

## Lee Campbell

### Visual Recorders.

As a current researcher at Loughborough University School of the Arts, undertaking a funded practice-based PhD investigating performance, liveness, witness and humour, since commencing in October 2010 I have been developing methodological strategies to be able to deal with undertaking research in the presence of liveness where I place great importance on self-reflexivity during and after the performance event.

Caught between the paradox of absence and presence where a performance may leave no physical visible trace when done and agitated by ideas that performance may survive only via recollections accessed through the memory of its witnesses, performers and audience members as participants alike, I have ignored Peggy Phelan's belief that performance is non-reproducible as a matter of its own ontology (Phelan, 1993) and adopted the position that the performance record may help to trigger self-reflexivity post-event, wanting to interrogate the challenges that the performance record presents if I deem it as an interlocutor between the past and the present. Where I am inclined to agree with Philip Auslander's assertion that we live in a 'mediatized' culture obsessed with 'proof' of an action and sharing the one-off performance via various recording devices (Auslander, 1999), I am unsure about his assertion that performance is a time-based action which naturally requires a time-based recorder such as film or video and his dismissal of traditional forms such as painting, drawing and writing as these transform the performance, though strangely thinks that the still photograph is suitable (1999:45). In the following case studies in this article where I interrogate such theoretical beliefs with practice, I reflect on what these 'transformations' could be.

Aiming to map out a politics of form when recording a performance using three visual mediums: painting, drawing and writing to interrogate Auslander's limited views on the suitability of recording devices, I have connected my ideas concerning the importance of self-reflexivity in research and Auslander and Phelan's opposing views with more recent discussions concerning performance documentation including Sally O'Reilly's denomination of performance records as 'portals' allowing non-attendees of the event to 'imagine what the past event might have been'<sup>1</sup> and Catherine Elwes' statement in *On Performance and Performativity* (2004) that performance can only be accessed through documentation, suggesting that artists and critics must look only in retrospect at an event (2004-193). Throughout this intense period of practical research, despite being concerned with forms other than the moving image, I viewed the painted, written and drawn records I created as objects to aid self-reflexivity in much the same way as Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham writing in *More-and-Less-Than: Liveness, Video Recording, and the Future of Performance* (2000) refer to performance's dependence to video by considering it as an aid, if only to preserve the historical lineage of performance for educational research. Considering these drawings, paintings and writings as statements of 'witness', to extend what a 'witness' may be, I wanted to interrogate whether or not the constitution of recording technologies as 'witness' as opposed to human phenomenological recognition is absurd, by not only referring to those people present at my performances as witnesses but also to the event's recording devices.

Witness.

Noun . 1. testifier, attestant, deponent 2. onlooker, eyewitness, looker-on, observer, spectator, viewer, watcher, bystander.

Verb. 1. see, observe, notice, note, view, watch, look on, mark, perceive 2. testify, attest, bear witness, depose, confirm, bear out, corroborate. 3. endorse, sign, countersign.  
(Manser, 2005:702)

One who sees or knows something and testifies about it; or (2) one who gives evidence under oath or affirmation, either orally or by affidavit or deposition; or (3) one who, to vouch for the genuineness of signature, affixes his or her name to an instrument that another has signed.

(Garner, 1995:938)

Jane Blocker, Slavoj Žižek and Tim Etchells' referral of the witness as empowered via their experience and testimony of the 'real' is important for this research when combining the above definition of a 'witness' as one who testifies with discussions concerning performance documentation to explore how the paradox of absence and presence that live performance embodies may operate when one aims to access performance through record. In Blocker's *Seeing Witness: seeing visuality and the ethics of testimony* (2009), she describes the 'privileges such a position can claim' where she argues that;

The godlike invisibility of this witness lends it a legitimacy and authority that allow it to control in alarming ways what we understand the 'real' to be.  
(2009:16)

Whilst Žižek in *The metastases of enjoyment: six essays on women and causality* (1994) refers to the witness as 'the one who 'sees', whose point of view organises and dominates the field of vision, is also the bearer of power' (1994:73). In *Certain Fragments* (1999), Etchells states;

The struggle to produce witnesses rather than spectators is present everywhere in the contemporary performance scene.. in very different ways, an invitation to be here and now, to feel exactly what it is to be in this place in this time  
(1999:17)

Evaluating how extended definitions of 'witness' may operate in the liminal state of live performance by deploying liminality as a methodological approach, I view 'witnesses' not only as tools for performance preservation, but as survival-tactics operating like Raymond Williams' ideas around 'keywords' which can be seen as 'tools' and 'attitudes' which comprise a methodology and its ideology (Williams in States, 1996). In *State of Play* (2011), fellow performance-based researcher Mike Chavez-Dawson refers to my sentiments stating;

