rather than my own body's. I am both performer and witness to the performing visual: my shadow, and as a result within the final showing I was also an audience member looking at my shadow (albeit from a different side of the screen on which my shadow was projected). The placement of the audience was as integral as my placement behind the screens, and inviting people to watch within different configurations was crucial research towards the final design of the space. In the previous chapter I discussed Robertson's *Phantasmagoria*: the magic illusion show in the round. Rather than perform in the round with the audience surrounding me, I presented an alternative arrangement where my body performed outside the circle with the audience inside. The outcome of presenting an end-on arrangement of screens and a circular arrangement with me both inside and out resulted in the final choice of presenting both circular and end-on arrangements. Each positioning of the audience within my research provoked varying experiences of my shadow's presence and my presence. When my body was contained within the tent-like structure the limitations of space coupled with the fact I had to hold the light source resulted in partial and fragmented shadow projections. Furthermore, the audience could walk around the screened circle and often missed shadows on the opposite side from where they were standing. In terms of my presence, I was reduced, like my shadow, to an abstract and diminished force. It became clear that my shadow needed to be more precise in order to be read as a commanding presence, and within such an enclosed space

this was impossible. Placing the audience within a screened cylinder allowed for a performance with my shadow circling the audience, and would also become key in making the space into a camera.

The distance at which the light source shone was an important factor, as the further away from the screen on which my shadow fell, the more diverse the scale of my shadow could become. However, the results of the explorations in shadow size were not so simplistic as a large silhouette equalling an enlarged presence and vice versa. Working with different densities of cloths for the screens (from transparent loose weave muslin to black-out material), I had found that the partial visibility afforded by medium weave muslin meant that as I approached the screen, my body would be seen as well as my shadow form. The closer I was to the screen, the closer my shadow silhouette's scale would be to my own body. At the same time, such close proximity to the screen would result in my body being most visible to the audience. My shadow was appearing to reveal my real body behind the screen at the point at which they seemed to fuse [illus. 8].

This effect served to compound the smaller scaled shadow as commanding more presence. Additionally, when my body was closest to the screen and therefore projecting the smaller scale of shadow, the silhouette was also the most clear [illus. 9]. It is basic physics learnt as a child, which teaches us that an object closer to the light source will project a less focused shadow than an object nearer the surface on which the shadow falls. Yet in terms of my questioning of presence and the ability of my shadow to

represent or reproduce my presence, the precision of my silhouette is a significant area to expand on.

QuikTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

#### 8. Still from *Skiagraphia*

QuikTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

#### 9. Still from *Skiagraphia*

I have previously discussed Marina Warner's re-telling of the 'origin of painting', in which the Corinthian maid, Dibutades draws round her lover's shadow in order to preserve a likeness of him. Victor I. Stoichita discusses the effect that the discourse surrounding (and the practical use of) shadows has had on the history of art in *A Short History of the Shadow* (1997). Pliny's *Natural History*, in which the story of the Corinthian maid is described, is also under scrutiny in Stoichita's text. Like Warner, Stoichita identifies the representation becoming 'a substitute, a surrogate' (1997, 15) for the corporeal body which is absent. It is the clarity of the shadow in reproducing the living body's features, which allows for it to become the double of the body that created it. Making my shadow in performance the clearest it could be, with the most defined lines and lack of distortion, also served to identify my shadow as a clearer representation of my body, and as a result the shadow would not so much act as a proof of presence, but as a separate performing visual from that of my own body still partially visible behind the screen. Within my final showing of the work, I presented both the abstracted blurred shadows close to the light source and, by moving towards the screen, brought my shadow form into focus [illus 10, 11 and 12]. My shadow being pulled into focus was referenced at each stage of the final performance as through my research process I had found that the movement involved in the shadow becoming a clear silhouette, and thus a more clear representation of my self, emphasised my presence.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

## 10. Still from *Skiagraphia*

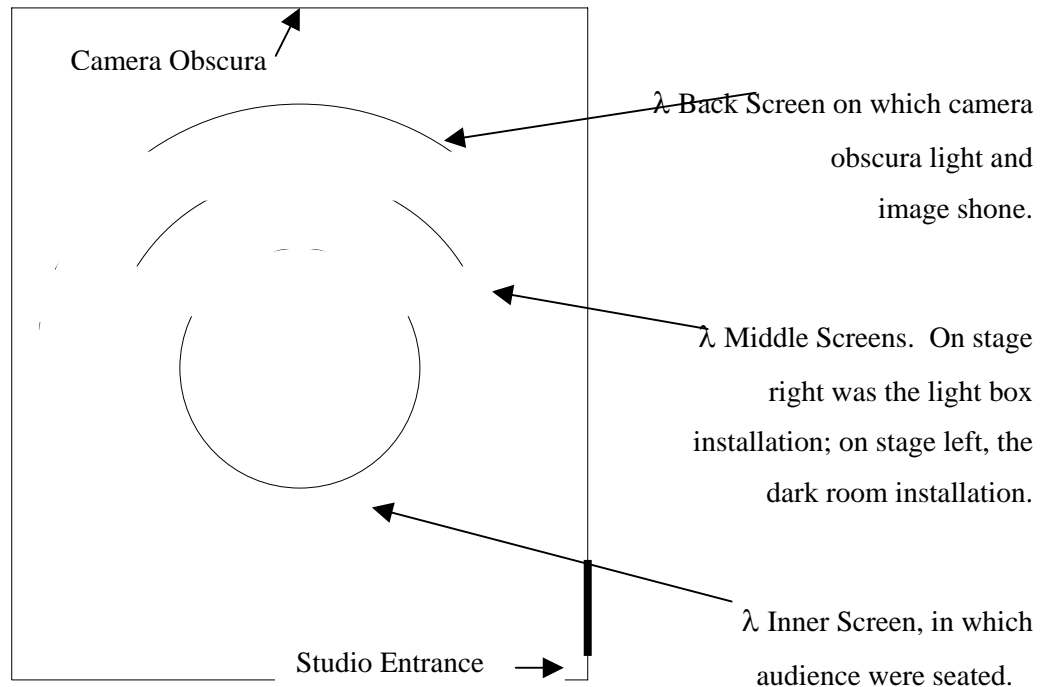
QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

## 11. Still from *Skiagraphia*

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

## 12. Still from *Skiagraphia*

The sharpening of the shadow form at each stage was reiterated within my final design of the space, in which I marked out concentric circles referencing the aperture eye of a camera [illus. 13]. I constructed a central circle, designed as the space where the audience would be situated and also screens on the outer circles, which would become the stages in an end-on configuration [illus. 14, 15 and 16]. It was my intention that as my shadow got closer to the central screened circle, the clearer both it and I would appear, as if being pulled into focus by the smallest aperture opening.



