

Presentation/Representation/Re-Presentation Fragments Out of the Dark to a Lived Experience

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Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (Phelan 1993: 146).

Taking into account Peggy Phelan's ontology of performance as unrepeatable disappearing acts, this paper looks to design as a means of either reconfiguring the remains of performance or allowing the lived experience to persist in exhibition. In delineating the performative aspects of the presentational, representational, and re-presentational, it asserts strategies that call on spontaneous communal encounters and encourage the creation of new unique productions, thereby complicating Phelan's assertion that representation is 'something other than performance'. Through exhibiting performance, designers as curatorial provocateurs create specific conditions in which viewing privileges and power relations can be challenged and in which meaning is continually questioned.

The paper will (re)present a range of performance design exhibitions we have initiated, curated, and designed: *Fragments Out of the Dark* (1998), *Landing: 7 Stages: Aoteroa* (PQ, 1999), *Srdce: The Heart of PQ* (2003), *Dis-Play: re-Membering a Performance Landscape* (2004) and *Now/Next: Performance Space at the Crossroads* (2011). Each project attempts to incorporate the spectator as participant and invites the exhibitor to approach the exhibition site as a found-space for communal action and re-action.

Representing Disappearing Acts

This paper considers Peggy Phelan's oft-repeated statement (simultaneously revered and contested) that any attempt to archive, record, document, or represent the live act betrays the promise of performance's own ontology, which is to operate in the 'now' and become itself only through disappearance. The assumption is that archival remains of events are lifeless mnemonic devices that have lost the performative force experienced only through the fleeting live act.

So what does this mean for the Prague Quadrennial and the scenographic profession, which desire to share and communicate the process, creation, and experience of long-disappeared live acts? Combining Phelan's refutation of archival performativity with Boris Groys' (Groys 2009) statement that the curatorial act both cures and corrupts the exhibited object, we will reflect on a series of projects undertaken since 1996, in which we tackle these issues around breathing life back into the dead beasts of past performances.²¹

Our argument is that recognizing Phelan's notion of the unrepeatable momentary event does not always render 'something other than performance', but reproduces it as a new performance; just as Phelan attempts to do so through her performative writing in *Unmarked* (Phelan 1993), the very book where she maintains representation's failure to perform.

To assume that the role of design (and its constituents elements) lose a performative charge when cut loose from the moment of performance is to render design supplementary to performance – and the designer merely a handmaiden to another's already disappeared vision. But to consider the scenographer as an artist orchestrating all elements as performance, rather than designing some elements *for* performance, allows us to create Phelan's 'performative utterances' (Phelan 1993: 149) in which things are rendered active rather than descriptive.²²

Therefore the first thing to recognize is that performance objects, environments, light, sound, and garments also 'perform'. However this overarching performativity is rarely considered or discussed in theatre discourse, where the expressive human performer remains central. In his Critical Introduction to the book *Performance*, Marvin Carlson parenthetically notes '(even in the theatre we do not speak of how well the scenery or costumes performed)' (Carlson 1996: 3). Well it is high time we do speak of how design elements not only actively extend the performing body, but also perform without and in spite of the human body. This reinforces Jiří Veltruský's claim that 'even a lifeless object may be perceived as the performing subject, and a live human being may be perceived as an element completely without will' (Veltruský 1964: 84).

It is essential to understand that places and things precede action – as action – in order to orchestrate them as elements in-motion, which play not only on the eye but also on the senses and the psyche of the most important and unpredictable element in the event – the audience – and that this restless collective is not limited to the well-ordered rows of conventional theatre, but extends onto the streets, the stadium, the museum, the gallery, and other places of public encounter.

Design (like the word performance) is both verb and noun – 'a doing and a thing done' (Diamond 1996: 5) as Elin Diamond contends – and therefore becomes the active means of reconfiguring the remains of performance and/or allowing the lived experience to persist in exhibition. It operates across the performative aspects of the *presentational*, *representational*, and *re-presentational* with strategies that create not 'something other than performance', but new unique productions as alternative performances. Through exhibiting performance, designers as curatorial provocateurs create specific conditions in which viewing privileges and power relations can be challenged and in which meaning is continually questioned.