To refine a point by artist/researcher Lee Campbell we utilise a bricolage of improvisation and intuition as methodological survival-tactics but are not limited by it.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the following case-studies, I become particularly curious in assessing how the 'witness' as survival-tactic may become a limitation and control the performance. Regarding Jane Blocker's ideas concerning witness and power, humour in my performances is deployed to antagonise the power relations that exist between myself as protagonist and audience members as performance participants. In what Claire Bishop

refers to as a relational antagonism (Bishop, 2004), I view the witness as operating like a J. L. Austin performative speech act where a performance needs a witness to validate its existence (Austin, 1976). No witness - didn't happen. The witness is thus empowered and the protagonist is controlled by the witness' gaze. Influenced by the performative actions of artists such as Dan Graham and Vito Acconci who have previously forced an audience to become unavoidably self-reflexive as the performance, in a similar bid to relinquish subservience from the witness' powerful gaze, I aim to regain some form of control in the unwritten performative contract by inviting audiences, through a form of friendly social conviviality, to participate in a potentially embarrassing form of bodily slapstick for their own and other's entertainment, where recording devices may help galvanise participation and trigger humour by their mere presence.<sup>3</sup>

## **Case Study 1: Painting as Witness.**

*Painting the Performance* (2011), held at The Centre for Creative Collaboration, London (Fig.1), attempted to capture 'liveness' in paint and was in response to *Paintings of Performances Nobody Saw* (2010), a series of paintings copying a set of photographs taken by a mobile phone camera that I had positioned on make-shift tripods; walls, fences and posts (Fig.2). To my knowledge, in most situations, the mobile-phone camera was the only witness to a series of actions I had performed on the top of hills, ends of piers and other off-the-beaten-track locations. Attempting to capture 'liveness' in paint and embed the action of recording within the ontology of a performance itself, at the start of *Painting the Performance* (2011) I invited three audience members to stand behind a black screen and instructed them to move about together. The audience could not see behind the screen, but glimpse at the participant's legs. Trying to stay unaffected by the laughter of the participants and the audience watching them, a small black hole in the screen allowed me a partial view to produce a set of paintings. The constant unfolding action that I witnessed made it difficult for me to decide at speed what 'still' singular moments I should chose to reveal to the audience members watching. Despite the denial of audience members to be able to see behind the screen and my own confusion in trying to represent the action, I became increasingly fascinated by the presence of laughter.

On reflection, I believe that the audience member's laughter was caused not only by their inability to see what I could see, but also, and quite unintentionally in my planning, to what I constitute as 'over-recording'; the organisers of the event recorded the audience recording my recording and this was recorded and eventually publicised on a website. I am certain that laughter was generated when the recording started to control and take over the performance. Audience members were witness to a 'scene of over-recording', an abundance of different forms of recording in operation at the same; from my painting as recording, the video and stills camera recording me to the recordings made by the audience in other mediums, such as drawing (Fig.3) and people's memory as a recorder. All of these attempts to record an action that could not be entirely seen by the majority of its witnesses produced laughter caused by visual negation.



Fig. 1. Lee Campbell. *Painting the Performance* (2011) Courtesy of Becky Cremin.



Fig.2. Lee Campbell. *End of the Pier* (2010) part of the *Paintings of Performances Nobody Saw* series. Acrylic on Canvas. 2x3 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

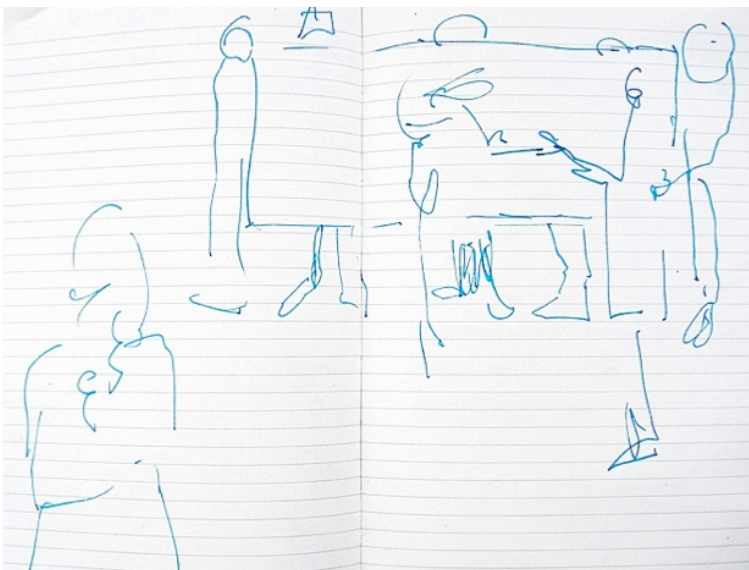


Fig.3. A drawing produced by Fflo Flach at *Painting the Performance*. (2011). Courtesy of Fflo Flach.

