(Re)Presenting The Present: The Act Of Documenting An Event

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(Re)Presenting The Present: The Act Of Documenting An Event

"Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as 'different'. The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present." (Phelan, 1993:146)

Working with time-based media naturally brings up questions of permanence. The temporality of performance acts as both its biggest strength and its biggest weakness.

It is remarkably powerful to know that you as the viewer are witnessing something which only exists in that state at that time; that your presence therefore is a part of its making and of its history. But when the piece no longer exists and its power remains trapped in that moment, how is it possible to represent it to those who were not present? Should it be re-presented at all? Maybe that's where the value of performance lies: the need to be there.

Questions concerning the re-presentation of live art have become central to my master project, especially as I continue to strive for accessibility. I want viewers to be able to access my work within performance, but I believe that by presenting them with video and photographic documentation I could be damaging the work by the simple act of portraying it in a new medium. Even reenactment, as close as it may be, is not the original. I want to avoid my audience viewing something not truly representative of the piece, but without documentation they cannot access my practice unless they are there to see it first-hand. This leads me to question what other options I have when it comes to documenting my work for the 'post-audience'.

Expression Of A Calculated Motion

In April and May 2016, I will show the piece *Expression Of A Calculated Motion* at Bergen Kunsthall. During the opening night on April 15th, participants will perform a choreographed walk for one hour. This will take place within the confines of a designated area, through which all visitors will need to pass when arriving and leaving the exhibition. The performance will interrupt the flow of visitors, forcing a spatial interaction between work and viewer. In all four corners of the performance area, speakers sit at head height on stands.

The performers' choreography will be set to a sound piece written in collaboration with musician Elliott Grant. It employs the use of surround sound and will pan across the four speakers, which stand to mark the edges of the performance 'territory'. The sound will act as an instructor for the performers, setting both the pace and intensity. After the one-off occurrence, it will continue to play in the space for the remainder of the exhibition period.

The hour-long event will occur during the time that visitors are arriving at the exhibition, interrupting the flow of access to the other works. The choreography itself will involve walking movements within the constraints of the space, subtle interactions between performers, and some periods of minimal or no movement. The performers will be given a set of rules that act as guidelines for their movements and the decisions that they will make on the night.

Expression Of A Calculated Motion was formed as a result of my investigations into how live performance can be used to encourage interaction between work and viewer, and through this interaction become more accessible. It begins as a live piece and later transforms into an installation that stands as the documentation, post-performance.

I will use this text to touch upon the forms of documentation most commonly used for performance art, in order to fully understand how this affects the perception and understanding of my piece *Expression Of A Calculated Motion*. I'm interested in discovering other ways to use documentation – ways that are less 'damaging' to the work itself. By damaging, I am referring to documentation that by its nature gives a false sense that it is a true representation of the event (usually photography and video). Recording a performance with these tools leads to the work being viewed in a different time and space from the original, and from a perspective other than the viewers own. It concludes in an experience that differs hugely from witnessing the piece live. Media that I consider to be less 'damaging' are those which clearly distinguish themselves as something separate from the initial performance.

Within this text I will consider the use of performed photography, appropriation, physical traces and reenactment. I will also touch upon the idea that tools, such as participation, could be used as a way to strengthen the memory of an event, thereby utilising memory as an additional intangible recording device.

Freezing Time

"The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the 'now' to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.)" (Phelan, 1993:146)

The need to document performance art will almost always lead to the employment of methods that represent the work as visually 'accurately' as possible. The obvious choices of medium for documentation are photography, video and written text. But although they may give a good sense of the overall actions within the performance, they will ultimately change the perception of the work by their distance from the 'present', and by their transformation from the three-dimensional to the two-dimensional. In order to compare the traditional forms of documentation with those that I consider to be less 'damaging', I will focus on the most common medium in the former category: photography.

Documentary Photography

"Even media that are usually thought of as reproducing reality faithfully – such as photography and film – are also used in the context of art in a way that seeks to undermine any faith in reproduction's ability to be faithful to reality." (Groys, 2002)

Historically, photography has played a huge role in the documentation of performance and live art. I personally feel familiar with hundreds of pieces that I have never witnessed live, some taking place more than 20 years before my birth. But, realistically, due to my not being there I do not know the works at all – just a visual representation of them. From the photographs, video and text which recorded their occurrence, I have imagined myself as a viewer in the present: the sounds, the smells, the intimacy. But it's all a product of my imagination, thanks to the assistance of the documentation. Although seemingly aiding accessibility for the post-audience, the problem with photography is that you cannot get to the thing itself; the surface is all you've got (Avedon, cited in Phelan, 1993).