13. Final design based on three concentric circles in the studio space (aerial view)

Although not overtly clear to the audiences involved in the final showing, it was never my intention to over emphasise the space as a camera. Rather, I hoped that through

witnessing the shifts between my shadow's changing focus from a central point, the audience would feel like the central axis, with a force which would have the power to pull my body and shadow towards them. The closer my proximity to the audience, and the centre of the space, the more visible I became. Yet, I was keen to emphasise that visibility does not so simply equal presence. In remaining 'hidden' throughout the performance, behind the circling screens, I wondered if my shadow could perhaps be more present than my own body. While the first part of the performance caused my body and shadow to interact with each other, even converging to become one image at the point of contact with the screen, it took a certain light source to render my body, my self almost invisible within the space.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

14. View through the inner circular screen.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

Above: 15. Side view of screens. Below: 16. View from inside the audience's circle

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.



After my final performances I invited the audience to respond to the work through feedback sessions. A comment was made about the quality of the shadow projected onto the back screen on which the camera obscura image was also projected [illus. 17]. The audience member said when witnessing the stillness of that particular shadow, and not being able to see my performing body on the other side of the screen, she forgot momentarily that the shadow had an owner, and saw it as an image on its own. When the shadow moved again she was jolted back into remembering I was making the shadow. It was fully my intention to present a shadow in this light (which only highlighted my shadow and not my body behind the screen) for just the reaction she described, and it was a great fulfilment that she had experienced this particular shadow in this way. At this point my shadow was more present than my performing body, which was one of my questions in my research process: Could my shadow command more presence than my actual body? In this case, through the combination of my stillness and absencing my actual body completely from visibility, my shadow commanded the presence in the performance space over that of my body. Furthermore, the appearance of the shadow becoming disconnected from the body making it, emphasises that even though my corporeal body may appear invisible, a representation of my invisible body is able to appear as an acutely visible force.



17. Shadow made with camera obscura light

While working towards finding a way in which to capture my shadow photographically within the performance space, I was simultaneously searching for the light source, which would make my shadow most present. Through testing various strengths and shades of theatre spotlight I realised that I needed to find a light source which was not as imposing. Even when dimmed, the spotlights would wash the space with light, which while

appropriate in the context of presenting my shadow play, was not exposing my shadow onto photographic paper clearly enough. Originally I had wanted to use Liquid Light, a photographic emulsion, which I could paint directly onto the floor. However, through using photographic paper to assess how much light and how much time would expose an image with different light sources, the object of the photograph and the process of its development became a significant part of my final performance, which I will expand upon later.

Blackening out the studio and leaving a small aperture open on the window surface, I created a camera obscura inside the space, the first step in creating a pinhole camera [illus. 18].



18. Initial camera obscura projection

While this first crude opening was a rough experiment, the sky poured in and onto the floor and in that moment I witnessed magic. I have been careful within this thesis not to overload my discussion of presence with the mysterious workings of how it may manifest itself. Yet at points in this research, the feeling of a magical, uncanny sense of presence has taken hold, particularly when working with the illusions light can conjure, such as the shadow, and the process of photographic development exposing blank paper to reveal an image hidden on its surface. Magic is pre-occupied with making that which is absent present and vice versa and so in many ways is inescapable.

Indeed, being present through absence is a condition many characters from science fiction and fairytale use as a powerful attribute. Yet invisibility serves in such fantastical stories as a most privileged form of presence most repeatedly used by male protagonists. Michael Haldane, discussing the magical properties of the 'wishing hat' and clothing offering invisibility in folklore and particularly in Tobias Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), observes that a reoccurring theme in this literature is that obtaining invisibility is connected 'with male invasion of female privacy' (Haldane, 168, 2006). In attempting to make my body present through concealing my body behind screens, I am striving to command my own invisibility, and further understand the politics of power associated in being, what Peggy Phelan terms, 'unmarked'. It is significant that male invisibility, at least within the context of fantastical literature, serves to make the male more powerful, and that female invisibility is aligned with her being the marginalised sex. Can I make invisibility work for me as a woman – to make myself more powerful?

Of course much of what appears as magic can be explained by science, and in using light and photography within my work I began to understand magic as the performative result of science. This is not in any way meant to demystify my performance, but rather to re-iterate my final performance as a presentation of illusion making, where the force of light alone creates theatre and images to marvel at.

The quality of light emitted from the small aperture at the studio window offered a strange combination of dullness and extreme force. Watching the clouds on the floor, it was almost as though they had been pushed through the tiny hole with such exertion as to spill out into the studio. Experimenting with this outside light falling onto a screen nearer its source, I found that the outside was projected inside in such a way as to present an upside down moving scene. With the camera obscura I could present the invisible outside within the studio as a ghostly apparition [see illus. 17]. The absent world outside the performance space immediately became a presence when projected into the back screen. Furthermore, the focused natural sunlight being projected into the dark room provided the same conditions inside a hand held camera, which ultimately made for clearer photographic prints of my shadow in front of it. The challenge I faced using the camera obscura once I had fitted a lens to focus the detail of the image was its overwhelming ability to literally ‘overshadow’ my own shadow. In work in progress showings, audience members expressed such fascination over the seemingly magical appearance of the projected exterior that this became a far larger presence than myself. To redress the balance I choreographed my movement very specifically for the section in the performance where the camera obscura image was revealed. In order to assert my own

presence, I controlled the operation of opening up the light source and closing it using a pulley system. In this way I was in command of the light, directing when and how the audience would see both my shadow and the projected image. It was my intention that by seeing my shadow holding control of the system with which to see, the shadow would be a commanding presence within the scene. Indeed, it was in this light source (made by the camera obscura) that it had been observed my shadow became disconnected from my body behind the screen.

On the day of the final performance the light outside was dull and the camera obscura image as a consequence was dark and not entirely readable. As a result, not many members of the audience could make out exactly what the light source or image was. In many ways this was helpful in that the image of my shadow was not overtaken by the projected image. Instead the mellow, muddy blue hue with faint rippling trees, which fell on the surface of the back screen, was appropriately subtle. The mysterious light would then be transformed (developed in a 'dark room') into a photographic image, making what had appeared to the audience as an invisible absent image, an acutely visible one.



19. Stills from *Skiagraphia*

I mentioned above that I had chosen to continue using photographic paper, as the more I experimented with developing images of my shadow, the more the photographic object became an integral part of my documentation. Furthermore, with photographic paper I was repeatedly performing the action of the developing process, which became a vital part of what I finally presented to an audience. The performed practical action of developing the exposed photographic paper differed from my initial movement with my shadow in the round [illus. 19]. In presenting both these types of movement I was attempting to show the shadow transcending any movement which could be easily marked as a caricature: for example in works in progress certain movements had been described variously as ‘Grecian’, ‘balletic’ and even ‘militaristic’. The shadow of an object or person is an easy visual to project one’s own meaning onto, as it appears featureless with just the silhouette to guide interpretation and connotation. This refers back to my repetitive use of my profile within the performance, as a face’s shadow front-on does not display any significant indicators of a live human face, or individual features. Stoichita writes about the profile in relation to Johann Caspar Lavater’s discussion of the subject in his *Essays on Physiognomy* (1792). Lavater describes a recently invented apparatus for ‘the creation of silhouettes’ (Stoichita, 1997, 156) in which the subject is seated one side of a screen lighted by a candle and on the other the artist draws round the resulting shadow.