## Case Study 2: *Drawing as Witness.*

*On Your Marks* (2011) was a collaboration between myself and fellow Loughborough University School of the Arts researcher Lucy O'Donnell, held at the Parfitt Gallery in Croydon, London, where we considered drawing as a form of marking to catalyst communication, test reciprocity between ourselves (Figs. 4 and 5), evaluate how physical presence could be marked and begin to understand how marks become indexical of their producer. Most importantly, we wished to assess how drawing may operate as recording phenomenological relationships between two people.

During the five day residency, myself and Lucy transformed the traditional white cube into a stage to perform in, play in and have fun in by utilising its physicality. Audiences could watch myself and Lucy marking through the windows or enter the space as the door was open. We prepared the gallery with sketchbooks and coloured sticky post-it notes and suspended a roll of white paper along the length of the gallery, all to be marked with charcoal, black biro pen, or lead pencil. As the performances took place, communication between me and Lucy alternated between using the various paper mediums which all became obliterated and eventually destroyed by the end of the project. Leftover objects from a previous exhibition including text left on the wall and plinths that had not yet been removed were utilised as props. This 'detritus' would become functional again in quite an absurd way. In *Archive or Memory?* (2003) Matthew Reason alludes to our leftover objects in his description of 'detritus' (2003:88) and cites Forced Entertainment's performance space as;

Littered with traces of what has gone before, traces of the performance which were present but now has gone.  
(2003:88)

Throughout *On Your Marks*, marks made on paper left in the space in the aftermath of a performance also became props which we played with and incorporated into our actions (Fig.6). Audiences not present at previous performances evaluated these forms of embodied debris as objects functioning as artworks within a white-cube gallery space (Fig.7).

Considering the relationship between drawing, performance and recording these objects became intriguing due to their multi-functionality. On the one hand they were the discarded waste of previous communication between myself and Lucy, records of a performance past and on the other, art objects for a fascinated audience who were not present at the time of their production but were now seeing them being functional as necessary props in a performance - 'recording' becoming functional and useful again in its object form and similar to *Painting the Performance*, firmly embedding itself within the ontology of the performance action. In terms of these objects and their relationship to an audience, I have found Rebecca Schneider's words in her chapter entitled 'Solo Solo Solo' in Gavin Butt's *After Criticism* (2004) helpful where she writes:

The work results in a denial of the audience by producing a document that will be exhibited as an indication that 'you' (the viewer) were not present at the event - you missed the action contained by the frame but more than the frame. The paper, frame, and photo of the action all represent to the viewer that which the viewer missed - that which, standing before the document, you witness yourself missing again.  
(Schneider in Butt, 2004)



Fig.4. Lee Campbell and Lucy O'Donnell. *On Your Marks* (2011) Courtesy of Coralie Shepphard.



Fig.5. Lee Campbell and Lucy O'Donnell. *On Your Marks*. (2011) Courtesy of Coralie Shepphard.



Fig.6. Lee Campbell. *On Your Marks*.(2011) Courtesy of Coralie Shepphard.



Fig.7. *On Your Marks* (2011) Courtesy of Coralie Shepphard.

### Case Study 3: *Writing as Witness.*

As part of a programme of audience participatory events entitled *THIS IS NOT A SCHOOL* held at Five Years, a white-cube gallery space in London's East End, I issued participants with a witness statement form which I asked them to complete carefully as I would be collecting these as evidence of the performance they had just witnessed. The previous performance consisted of me allowing participants to enter the gallery one by one where they would find nothing on show. In response to my request, one woman told me that she could definitely smell smoke and asked whether that was part of the performance. I didn't comment. Others wrote something similar. One man asked 'what was the performance, did I miss it?' The recording of the performance, as in the case of *Painting the Performance*, was the performance.

Despite the amusing comments that participants wrote on their forms, this research highlighted the difficulties of language in constructing meaning to a performance. This was exemplified when I asked the participants to collate their witness statements and choose which statement most accurately represented the performance or, if impossible, to merge statements to produce a collective meaning (Fig.8). As I suspected, meaning construction is entirely subjective to easily produce an overall 'collective' meaning. Groups laughed at and humoured each other's comments on the forms and by the end presented me with statements which contained phrases which had the largest capacity for laughter.



Fig.8. *Witness Statements* (2011) Courtesy of the artist.