The major challenge for designers revisiting and re-presenting disappearing acts such as performances, installations, and exhibitions, is how to work with the remains of the event as a means of representing the past in the present. One strategy that engages with event and representation is offered in the

writings of Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks (2001) in their book *Theatre/Archaeology*. Archaeology becomes the means for remembering and reconstructing a performance, with the proviso that ‘the past “as it was” or “as it happened” is an illusionary category, neither stable nor homogenous’ (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 11). As a form of production that involves interpretation, archaeological knowledge is always shaped by present interests and values. Therefore, as with archaeology, experiencing a performance event or its documentation isn’t a reconstruction but a re-contextualization taking into account how one ‘might work with the remains of past performance’ (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 13). Those visiting an exhibition interpret the documentation they are confronted with in a similar manner to how an audience interprets a performance environment and the narratives placed in front of them – by drawing on their own experiences of the past. The reading of the documents is influenced by the way the visitors reorder, and choose what they regard as significant. The document(ation), as a new performance in itself, involves a gathering, assembling, and letting-go again – bridging between past and present through a spatiotemporal orchestration.

Here we are considering the performance designer as one whose creative ambit extends beyond the theatre and offers an alternative role to the traditional curator/exhibition designer: that is, a new form of curatorship – defined through the word *curate* as carer and curer: the keeper, overseer, and guardian. Performance Design potentially provides an alternative and oppositional form of curatorship that allows a play on the extended curatorial role that Derrida has pointed out through the *pharmakon*, playing the corrupter, contaminator, infector... the dis-easer. While the conventional curator is guardian of the artifacts that have to be housed, treasured, and preserved (keeping in check their physical and memorial decline), to curate a performance is to capture the ineffable, to house the un-housable, to reproduce through a contextual shift that which has already long disappeared and to re-produce it as something ‘other’ to its original. The act of re-designing is therefore essential.

The trajectory we will take you on presents a range of exhibitions we have initiated, curated, and designed: *Fragments Out of the Dark* (1998), *Landing: 7 Stages: Aoteroa* (PQ, 1999), *Srdce: The Heart of PQ* (2003), *Dis-Play: re-Membering a Performance Landscape* (2004) and *Now/Next: Performance Space at the Crossroads* (designed for 2011). Each project allowed us to play out the question of how to re-perform past events by incorporating the spectator as participant in the exhibition site as a found-space for communal action and re-action.

Before outlining the selected projects, let’s establish a few terms:

Presentation: As both method and deed, presentation is predicated on live action; from the delivery of information and entertainment; to the bestowal of a gift. As the thing itself, presentation – a making-present in the moment of reception – is aligned to Phelan’s unrepeatable and unrepresentable act. The performance event is therefore presentational, just as the art object is in a gallery context.

Representation: Like presentation, representation constitutes an act, but *on behalf of* the absent original. In design it stands in for the realized object-event as both a pre-making (projecting unrealized performances) and a re-making (standing in for past performances). Representation involves an

imagined presence and is associated with a mimetic reflection of reality. Theatre itself is therefore bound up in the representational, often considered an etiolated version of reality, in which something is lost and the power/presence of the original is diminished. In scenography models, drawings, photographs, and artifacts (such as costumes/props/scenery) are representations of the performance event: that which preceded and outlived the original presentation. However representation's relationship to reality is complicated. While reflecting, portraying, or standing in for the real, representations can be more real than the reality to which they refer, as witnessed by Jean Baudrillard's theory of the *simulacrum* (Baudrillard 1988).

Re-presentation / *(Re)Presentation*: As a hyphenated or bracketed word, re-presentation is a hybrid expression that negotiates between the presentational act and representational facsimile. The hyphen/bracket is intentionally added to destabilize 'representation' as a reflection or transparent record of 'reality', suggesting that no re-presentation can be absolutely objective or universal. Critical theory suggests that we only know the world through re-presentations that allow us to access events and physical reality. Operating between 'fact' and the 'ideal' re-presentation is an act of representation and therefore renders the copy performative by re-working it as an original.

Each of the projects outlined below work between the presentational, representational, and re-presentational in order to make-in-some-way-present past performance designs or potential future ones.

The event scorches on the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell – a picture. (Brook 1968: 152)

In 1999, Dorita Hannah coordinated and convened New Zealand's first symposium and exhibition on Theatre Arts Design, which we called OUT OF THE DARK: a pioneering attempt to bring our performing arts design out of the shadows and into the light. We named the symposium *Offerings Out of the Dark* and the exhibition, designed and curated by Sven Mehzoud, was titled *Fragments Out of the Dark*.