Defining the shadow-image, Lavater writes:



Shades are the weakest, most vapid, but at the same time, when the light is at the proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man – The weakest, for it is not positive, it is only something negative, only the boundary line of half the countenance. The truest because it is the immediate expression of nature, such as not the ablest painter is capable of drawing, by hand, after nature. (Lavater in Stoichita, 1997, 157)

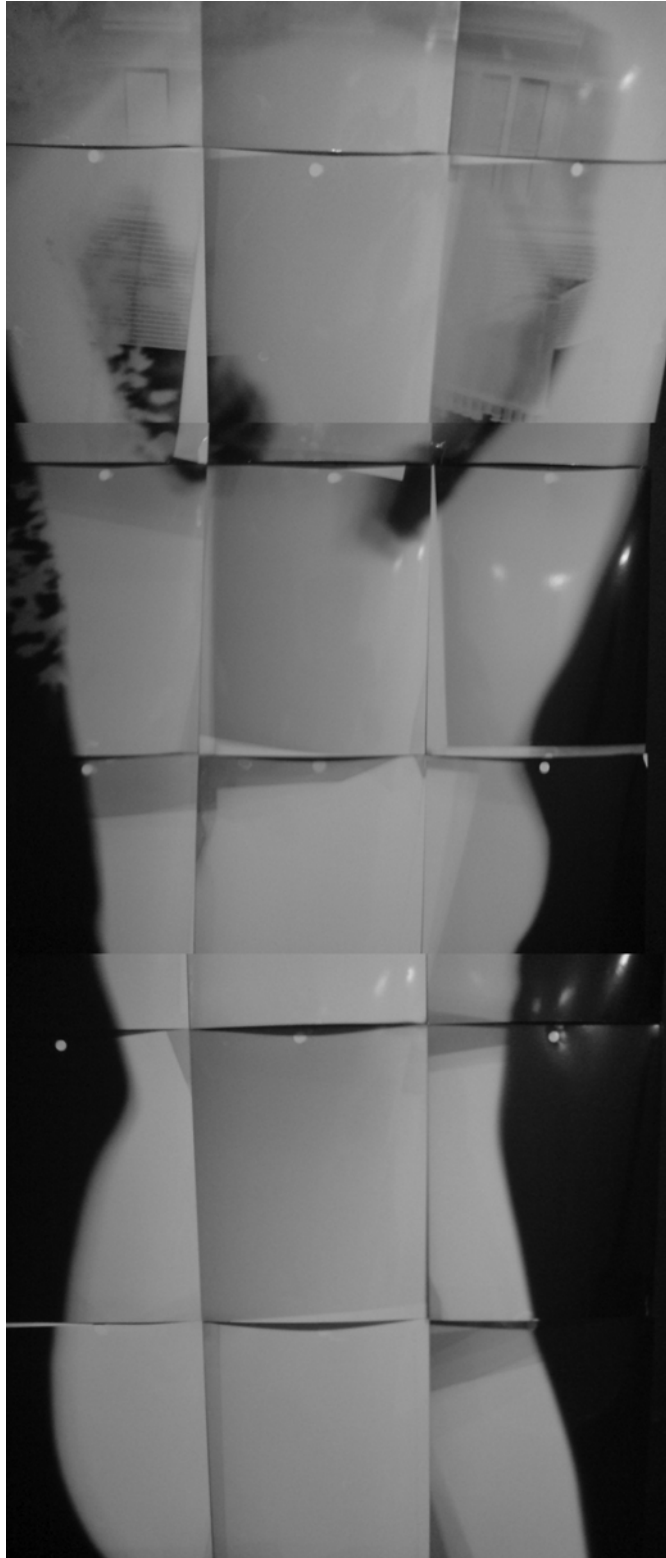
The description above is useful within this thesis in two ways. Firstly, Lavater emphasises his belief that there can be an optimum shadow form in which ‘the truest representation’ can be achieved, which is what I have been striving to find within my practical explorations. Secondly, his distinction of the profile as the ‘immediate expression of nature’ echoes the outcome of my research, which was to find my profile as the most clear expression of my own presence. With this in mind, I wanted to know if through photographing my shadow profile, and thus creating a photographic presence of my shadow, I could capture my shadow-double and by re-introducing my shadow to the image, multiply or compound my presence even further.

The ‘machine for drawing silhouettes’ was ‘Regarded as one of the direct predecessors of photography’ (Stoichita, 1997, 157) in that this method captures the ‘profile’s negative image’. This is significant here, as when I exposed the photographic paper to the light from the camera obscura, it would make a negative image of the scene projected onto it [illus 21]. Usually, one would make the negative image on film and, using an enlarger,

transpose the positive image onto the paper. Using photographic paper to capture my shadow image, I was essentially making a negative of the negative: a negative photographic print of the negative image of my profile.<sup>9</sup> In capturing my shadow I appeared to be preserving not solely the presence of it, but also its absence, as it appeared as a white silhouette, unlike the black shadow we are accustomed to. Here I created the double of my shadow and in effect the double of my double. By tripling my profile in the final section of my performance (overlapping the photograph of the negative shadow, my shadow and my actual face's profile) I attempted to compound these various presences into a whole. Shining a light reminiscent of the light box used by photographers to see negatives more clearly, I staged a re-forming of my various presences. Displaying the photograph I had made minutes before I could then attempt to fill the documentation with the live shadow, literally colouring in the blank silhouette with my darker shade.

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<sup>9</sup> I am not using negative to connote a lesser, or secondary state in comparison to the positive. Rather, I am using the term in the photographic sense of the word: where there is an absence rather than a presence of features in a visual image.



21. Full body photograph made with camera obscura.

Ultimately this could only ever be an attempt, as my live body, unable to remain completely still, could not fit the contours preserved in the photograph exactly. Perhaps this also hints at the impossibility of ever gaining an exact representation of the corporeal body through reproduction? In addition I wanted to emphasise the layering of the presence preserved in photographic form and the presence of the live body in performance. Even though my body could move in the present moment of live performance, once the performance was over it would be the photographic document, the representation, which would be rendered the lasting presence of the performance. I was struck by the similarity of this final image I presented and a self-portrait by Giorgio de Chirico, of which Stoichita describes how ‘the shadow detaches itself from all support’ [illus. 22 and 23]. He observes ‘it turns in on itself: from being black it becomes white and instead of being a background it becomes a figure’ (Stoichita, 1997, 223). De Chirico doubles himself in his portrait, inverting his shadow so that it becomes ‘a living spectre’ (Stoichita, 1997, 224), which holds an entirely different pose from De Chirico’s dominant central likeness.