## Conclusion and Future Research.

An audience is generally perceived as the people who witness a performance. I challenge performance's ontological stasis as being dependent on human phenomenological recognition by asserting that recording devices are witnesses and like people are unreliable in giving accurate accounts. The memory of both a person and a recording device is equally selective, forgetful and can easily be manipulated. Both can, in the words of Mike Chavez-Dawson, ultimately 'misinterpret'.<sup>4</sup> Those working in the presence of liveness must find other survival tactics to allow themselves to evaluate their actions beyond pure memory, particularly if they are to adopt a non-recording policy to their performances. The questions remain; whilst under the scrutiny of witness, how may the performance maker become a self-reflexive tool whilst simultaneously maintaining a position of direct involvement and critical distance within the presence of liveness? Can sustainable methodologies be found for retrieval, if ontologically performance is rooted in non-reproduction? For many self-reflexive researchers and performance makers, recording is a vital if not essential part of the performance process as a way to relive the action in a bid to extract knowledge, construct meaning and evaluate one's behaviour. As I have shown in the case studies described above, each form of recording has presented me with challenges and difficulties. However, I have been more concerned with how the presence of recorders as 'witnesses' have contributed to the proceedings of a performance and primarily how their presence may trigger humour and reveal clues about the phenomenological relationships we have with each other rather than suggesting that all performance records compromise meaning, that my paintings, drawings and written documents as records merely function as arbitrary illustrations to add more fuel to Herbert Molderings' condemnation;

Whatever survives in the form of a photograph/videotape is no more than a fragmentary petrified vestige of a lively process of that place at a different time in a different place.  
(1984: 172-3)

My current research explores the idea of human recorders to interrogate the relationship between modernity and comedy by drawing on Michael North's curiosity in *Machine-Age Comedy* (2009) as to whether there is something inherently comic in the modern condition and more specifically in mechanical reproduction itself with respect to Henri Bergson's belief that the sight of a person acting like a machine is laughter-producing, when a person acts like a 'thing' (Bergson, 2008). By referring to Walter Benjamin's 1927 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in terms of copying and mimesis, I am revisiting an earlier work *Lost for Words* (Figs.9-11), held in January 2011 as part of *Testing Grounds* at South Hill Park, Bracknell, where I instructed audience members to participate in an action where they collectively marched around the gallery copying me shouting LEFT and RIGHT whilst attempting to perform the opposite in a body action which proved far more difficult than they would first believe. You shout LEFT but your body does right. You shout NO and you nod. You shout YOU but you point to yourself.

Subsequent performances as research in 2012 will question whether the performing slapstick body may be able to shed light on the comic value of reproduction through acts of human mimesis, one person copying another in a performance which builds up a domino effect of confusion. Participants will try to make sense of the multitude of confusions busily in operation at that particular moment in the performance space and I



will assess how various forms of instruction enable or disable the participant to successfully carry out such inverted behaviour.



Fig. 9. Lee Campbell *Lost For Words* (2011) South Hill Park. Courtesy of Testing Grounds.



Fig. 10. Lee Campbell *Lost For Words* (2011) South Hill Park. Courtesy of Testing Grounds.



Fig. 11. Lee Campbell *Lost For Words* (2011) South Hill Park. Courtesy of Testing Grounds.

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<sup>1</sup> This was stated by Sally O'Reilly at a discussion concerning performance documentation held at Jerwood Space, London in April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished exhibition catalogue produced by Manchester University Press (2011)

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Performance/Audience/Mirror* (San Francisco Art Institute, 1975) comprised of a mirror being held by Graham in front of an audience where he announced the audience's every move, every gesture, and every sound. In *Performance Test* (1969), Acconci stared at individuals in the audience for approximately thirty seconds.

<sup>4</sup> Mike made this comment at 'Documenting Performance: Exploring the Problems' TaPRA Documenting Performance Working Group Interim Symposium at University of Kent, May, 2011, organised by Dr. Toni Sant and Nicki Shaughnessy.

## Web links for performances cited.

*Painting the Performance* <http://youtu.be/-6RP45yRobE>

*Lost For Words* <http://youtu.be/ky5bjONPoek>

*On Your Marks* <http://www.parfittgallery.croydon.ac.uk/exhibitions/past/onyourmarks/>

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## Biography

Lee Campbell is an artist and curator currently completing a funded PhD (2010-13) investigating the deployment of humour in contemporary art practices at Loughborough University School of the Arts supervised by Dr Gillian Whiteley and Mel Jordan. As a 2007 Slade School of Fine Art MFA graduate, he has participated in numerous group shows including *Beautiful* with Mark Wallinger and Tomoko Takahashi, OXO Tower Wharf, London (2000) *Perseverance*, Physics Room, New Zealand (2004), *Whitstable Biennale* (2008), *Archipelago*, Cafe Gallery Projects, London (2011) and has presented research at Manchester Metropolitan University, Central School of Speech and Drama, London and Chelsea Theatre, London. (e) [L.Campbell@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:L.Campbell@lboro.ac.uk)