Fragments Out of the Dark (FIG. 1: GAVIN WOODWARD, SVEN MEHZOUD, OUT OF THE DARK, NZ INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL, 1998) allowed us to begin posing questions of making present past performances, which remain only as fragmentary memories, documentation, and material remains – those photographs, models, drawings ~~and~~ props, costumes, and set pieces so often utilized as exhibition artifacts. We decided to encourage NZ performance practitioners – in art, theatre, and architecture – to curate past projects by designing a site-specific display. The exhibition's design strategy involved a spatial provocation in the form of a metal locker backed with a vertical florescent light – which was delivered to the artists' homes. This was accompanied with the following statement:



FIG. 1

Fragments seeks to re-present design in theatre: the lighting, sound, graphics, sets, costumes, and architecture. We have asked 20 contributors to this exhibition to re-visit and re-interpret one of their past projects in which the designer was a significant player, a creative originator, or an aesthetic director. But how does one in fact re-visit a past theatrical event, conjure up a memory of something always intended to be transient? How does one re-present the essence of an architectural project? (Mehzoud and Sayle 1998: 131).

The aim was to provoke the artists, architects, and designers to translate their original design concepts and solutions into the challenges of a new site with diverse results, which tended to work between the representational and re-presentational through performative site-specific installations that created worlds within the metal walls. Like portable cabinets of curiosities, the lockers returned to Wellington filled with drawings new and old, props from original productions, strange articles in jars and bottles, sculptural objects, and architectural models. Some took their lockers apart, some violated theirs, and others distilled former performance designs to an essential gesture. Tony Rabbit simply refused to exhibit his production design for *The Masterbuilder* (Circa Theatre, Wellington, New Zealand, 1995) and explained that since theatre exists only in the performed moment any re-visiting of past work would inevitably result in a corrupted, incomplete, and therefore meaningless outcome. Nevertheless he took the position that 'it is perhaps valid for a third person to present in another medium an interpretation of an individual theatre designer's work' (Rabbit 1998: 141). Consequently, his exhibit showed a video documentary on the making of the production within a locker out of which spilled scoria, red porous rock fragments that had filled his original set. Despite his philosophical

stand, Rabbit still deferred to the representational mode of a moving-image documentary, accompanied by the presentational mode of the scenic material.

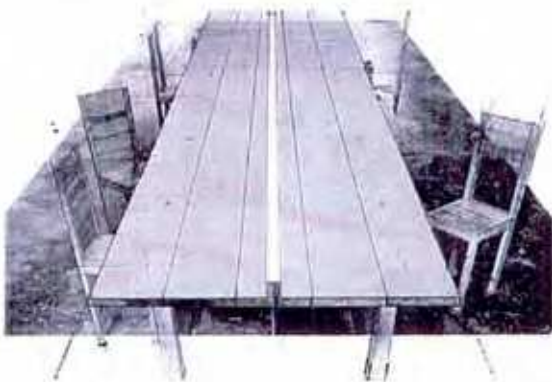


FIG. 2

In New Zealand the term 'curator' also applies to one who prepares a sportsground – a groundsman – suggesting a form of staging that is linked to landscape. Our national exhibit at the 1999 Prague Quadrennial was comprised of an architecturally scaled table, referring to vessel, jetty and terrain, which landed in the Quadrennial's exhibition hall (FIG. 2: DORITA HANNAH, JON RENNIE, LANDING: 7 STAGES: AOTEAROA, PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL, 1999).

As a site of collaboration, colonization, and negotiation, the table presents a gathering ground for displaying past projects. Dorita Hannah curated this exhibition co-designed by Helen Todd and Jon Rennie. New Zealand designers were asked what would they bring to the table that was 'of this place'? The result was an eleven-legged table with seven places that presented seven productions in varying scales and methods, each individually lit from a central shaft of light that ran the length of the tabletop, based around Colin McCahon's painting *Light Falling Through a Dark Landscape* (1972). The installation invited visitors to physically engage with the site, briefly forming small communities of embodied participants within the work.