23. Still from *Skiagraphia*, Ella Finer, 2008

Within the still from the final section of my performance my negative white shadow is hanging from the screen and my live dark shadow is in the action of attempting to fill it. My corporeal body is also visible behind the screen, which is the authorial and artistic force behind the different representations being displayed. De Chirico, as the artist who painted both his representations into being, could be said to be the third ‘self’ in his portrait, although his live body is absent. Throughout the final performance I was at once attempting to fuse these multiple images or ‘selves’ of my body at the same time as acknowledging the impossibility of this task. Writing about the shadow in Shakespeare plays, Alex Aronson describes philosopher Carl Jung’s ‘attempts at defining the “shadow”’ (Aronson, 1972, 95), within a psychoanalytical framework. Jung’s ‘shadow’ is the dark other, the “invisible” portion of the human personality’ conflicting with the “visible” ego’. Although Jung’s definition of the shadow is overtly concerned with human personality and its psyche, rather than the shadow as a doubled ‘image’, his

concept of the unconscious human dark side offers a comment on the fusion between shadow and self which I think is relevant to creating an *image* of shadow and self. Summarising Jung's conception of the conflict between the human conscious (ego) and unconscious (shadow) and their ultimate joining together as 'a symbol, a coin split into two halves which fit together precisely' (Jung cited by Aronson, 1972, 125), Aronson writes 'the ego and the shadow do not become one except as an image in a dream' (Ibid.). Within a psychoanalytical reading my performance could be read as an attempt to fuse the conscious and subconscious within a 'dream space'. It is dream space (within this analysis), which could be read, as hosting the *image*: the visualisation of selves fusing. Performance space as photographic space thus morphs into a 'dream space', in which multiple selves can appear simultaneously. Yet, my main concern was with visual representations layering over each other so my corporeal body would appear as an intensified presence by an audience. Ultimately it was the inclusion of a heart symbol to suggest an integrated personality that was observed to have interrupted the subtlety of the performance.<sup>10</sup> And which I subsequently realized was more relevant to the psychoanalytical potential of placing my body and shadow in the same space than the visual phenomena and its relation to presence that I was seeking to communicate.

After reflecting on the choice I made within this final section, to present a shadow of a heart within my body's shadow, I saw this as jarring, not only with the intention as outlined above, but also with the pace and intended delicacy of the rest of the performance. It appears from post-show discussions that the audience were divided on their response to the appearance of this iconic and much loaded symbol. I had originally

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<sup>10</sup> Observation by a member of the audience recorded in post-show discussion.

included the heart when experimenting with layering shadows on top of each other, to present an absence within an absence or a double absence. The heart was 2 dimensional, cut from over - exposed photographic paper. As a result of being exposed to the light for too long this material had lost any image it might have once held in its fibres.

In an immediate and emotional response to lost work due to light entering the designed dark space of my experimentation. I cut hearts out from the ruined photographic sheets. I incorporated these heart shapes into work in progress demonstrations and these experiments were initially greeted with much enthusiasm and serious consideration on the part of my peers. It was only later when the body of work had been thoroughly developed and was being performed as a 'finished piece', that the entry of the heart caused different reactions. For some it seemed not only redundant, but also somewhat confusing and in some cases even alienated audience members as its appearance seemed to compromise the rigour of the work and introduce a certain sentimentality.

One section of audience was conversely extremely positive, they saw the heart as giving my shadow, and myself behind the screen an emotion, a personality, which they liked. But as this was something I was striving to avoid in this work in order to present a visual installation exploring presence rather than a narrative with any investment of character or persona, I decided that their positive response was instructive but was determined to lose my heart.<sup>11</sup> Even though I decided to reject any easily read symbols or symbolic movement within this piece, I followed initial positive responses to the use of the heart

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<sup>11</sup> Within the filmic documentation of the final performance (the DVD is at the back of the thesis), I have included an alternative scene without the heart symbol being used.

symbol instead of rejecting it in favour of not over-loading the performance as a whole. It is a hazard of working alone and not being able to see the result of what I'm making, that once an audience is present, their comments (on what I am not able to see from their perspective) are magnified in importance. This is not to say that the audience response is not important, in fact far from it, as this particular project is hugely dependent on the audience determining my presence. Rather I have learnt that as much as it is important to consider very carefully why and how an audience responds to certain aspects of a performance to ascertain whether the intentions have been communicated, it is also equally vital to consider the demographic. Divisions in an audience's reactions are inevitable, readings coming from not only different sensibilities but also from people representing different levels of engagement with the subject area of my research. However much a work is considered before it is given to an audience it will inevitably be up for grabs in the instance of it being 'out there'.

This highlights the learning curve in presenting a work within the context of a practice as research thesis. I have been naming the end product of this year's research, 'the final performance' for the purposes of clarity within this written document. Indeed, within the time frame of this year long study, 'final' is chronologically accurate. However the performance I presented exists as part of an on-going enquiry, and is actually far from final in terms of my intention to continue to explore and to further interrogate such questions as to how presence can be constructed within performance. The challenge now is to find a way to translate the results of the practical research experience into a



performance, which can reach an audience in a wider cultural context: in a theatre or an arts venue in comparison to an audience within an academic research environment.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this process of searching for a way to make my female body present in performance, I have been aware that within the process of finding ‘it’ (to use Roach’s term for an ‘auratic’ presence), there lies the possibility of demystifying this strange force of the state of being. Within this thesis I have attempted to offer different philosophical, critical and poetic thinker’s definitions of how presence can manifest itself. The most prevalent kind of presence within the discussions I have looked at is that of the ‘auratic’ presence: the unique aura of a performer (Power, Goodall, Roach, Lorca) or work of art (Barthes, Benjamin), which holds spectators captive and indeed is dependant on a witness (a pair of eyes) to respond to and quantify that aura.<sup>13</sup> Yet I have also been concerned with the more literal meaning of presence, and its opposite state with which it is so closely bound, absence. By ‘literal meaning’ I mean the physical state of being and not being (Derrida) and my main concern has been preoccupied with disrupting the idea that presence equals visibility and absence equals invisibility within the context of solo female performance.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that ultimately my body was performing a visual meditation on absence and presence within a theatre space, where an audience are attendant to behold an event. Can my shadow be as significant a force in signalling my presence outside a performed context?

<sup>13</sup> See also the final page of my Symposium Paper in the appendix.

I have used the shadow, simultaneously a presence and an absence, as a visual with which to explore whether a representation of my body can render me more present in the performance space. Also using photography as a way in which to compound and document both my shadow's presence, and mine I have attempted to create a performance space in which my body can shift between visibility and invisibility, while marking both states as holding equal power in locating my female body as a presence. Through this research I have observed that the 'traces' of presence, contained in a photograph or shadow, create an intrigue or speculation as to what created them. Through absenting one's body from visibility, those looking are compelled to look harder or more closely. Presenting a partial view of my body behind my design of screens, I attempted to encourage an audience to become more aware of the presence of my body as a result of the framing of it within my shadow.