The varied installation responses from designers selected by a national jury included; a flipbook showing the visual score for the premiere of a new opera produced by the NZ International Arts Festival; a suitcase full of neon light and memorabilia from a Mozart opera; a smooth undulating landform that rose out of the table's surface replicating a timber set designed as landform and whale-back; a Samoan kava bowl filled with water and images of dancers embedded in resin forms; and a wooden tripod that pierced the table's surface and held a model for a bicultural performance, its position deliberately denying the seated view at the colonizer's table. Dorita Hannah's costume designs for *Ricordi* (another premiere commissioned by the NZ International Arts Festival, 1998) were re-presented as curious assemblages in large glass jars filled with oil and lit from below. These uncanny objects referred to medical specimens and rock-pool collections, echoing the production design concept that responded to Katherine Mansfield's short stories of a New Zealand childhood in bush and beach. The garments – constructed of synthetic, plastic, and metal in Act One (fever) and reworked in silk, cotton, and raffia in Act Two (horizon) – reflected the writer's feverish and depleted tubercular state as she recalled her distant past. A souvenir program, transformed into a scrapbook that contained design drawings and production photographs, complemented the five jars, emphasizing the display as an installation constructed from the detritus washed up on the floors of a design studio and costume workshop.

As with *Fragments*, the work exhibited in *Landing* negotiated between the representational and re-presentational. However the exhibit itself, as furniture inviting occupation, was presentational with the performative landscape of the table harnessing and including the visitors' bodies, which were incorporated within the work and thereby necessary to completing the work.

The success of *Landing* at the 1999 Prague Quadrennial led to a collaboration with the Czech Theatre Institute, which invited Dorita Hannah to design the central thematic exhibition for PQ 2003. Hannah invited Mehzoud to co-design this event with her and together they formed *SCAPE @ Massey* (a design studio for Social Cultural & Performance Environments), inviting Lee Gibson to join the team. Titled *The Heart of PQ: A Performance Landscape for the Senses*, the resulting site-specific sceno-architectural installation was located in the Middle Hall of Prague's Industrial palace, where we sought to dispense with all representation – models, artifacts, images – and present performance as a “lived experience” upon terrain that offered a site with multiple places to perform, to view, to be viewed, and to participate (FIG. 3: *SCAPE @ MASSEY*, RASTISLAV JUHAS, SRDCE: *THE HEART OF PQ*, PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL, 2003). Within this complex 3-dimensional labyrinth, constructed of sensory towers set in an undulating landscape, theatrical space was discovered, and shared by practitioners and visitors alike. The aim was to challenge and eliminate the borders that traditionally exist in theatre so that new relationships could be explored between the body and the built,



FIG. 3

between the viewer and the viewed, between the designer and the director, between performers and audience. The design emerged through a global collaboration between interdisciplinary performing artists, through a number of workshops in Europe, leading to a sceno-architectural landscape that presented a range of dynamic spatial conditions for performance exploration in real space and time.

Sited within the intersectional gathering ground of the Middle Hall of *Výstaviště's* Industrial Palace, the installation was composed of five scaffolding towers, organized around a long table and bound within an abstract landscape of timber planks rising from a platform/stage. These structures formed containers for each of the (uncontainable) senses (smell, hearing, taste, touch & sight) to be dressed/fleshed with performance. The *landform* of undulating platforms rose up to the *threshold* through which the public enter; a multileveled archival wall made of cubby-holes designed as a repository for the senses. Below the landform, at its highest point, lay a subterranean space that could be accessed from two of the containers and the threshold wall. The scaffolding *towers of the senses* were 2.5m wide, 12m long and 9m-11m high, each one individually developed with a performing arts group from South Africa, the Pacific, Asia, Europe, North America, Kazakhstan and Russia. The central theme for this purely presentational exhibit was *containment and contamination*. In maintaining that performance can never be truly contained and that the performing body is a contaminating agent, these sensory containers either opened out or closed to their surroundings, forming zones of action within a chaotic market-place composed of varying temporal rhythms, which were purely presentational.

The process, which focused on design representation in the studio and embodied re-presentation in project workshops, evolved over nearly three years as a collaborative investigation into the dynamics of theatrical space and the sensory body. Architecture took on the role of provocative agent rather than passive receptacle, through a studio project (run at Massey College of Creative Arts), a series of performance workshops (in Germany and the Czech Republic) and ongoing global dialogue between international artists (via fax, phone, and email). The installation constituted the final workshop, inviting performance explorations and a physical engagement by the public. The proposed 'sceno-architecture' was a hybrid environment that falls between scenography and architecture, challenging both disciplines and our perceptions of space-in-action. Its urban form with towers and folded ground established a contemporary 'Babel'; a complex landscape upon which language, culture, and performance were shared, contested, and negotiated.

The Heart of PQ was on one hand, a utopian idea fated to fail and, on the other hand, a dystopian experiment where failure was productive. Differing languages, cultural practices, and spatial conventions led to misinterpretations during the process and the production. Like the mythical city of Babel it proved an unsustainable dream, resulting in confusion, tension, and the pervasive threat of collapse. Yet within this provisional environment, negotiating between architecture and scenography, resides the promise of architecture's inability to behave with propriety and the performing body's inability to be securely contained.

The challenge for us as designers working in an international environment was to re-present the *The Heart of the PQ* back in the local New Zealand context. Working with Hannah, Gibson and Massey

University colleague Stuart Foster, Sven Mehzoud led the design of the resulting installation in Wellington City's Art Gallery during the 2004 International Festival of the Arts.

DisPlay: Re-Membering a Performance Landscape set out to playfully examine the ways in which a past performance event might be viewed and displayed in a specifically gallery setting (FIG. 4: *SCAPE @ MASSEY, DISPLAY: RE-MEMBERING A PERFORMANCE LANDSCAPE, WELLINGTON, 2004.*). It displayed fragments of our design process, which included prospective imaginations of the event (3-D digital and material models, plans and perspectives), its architecture



FIG. 4

and still/moving images from the Prague performances. The strategy was to construct a walk-in diorama as a white abstract landscape, constructed of two undulating strips, that re-membered *The Heart of PQ*. This allowed the visitors to physically occupy the space in order to discover the fragments embedded within the display and thereby find themselves on the stage itself reconstructing a body of work. A larger scale model, with soundscape and video projections, complemented the working maquettes hidden in the landscape. It was housed as a smaller diorama within a black box that could be viewed through a square window or peepholes on the side. In this way the prospective fragments of the design process combined with the retrospective, audiovisual representations of the performances to create a fractured archival experience in the moment.

The *DisPlay* installation aimed to emphasize the engaged and embodied nature of performance design, with specific reference to the Heart of PQ, as a place for direct communal inter-action in a time when communication was becoming more and more disembodied. Helene Cixous's words reiterated this in a line of text on the gallery walls:

In truth we go as little to the theatre as to our heart, and what we feel the lack of is going to our heart, our own and that of things. We live exterior to ourselves, in a world whose walls are replaced by television screens, which has lost its thickness, its depths, its treasures, and we take the newspaper columns for our thoughts. We are printed daily. We lack even walls, true walls, on which divine messages are written. We lack earth and flesh (Cixous 1995: 341).

In *DisPlay* representational techniques (models and videos) combined with presentational techniques (incorporating the visitor) as a re-presentational event within the gallery environment. The design strategy was to provoke the audience into piecing together representational fragments viewed from a platform on which the public became performers themselves, distracted in the process of actively creating their own interpretations and imaginations of a past event. The otherwise passive viewer became an active participant in the re-membering process – individually reassembling a body of past work while incorporated into the present work.

The final project in this ongoing investigation into performance design curatorship is one that is still in motion: the architecture exhibition for the 2011 Prague Quadrennial, designed and commissioned by Dorita Hannah. Titled *Now/Next: Performance Space at the Crossroads*, the 10-day exhibition is to be sited at the literal Prague Crossroads in St Anne's church and at the metaphorical crossroads between performance and space, theatre and architecture, environment and event, body and building (FIG. 5: DORITA HANNAH, MORGAN TERRY, NOW/NEXT: PERFORMANCE SPACE AT THE CROSSROADS, PRAGUE QUADRENNIAL, 2011).

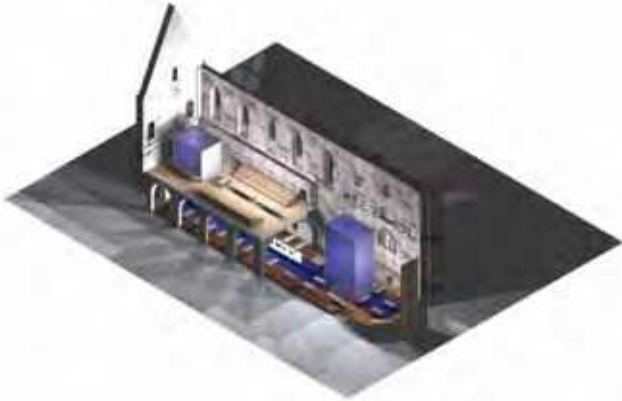


FIG. 5

The exhibition is composed of two parts – the National Exhibition (asserting what performance space is NOW after the first decade of a new century) and an open Spatial Laboratory (exploring what it could be NEXT) that meet around a Media Tower where collaborative projects, which negotiate the in-between, are presented in moving images; choreographic dialogues with architecture; temporary performative pavilions; spectacular transformations of urban facades and city squares; fleeting constructions in remote landscapes; theatrical interventions to public buildings; and behavioral structures that respond to human movement, sound, and breath.