As a result of my engagement with Peggy Phelan's analysis of the unmarked I was determined to understand in practical terms, in a live environment, how my explicitly female body's invisibility could translate as a politically empowering state before an audience. I attempted to observe how the perpetually changing shape of my shadow in motion could attempt to fulfil Phelan's understanding of an '*active vanishing*', through which one may attempt to escape the trappings of representational visibility. Significantly what I finally presented to the audience was a series of images of the female body "on screen". Although not a film projection, my body's shadow offered a live projection onto screens before an audience, which echoed the cinematic positioning of audience and spectacle. The danger in presenting a silhouette of my body was that it

would be potentially easier for an audience to project meanings and interpretations onto such an image. Within the ‘calculated risk’ of the performance, I was reducing my body to the shadow of an explicitly feminine outline, with breasts and hips, instantly recognisable as the loaded symbol of ‘woman’. A few audience members commented on the striking familiarity of this image in popular culture (Bond girl silhouettes, iPod dancing outlines). However, no audience member commented on my visualisation of the female body through shadow form as reductive to a sense of female empowerment. This certainly fulfilled the ambition I had for the performance, as I wanted to command the space specifically as a solo female performer.

Presenting a live version of the ‘silent image of woman’, I was able to load the shadow with living and breathing motion, and with the possibility and potential for movement, so that the image may disappear in an instance of ‘*active* vanishing’. This was further compounded by the presence of my body, partially visible behind the screens, as my body and shadow determined each other’s (in)visibility before the audience. The shifting visibility of both my body and shadow throughout the performance was striving to communicate my acknowledgement of Phelan’s thesis within *Unmarked* and that while on some levels ‘visibility is a trap’, so too is a passive invisibility. Phelan’s call for ‘*active* vanishing’ is crucial in that female bodies are encouraged to move between states of being and appearing, avoiding being stuck in one categorisation of woman, but fulfilling many understandings of what it is to be a woman in the present, as well as the past and future. Indeed it is the discussions between all generations of women, which are as crucial now as they ever were.

To reiterate: can I be present through absence? It would appear that the shift between being present and absent is dependant on those who are *seeing* or *perceiving* the body in these states. Being absent and present therefore, at least within performance is determined by how an audience *sees*, and each reading of my body will be unique to each pair of eyes and the minds watching. Furthermore, it was the shift between both states, as intended, which served to compound my presence to an audience. In moving from presence to absence and back again, and then attempting to capture my female form in photographic boundaries, I felt the resulting 'final performance' celebrated the impossibility of 'fixing' myself.

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## **APPENDICES**



## **i. SKIAGRAPHIA DOCUMENTATION**

## ii. SYMPOSIUM PAPER

This paper was given at the Theatre, Film and Television Studies Postgraduate Symposium on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 2008. Mid-way through completing my MPhil, the paper provides an overview of my work up to that point, and a discussion of Lorca, Duende and Flamenco in the context of my research into female presence in performance.

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This year has been more than anything a training experience, and in some ways a re-training. Practice as research has been a rewarding struggle for me, as up until only a couple of months ago I had jumped ahead to a final conceptualisation of my performance, before being helped to realize that actually there were smaller intricacies of my work that needed questioning first. It is then somehow wonderful that my research brought me to Flamenco, and to *Duende*, the Spanish spirit, which is invoked by Flamenco dance and song. *Duende* acknowledges struggle, celebrates struggle and ultimately relies on struggle to produce its effect. And what is its effect?

*"DUENDE IS A POWER and not a behavior, it is a struggle and not a concept. I have heard an old master guitarist say, 'Duende is not in the throat; duende surges up from the soles of the feet'. Which means it is not a matter of ability, but of real live form; of blood; of ancient culture; of creative action."*

Lorca's terms to seek some definition of *Duende*, the untranslatable word, all imply movement and motion: Struggle, Surge, Live Form, Action. *Duende* is uncontainable, uncontrollable, it is deep rooted and ready to surge, it is struggling beneath the surface, it is blood pumping round the body and blood inherited, passed down through generations.

It is...

It is *It*.

*Duende* not only plays with *It*, but also could be seen to be the root of *It*, or at least as Joseph Roach defines it as the extraordinary and compelling power 'possessed by abnormally interesting people'. Both having *Duende* and having *It* (as in the it-girl, she's got it!) could translate as having a certain magic. Roach, like Lorca identifies struggle as being integral to this magical quality when in performance:

Theatrical performance and the social performances that resemble it consist of struggle, the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities – truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and mask.

*I started my MPhil journey with Roach's It, while studying photographic images and taking them and now nearing the end of this year long research project I have arrived at Lorca's Duende, while I smash my feet in Flamenco classes.*

In many ways I started off still and now I am moving.

I came to this exploration through my interest in solo female performers, and how they command a presence in front of an audience. Having written in my undergraduate dissertation about the binary of female nudity and nakedness alongside how an awareness and ownership of one's body in performance can disrupt the passivity of the gaze, I wondered how these women I wrote about: Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke commanded such presence, when in 1970s USA it most certainly was a struggle to be present or be a presence in the male-dominated art world. Yet I can also only be witness to their performances through photographic documentation – the live body is absent, and I am left with an unstable photographic presence.

Some female solo performers I can witness live today like Oreet Ashery, who dresses as a Jewish rabbi called Markus Fisher and Helena Hunter who hides her body in extreme darkness, play with their presence in front of an audience – how do they command presence even if their “real” body or perhaps I should say self is hidden or even absent. Who is present then? The performer or the performed doppelgänger, alter ego or shadow-side? In both cases, with the performers I can experience through photographs and the performers who conceal themselves with masks, darkness etc, I am experiencing at once an absence as well as a presence.

I find it of particular interest to note here that a huge majority of young women I meet today, and not just within the artist/performance communities I know, say they are “performers”. I believe this is about presence, about proving in front of an audience they are active, authoritative females. Yesterday Gerry Harris spoke of the revival of burlesque, traditionally the realm of male performers– now it is women who populate the scene. There appears to be an urgency now to prove presence, perhaps perpetuated by an increasingly competitive battle for star-status and celebrity? I am fascinated by this, but this is neither my motive nor the subject for this discussion. I want to know whether and how absence can serve to make a woman more present in performance?

How does a solo female performer command the performance space she inhabits: how does she make herself present in that space, and can her physical absence somehow play a role in making her present?

How do we determine presence in absence? My starting point was the object of the photograph, as it was in this form I could experience Schneemann, Wilke, Ono and their performances, which had taken place before I was born. When I was absent. The Photograph, as an image containing as Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* ‘both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’ encompasses a shifting movement between the two states, which I felt was translatable to the performance space: both sites where illusion making takes place and the performer can shift between presence and absence, concealing and revealing her self. But also both sites where light is used to capture a presence. To illustrate this I refer to the iconic image of *Interior Scroll*.

Carolee Schneemann in conversation with Alice Maud-Roxby stresses how much the history of her performance ‘relies on archives of photographic documentation’ and how even if not explicitly constructed for camera are all ‘potentially alert to the camera’ if an audience is present. Although there is always the possibility of camera use within spectatorship, Schneemann’s account of being photographed during performance describes a moment of fusion, of connectivity when the flash ‘blinds’ her through the darkness: ‘when the flash goes off – it is vibrant, participatory – like some kind of lightning bugs, opening space within space’ (Roxby 9). The action of the camera for Schneemann would seem to serve as a confirmation of presence: the flash illuminating her position in space, among an audience who she can’t see. As a document of a moment defining presence, the photograph of Schneemann performing *Interior Scroll* captures her own affirmation of being “present” in the here and now of her long ago performance.