Asserting theatre architecture as a 'live space', the national exhibition presents each country's concept of what a theatre is *here* (of a particular place) and *now* (of a particular time):

Is performance space new, found, recycled, old, fresh, safe, or dangerous? Is it inside, outside, traditional, or radical? Is it a purpose-built venue, a found site, a virtual world, or simply any space creatively claimed by performance?

In this age of global media events, new technologies, shifting performance genres, and local festive expression each nation is asked...

...what is the contemporary place of theatre in your country?

In the first decade of the 21st century, what active roles have performance environments played in shaping theatrical events and local cultures? What spaces were constructed (built), performed (improvised), or imagined (unbuilt) in this new century? (PQ'11/Hannah 2010: 4).

Each national exhibit is provided with a table as a site to display selected projects and how they are, were, or could be inhabited by performance events: from a spectacular opening in a stadium, to highly tuned concert halls, to reoccupied industrial behemoths, to fantastical urban streetscapes, and the theatrical spaces that lie between or beyond these. The table becomes a found space for recontextualizing the work within the ancient deconsecrated church of St Anne's, which was established by former Czech president, dissident, and playwright, Václav Havel, as a space for creative global dialogue that respects cultural diversity.

The table returns as a performative locus for re-presenting work, which could incorporate the representations of *pre-making* and *re-making* where constructed environments are speculated, recorded or reinterpreted. Proffered as an intimate piece of architecture that engages directly with the body of the viewer, the table allows the curators to encourage visitors to linger and engage more directly with the work – once again becoming implicated in the presentational space of the exhibition as event. As with New Zealand's *Landing* exhibit designed for PQ'99, the tabletop provides the conditions for a miniaturized performance landscape upon, under, and around which spatial propositions can be played out.

The table is also where we communally create and can hotly debate the future of performance space and place pressure on contemporary theatre architecture, which appears to be failing performers and audiences who refuse to be contained in its all too often dark and disciplined interiors. Upstairs the 10day international Spatial Laboratory, open to theatre professionals and the public, will provide a discursive site for 18 young scholars, designers, and performance-makers to work with professors and professional experts on the social, cultural, and political potential of performance space as both a global and local venue for creative, civic, and communal expression.

It is in this combination of the presentational laboratory, representational media tower, and re-presentational national exhibits that the architecture section aims to provide a 'live space' for public and professional discourse during the PQ.

Conclusion

Representations of live events seek to heal the image if seen as a curator's role in conventional terms. However the curated performance exhibition is not just a healing device, but also exposes problems with conventional exhibits, which tend to refuse performance as an active contaminant.

As exhibition designers, we tend to apply the same conceptual framework used for designing theatrical events, which aim to provide an immediate and meaningful connection with the audience – the most essential element in theatre's disappearing presentational acts. Simply put, we create a performance-based representation as re-representation. Furthermore, as we step into the role of curators by choosing how and what is represented, we pass on this challenge to the viewers or audience who become complicit and involved in the meaning-making of that re-representation.

As performance designers who adopt the role of curator, we are also agent-provocateurs revealing the uncontainable nature of performative bodies, environments, and discourse; allowing meaning to spill out; creating new events for audiences to engage with, interpret, and make meaningful. The image is not healed, but rendered vulnerable, fragmentary, and contingent. The audience is invited to participate in making meaning and, by inhabiting a shared contested space, to necessarily complete the event, which is different for each participant. In this way the exhibition is not 'something other than performance', but an 'other' performance.

Endnotes

¹ This comment paraphrases a statement made by Wales-based scenographers, Simon Banham and Richard Downing, in a *Performance Design Symposium* (Rome, 2006), expressing their resistance to representing creative work in such fora.

² Here Phelan is referring to J. L. Austin's speech acts and the active nature of the 'performative' in which by saying something it is enacted, as opposed to the 'constative' that merely describes something.

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