Schneemann is rendered doubly present by the flash of the camera, present in the live moment as she describes it and in the lasting photographic image.

Photographic representation is another way of doubling or multiplying the self, as Marina Warner discusses in her 2002 book *Fantasies Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*. It was this thought, coupled with the ancient idea that to take someone’s photograph was to capture their soul, or their shadow, that grounded my exploration into using my shadow as my absent/present performing double.

My research is now concentrated on finding out how my shadow’s performance affects my physical body’s presence. Can my shadow-double out-perform me? It has been commented on in earlier performance showings that it was indeed my shadow that commanded the space. Like the Wizard of Oz, I was merely the un-magical maker of such a grand and looming human form working the lights to create the illusion of a force and presence far greater than my own.

However, as interesting as this is, and although an important stage of my questioning, I want to know whether *I*, the maker of the shadow can be made present through my shadow’s performance. Can I be present through absence?

I am still in the stages of working this out, and at times it can feel like a school science experiment. I have even created a spectrum following from my research into how the distance between the light source and the screen (on which the shadow falls) affects the presence of the shadow.

Alongside this my investigations have and will include:

Testing different fabrics for the screens on which the shadow falls,

What configuration of the audience makes me most present?

How different types of light source impact on my presence

What happens if another person operates the light source?

And how movement and stillness affect my presence, which I am discussing here.

From looking at performances for camera, notably Francesca Woodman's extraordinary photographic self-portraits in which she plays with hiding herself, and Martin Newth's magical long-exposure photographs, I realised that movement and "a lot of light" make the photographic subject absent, yet contradictorily this absence, with flickers or blurs of human presence in them actually serve to make these subjects more present.

Francesca Woodman's image

Peggy Phelan, writing on the brief career of photographer Francesca Woodman, identifies in her work a 'refusal to be still' (Phelan, 2002). Woodman's images appear to contain ghosts, or ghostly fragments of a body (mostly her own) unbound by photographic limits, which are all the more sensitised in knowing that Woodman committed suicide at 22. In shifting herself *within* photographic space as well as outside it (being both photographer and photographed), she commands multiple presences within her images. She moves through photographic space as a ghost, a shadow, and a female body changing her form within the stillness of each frame. It is almost as if Woodman becomes an illusion of herself by (dis)figuring her corporeal form into a shadow form

Martin Newth's image

*8 hours* – Newth took these pictures on his honeymoon. Each hotel/motel he and his wife stayed in he would capture their whole night together, the shutter open for 8 hours. A very long exposure. The result is a soft and ghostly web over the bed, and the rest of the room perfectly captured in minute detail. The long exposure, coupled with the movements of Newth and his wife as they slept makes the pair disappear apart from traces.

*Rush Hour* – In this incredible picture, rush hour on a London tube is reduced to a couple of empty escalators. In both of these pictures it is the traces, the blur on the bed, the subtle grey fuzz on the escalators and their unnatural smoothness, that draw attention to presence.

Absence or the marks of absence are here defining presence.

I have become increasingly aware that my body *in motion* commands a force of "liveness", "hereness", a proof of presence, which my still body in photographic representation cannot so easily convey. While photography offers a presence of my body through absence, the photographic object remains as a still document. Although a performer can shift between presence and absence within its static boundaries as I have illustrated with Woodman and Newth, performance has the privilege of being live and in front of an audience who to a large extent determine the presence of the performer.

This is how I have reached Flamenco, in searching for a dance form, which centred on the power and physical presence of the female performer. And this is how I came to be standing in a class last week full of women holding their breastbones parallel to the ceiling as we were instructed to do by our teacher.

“There”, she said, “now we have presence”

The questions I am still working through with regards to Flamenco are: How, in practice, does the female Flamenco dancer command presence? How can this presence be used and how does it change when the dancer is unseen and her shadow relates the performance?

I have more work to do regarding these questions, but my initial findings from my practical research show me that as well as posture and the raised breastbone, interestingly it appears that once again the shifts between stillness and motion, between pose and strong dynamic movements create a pace which rises and falls and in turn builds a tension in the flamenco figure which seems to demand presence. It's the strength of resistance in the dancer, which promotes this. Unlike ballet's arms, which flow seemingly effortlessly, flamenco's arms bear weights, struggle to their position.

The flamenco dancer in silhouette, in shadow form has raised more questions than it has answered. Many times working in the studio I am my own audience: my shadow is my audience or I am my shadow's audience, and so at this stage I was more reliant than ever on an audience looking at the effect. Of course the sound of my shoes, with nailed soles, proved my presence over the image. Since this showing I have decided to stay bare foot, as sound is a bigger, wilder force and while sound is inescapable I am not foregrounding it within this exploration. What was also mentioned was the way that in shadow form, devoid of facial features and expression, but reduced to a pattern cut-out of black and white, the flamenco shaped shadow became like a caricature, a symbol, a motif. Having worked through how movement creates presence, I am now looking at how different forms of movement affect presence, flamenco being one of them.

Lorca writes about *Duende* as the demonic earth spirit. With *Duende*, he writes one is brought face to face with death, which helps him “create and communicate memorable and spine-chilling art”. Of Flamenco he says that In Andalucia

*‘People say of certain toreros and flamenco artists that they have Duende – an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability, on rare occasions to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to them’*

This description reminds me of Barthes' ‘punctum’, the quality he is looking for in *Camera Lucida* in order to find the “truth” in a photograph of his dead mother. Barthes writes: ‘a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’. ‘Duende wounds’ and Punctum pricks. Both are aligned in their close relationship with death. Barthes notes that the photograph's freakish property is the

‘return of the dead’. For Lorca “the duende does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible”. The threat or actuality of absence makes for a heightened reception of presence.

It, Punctum, Duende...

And there are undoubtedly many more ways of describing unique presences. What binds these terms is that they have whole books written about them, and yet still remain elusive. And I feel this is the point of presence in a sense – a mysterious force that escapes being pinned to a neat definition. Still people strive to discuss presence in different forms, and I am aware of two very recently published books on presence and theatrical performance.

This is where a risk lies in my research. Do I risk losing presence by finding it? Or in the process of finding it? It is impossible to quantify liveness, and certain things cannot be demystified.

### iii. CONVERSATION WITH PERFORMANCE ARTIST HELENA HUNTER ABOUT *TRACING SHADOWS*.

A Conversation with artist Helena Hunter about her performance *Tracing Shadows* with Ella Finer in Stoke Newington, London, 2008.

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Ella Finer: Can we talk about the darkness in your performance *Tracing Shadows*? It was a feature of your performance I was very struck by: How your body is so covered in darkness, concealed by darkness.

Helena Hunter: I am very influenced by film. With film the camera controls the gaze and it specifically picks out what the audience sees, almost like their gaze doesn't exist beyond the camera. I wanted to give that kind of focus and use a very small amount of light surrounded by a lot of darkness, so that I could focus in on parts of the body. I remember saying I wanted a pinhole to Chiara, and we talked about looking through keyholes, peering in on something that's private or maybe something more...

Ella Finer: Intimate?

Helena Hunter: Yeah, it's like a private world you're looking into. We got a dark space and just played around with that. We started off using a projector, an old slide projector, because we felt that theatre lights have a certain quality and it makes it theatrical...

Ella Finer: They can be very brash...

HH: They are quite hard to control or focus and once you do they look "theatre-y" – It's in the quality of the light. But with the projector light, it's a colder feeling and it's not so intense. It has a much nicer quality. We played around in rehearsal with this projector and putting all sorts of black wrap and things on it to make a very narrow light, which we could control manually – with our hands. Obviously unless you're in a really high tech theatre you can't actually control the light – they are up there on the rig and you can't necessarily move them. But we wanted it to move and so, yeah that's how we started working on the light.

EF: So was she, Chiara, with the light source the whole time controlling it through the show?

HH: Chiara's not a lighting designer. She's a filmmaker and a photographer, but very much her photographs are to do with darkness and light – they are black and white and really over-exposed and very tiny and detailed and magical. So I really like the way that she works with darkness and light in photography and in her film – she's an animator as well. She does stop-motion, so she's very interested in very slow, controlled movement of puppets, or marionettes or things. So to have somebody who has that understanding of



darkness and light and also that understanding of how things move – and the film angle and the photography angle really made sense.

EF: That really came through and also what I was really struck by was the flickering effect of the light. Was the slide projector going through the motions of putting slides through?

HH: In the actual performance, the one that you saw, it's a moving spot: it's an old moving spot-light, which we have a gobo in and its operated by somebody's hands, which is possibly why it was flickering or shaking – because it's hand held. I really wanted the light to be hand-held, to be not so controlled and especially with the first moment at the beginning when you see the body for the first time, and it's with that ribbon...

EF: So it's like the light is really controlling what you see like you were saying before?

HH: It's controlling what you see and it's moving, it's not fixed. It's exposing and it's hiding bits of the body – that was the initial idea, as the spot light was actually a lot smaller than when you saw it back in...so it really captured the elbow, back, rib, the head – really focusing in on bits of the body and abstracting the body. I think that's what's really interesting for me: to abstract the body and not make it seem as a whole thing, it's seen as bits and its seen as fragmented and a little bit monstrous and a little bit alienated and disembodied.

EF: Was it a conscious decision not to show your face?

HH: Oh yeah. The minute I felt like I showed my face, or even when I see people's faces when I watch performances, it immediately becomes about *them*, becomes about a human being – it becomes about that identity, that person. What I wanted to do was not to have an identity and make it about the body, and make it resonate further than “me”, or me as Helena Hunter. And I wanted to be a body...

EF: A female body?

HH: Yeah, but I think a lot of people when they first saw it didn't know, especially at the very beginning whether it was a female body or a male body.

EF: How interesting. Why?

HH: Because the back is quite strong, and because it's abstracted you don't necessarily see the boobs, you don't see the feet – you just see this very strong back and the shoulders. What was really interesting to me, that when some people saw the first part with the moving spot, they didn't know if it was a female or a male. I quite like that.

EF: I find that really interesting, because is one of the wider concepts or questions you are looking at about the female body as “Other”? Or is that what I'm reading into it?

HH: Well I wanted it to be neutral, a neutral body. So not necessarily overtly feminine and not necessarily overtly male, because really that's constructed anyway in society - I wanted it to be identity-less at the very beginning of the show to show how this constructed material dress starts to impose itself on this neutral body and can roll it and shape it and push it...

EF: Thinking about my work looking into presence, and how it manifests itself in the performance space, and the fact that you don't show your face in this performance – How present do you think you are?

But dress, costume, is an imposition of sorts – constructing identity fantasy, gender even

HH: I think you take on a different presence – you don't go “there's Helena Hunter – she's a woman, she's a performer”. I think the audience identify with presence in a different way. When I perform I don't necessarily think I am present as Helena Hunter – it's almost trying to erase that, trying to get rid of that, so that one would hope the body could become a vessel or some kind of neutral thing that you can use to express. For other people to watch and for me to not impose things on it – but for the audience to get their imaginations going, to think what is this? What is this body? What is this body doing? How does that affect me? What do I think of that? All without them seeing my face, without them seeing me impose all these things about my ideas and my expression. I'd like them to read the abstract and absent things I am presenting to them and let that carry their imaginations or their ideas – let them project onto the piece rather than me projecting onto them.

EF: But that is so interesting, as you are literally projecting a light to direct where people should look, where an audience's gaze should fall. So in some ways you are dictating your presence through the position of the light, and I feel you were very present in your piece. It's interesting this thing about “Helena Hunter” being present, because of course for people who are watching you who don't know you or wouldn't have met you before, or who don't even see you after, it is almost magical that afterwards you disappear again, because no one knows your face. I find this a very intriguing aspect of your work.

HH: But I think this is a failure to assert an identity as well. It's a failed piece.

EF: You think it is?

HH: In a good way! To paraphrase Judith Butler who says ‘identity is a complete and utter failure’, it's a repeated failure and we try and construct these identities, but these identities are nothing, they are not real – and what remains? I'm talking more about concepts and ideas rather than the actual piece, but the fact that identity is a failure, what is behind and underneath that? I think that's why I was looking at this constructed material, like the dress for example – how that imposes itself on the body and tries to control and take over it. I don't answer the question; I think I just present it.

EF: That's the magic of it.

HH: That's what I'm interested in, letting the audience make up their own mind about it. One thing I always think at the end is that I wish I could know what people read into it, or know how they feel and what their response is – what do they think it's about. Because it really is about them.

EF: Do you think it's mostly about the audience?

HH: Well I'm not doing a narrative, I'm never saying anything – I'm moving, and I don't even have a movement language that I'm drawing from, I don't have a reference point.

EF: But wait, didn't you write something for it – a fairy-tale story?

HH: Yes I did.

EF: So the language is embedded in it somewhere? Even though that's absent.

HH: Yes very much so. But with the language and the imagery and the story in that – but the aim was to kind of go beyond that and to go deeper into the psychoanalytical rumblings behind the narrative and the story – looking at the archetypal images of fairytales and myths, which touch on things you can't necessarily express in words. They have these archetypal figures, like with Greek mythology – the Gods who represent all the different human emotions. Going back to the fairytales, its about female initiation the fairy-tale, and so my performance is very much concerned with presenting this concept of initiation in using space, in using light, in using the body.

EF: And you consciously chose not to use text or speech? And you worked with your boyfriend on the backing track/soundscape?

HH: I didn't want my voice in the performance, I recently read something by Louise Bourgeois, where she says how often words can fail, but the language of the body never lies. I do think the language of the body can lie, and I was trying to find my own language to express those thoughts and concepts and ideas I had. I tried to leave the words of the story and though movement and visual imagery affect the audience.

EF: Yes, and of course when the image is disconnected from language as Barthes writes about it – that you make your own interpretation of the image without being led to a conclusion through descriptive language. So then how did sound play a role in the performance for you?

I don't think movement is that easy in creating presence. This is where I disagree, because of course music, sound heightens/adds to movement, but the challenge of mine is to make movement command the space by itself – to make the image powerful alone.

HH: Well working with Mark Wright, I wanted to use sound to give a tactility to the movement, to make it resonate more. I think it's so easy to move, you just move, but the movement in this piece is quite gruelling, quite hard and quite slow. I wanted to give the struggle in it, because there is this struggle and this fight going on, or a conflict, so I wanted to give this movement and the materials involved a kind of gravity in a way. Like I love sound in animation, because it's so magnified and it's like for the image of someone stroking hair, or scratching a beard there is a really loud sound that corresponds – it imposes a dimension of gravity, a reality and a heaviness on the movement. I wanted to do that with the performance, and show that these movements were heavy, that they resonated beyond the movement – that they sounded, struggled and got inside you. For instance we had certain sounds which we called “hits”, like when the dress is coming on the body there's a kind of cracking sound which was really loud in the first piece we did, but with the one you saw we really brought it down to give the impression that this dress is crushing the body, subtly suggesting in the background there is sound to the movement. The dress becomes heavier through the sound; it is given a kind of presence, an element of weight. So these “hit” sounds happened at different points: the bones cracking, the dress moving, and the creaking when I'm hanging upside-down. And then coupled with the space and the darkness, we wanted to give this interior feeling, the idea that you're inside someone's head or maybe just in a big black void – what does that sound like, and how do you create that atmosphere?

EF: I find this blackness, this idea of being surrounded, encased in darkness very intriguing alongside the kind of soundscape you are using, what I'd describe as a kind of white noise sound, or the sound of the unknown – it's very Lynch. And this is appropriate as your performance is so much about translating the aesthetic of film into performance.

HH: Totally, and what we were thinking of was when you close your ears you hear inside your body, and we worked with that in mind. What does inside the body sound like? We were trying to find a noise, which would take people to that place. The sound in the performance also got rid of the background noise, which was great, because when you're doing a piece like this, which is very focused, but you want an idea of silence to use something like that immediately makes people lean in and ask what is going on?

EF: Yes. I found the space really interesting because there was quite a distance between the audience and you. It was the kind of distance you experience in the cinema looking at a screen, but at the same time there is this feeling of intimacy, as this very focused light is directing the audience to your body. Yet it's quite a far distance to look in to from where the audience are positioned which I really liked – it was almost as if our eyes became the lenses having to focus to a far-away point at the back of the theatre space.

HH: I think there were pros and cons with that – it's tricky because when you see something from a distance, how much can you be let into it? I think that's when sound came in to act as a connective force. Some people have said it would be nice to get up and walk around it, like an installation, but that wouldn't work for me. I'm working with the problem that in a theatre space: a black box, which this piece was conceived for, there is always going to be this distance, but this is about intimacy, about high-lighting bits of

the body and drawing people into it. I'm working with this conflict, and its why I use these mechanisms, if you will, like the sound and the darkness and the light to try and get the audience into that world – to make them feel like they are focused and they can see the little things that are happening.

EF: And this highlights another point I am interested in which is the illusion-making quality of theatre, and the idea that as an audience member of *Tracing Shadows*, you don't actually know what you are seeing. The part where you were swinging on a harness in a tiny shaft of light was so focused, and then when you use the projected shadows the space seemed to open up, in that it was suddenly illuminated from another light source, which was bigger than the performing self. Why the choice to open up the space to this wider perspective of the space? And then why the choice of two specific shadows: one being the girl, the other the dress?

HH: I was thinking about the self, the idea of the self and the other and I read somewhere that the shadow self is something you will never know and never want to admit to. I never used to have the shadow of the girl; I just used to have the shadow of the dress. The idea of the shadow within the whole piece incorporates this idea of making, of making something out of nothing, which echoes the creative process. It's the same idea with the dress and how it manifests itself and how it slowly and gradually starts to become something in the space. The piece you saw was quite heavily edited, but in the first piece I did, the dress started off as a ribbon, then became two blue curtains, which I walked through and then it became material that I got inside of and moved around in and then finally it appeared as a dress. So in essence the dress is gradually being made, and the dress actually starts off as a shadow, its not real, but more an idea.

EF: So why did you have to edit it for the National Review of Live Art?

HH: Well, I wanted to make it shorter, because I wanted it to be more contained and more succinct. I also wanted to get rid of a lot of prettiness and illusion that I'd built up in the piece. I wanted to strip it down, and get to the root of the performance. Going back to the shadow, and the shadow of the dress – it is a projected image, it's not real and you could say it is the signifier of gender that is projected onto my body. Also it has such a power, as it starts as nothing, coming out of the imagination. The thing that is imagined but is not real is so powerful once it actually starts to come into being and it takes over.

EF: My reading of the shadow dress was totally personal, heightened I guess by the fact that a shadow has no features inside its silhouette form. It is easier to project onto the shadow image perhaps? And as a result of this I saw the dress as a dress from my childhood, which I used to wear. The scale of the shadow was really bizarre for me too, as it looked at once huge, but also really small, because of the proportions of the actual shape of the dress. It disconcerted me slightly because the shape is quite abstract, and so it became just a shape rather than a dress, or rather shifted between these two states. Like Plato's cave – looking at an image and being able to discern what it is, but after all it is not the real object but the illusion, or representation of it.

What about the shadow of your body projected onto the back screen? What were the choices behind that?

HH: Having my body's shadow projected was meant to play with the idea that this anonymous body encounters itself – it doesn't encounter its reflection, but encounters its shadow. It finds the part of itself it will never know.

EF: Looking at the shadow as an alter-ego in my work, but also as an illusion which can make itself bigger or more present than the actual performer, I was struck by how literally huge you made the shadow of your body. Yet the shape of the shadow created a tension with the scale, as it was just displaying a closed head and shoulders and was somehow more vulnerable than anything else. The light too created tensions with the scale, and the play between the scale of your body and the shadows. For me it was very effective how the space was opened up and closed by light, like an aperture, and I guess then the audience would be at the point of the aperture, at the light source.

HH: Yes, I am interested in space and darkness, and the dimensions of the theatre. In a black-box space experimenting with how that can be used and how you can play around with that. I'm also interested in scale within the imagination as well as physical scale, and how the mind can blow things out of proportion.

EF: You mean like a kind of mental perspective?

HH: Mental perspective yeah – things can become absolutely enormous and huge in your head that for other people are really tiny, and I imagine it's about what you really care about. So I think I was trying to play around with the possibilities of scale within physical space – and that's I guess why I made the shadows so big, as they resonated for me as quite big, like this momentous weird dress that was inside the head but then began taking over into physical space. And all along, thinking about the space, I was looking at the back wall of the theatre as this kind of projection wall, something to project things on to, and a place where things can appear and disappear.