Jon Erickson (1999, cited in Auslander, 2006) suggests that choosing to use black and white photography over colour could help to complement rather than damage the work. For Erickson, colour photographs assert themselves strongly as objects in their own right, whereas black and white images exist more as a supplement to performance, serving merely as a reminder of context, space, action and ideas. This suggests that Erickson and myself share a common aim: for documentation to be seen as something separate from the performance, for it to serve simply as a bank of information, or a tool for recalling memory. Although in agreement with Erickson's view that black and white photography could be the better option for recording live events, I still have a problem with the use of photography as a form of documentation for performance art. The viewer could be deceived into feeling as though they have witnessed the actual event – a deception that is definitely damaging to the piece. I strive to find methods of documentation that are distinctively separate from the event, but which can provide the same sense of what occurred. A bodily experience maybe, rather than an image on paper.

Physical And Photographed Traces

For a lot of performers, traces or physical remnants from the event can act as a powerful form of documentation. These traces can themselves be the subject of documentary photography, possibly serving as a better record of what occurred in the space than the photos of the performance itself. Taking part in PAS (Performance Art Studies) in Oslo, I was made aware of the power of the physical trace by professor Johannes Deimling. Post-performance, I was encouraged to take the time to explore the performance space and the traces left there, culminating in a deeper reflection of what had taken place.



Fig 1. PAS Performance Traces

I found this physical form of exploration a much stronger reminder of the movements and actions that I had witnessed compared with the photographs and video documentation of the actual event. As stated by Groys (2002): "[...] in the installation the documentation gains a site [...] this space is not abstract or neutral but is itself a form of life." However, like the performance itself traces usually have a short 'shelf-life', needing to be cleared away quickly from the public or private space which they inhabit. But if they could stand as a permanent installation or an immersive experience for viewers, wouldn't that be so much more captivating and informative than a photograph for those who were not present?

"The siting of documentation in an installation as the act of inscription in a particular space is thus not a neutral act of showing but an act that achieves at the level of space what narrative achieves at the level of time: the inscription in life." (Groys, 2002)

Even photographs of traces are themselves a more effective reminder of the performance than the event photography. Seeing the traces can evoke a physical memory of the space and of how these remnants occurred. But maybe this is only efficient to serve as a reminder for those that were present, rather than a way to access the performance for those that were not.

The link between photography and performance art is not limited to 'literal' documentation. Some artists use photography to manipulate the perceptions of their audience. They create what appears to be traditional photographic documentation, but in reality it depicts a staged or even fictional event.

Performing For The Camera

If the only access to the event is through its documentation, does it matter if it occurred at all? Maybe it's ok to just perform for the camera, bypassing the live audience. Or even to stage the entire thing, resulting in the 'event' never actually happening in the format that it claims.

For performance artist Gina Pane, the 'post-audience' (those who will access the work through the documentation) were far more important to cater for than the 'present audience' (those at the event):

"[the documentation] creates the work the audience will be seeing afterwards. So the photographer is not an external factor, he is positioned inside the action space with me, just a few centimeters away. There were times when he obstructed the [audiences'] view!" (O'Dell, cited in Auslander, 2006:3)

Despite Panes performances happening in front of a live audience, their presence was apparently not necessary to the works; in fact they were almost a spare-part in the process. It seems that the performance would have occurred in order to create documentation whether the audience were there or not, so why did she bother to hold a public event? It would have been perfectly possible to feign the performance for the photographer and merely claim that it actually took place. Austlander (2006) agrees with Panes view of the importance of catering for the post-audience, describing performance art as the performative act of documenting an event as such, and nothing to do with the initial presence of an audience. So in a situation where 'documentation' in the form of photography and video is being made, performance art does not need to be witnessed live. However, I see this as a way of creating a photographic image and would not necessarily call it 'performance art'.

Connotations – Performance Images

Hayley Newman's series *Connotations – Performance Images (1994 – 1998)* is a prime example of how the documentation of an event can hold so much more value than the event itself – so much so that the event need not happen in the first place. Exploring the differences between the experience of performing and its archiving as a document (Heathfield, 2004), Newman created a series of photographs of a fantasy international performance career claiming to be from the years 1994 to 1998:

"Taking only a week rather than the stated four years to complete, the work realises ideas that only previously existed in notebooks, crediting fictional performances to years in which I had been thinking of doing them." (Heathfield, 2004:170)

The artist provided a written account of each 'performance' to accompany the photographs, assigning them a time and space across international venues, which results in an increase of their credibility: "the artificial can thus be made living [...] by means of art documentation." (Groys, 2002).

The piece *Stealth*, part of the Connotations series, claims to have happened in Arnhem on November 22, 1996. A striking black and white photograph is said to be the only documentation of the performance; its accompanying text not only commenting on the event itself, but also on the decision to restrict its documentation:



Fig 2. Stealth

"Over three hours I jumped up and down on a trampoline in complete darkness. A small flashing red light attached to my body, along with the sound of my movements, were the only things indicative of any activity. Prior to the event I had instructed its organiser to enter at any point during the three hour performance and take a single photograph with a flash to document the work. This is the only image of the work, since no other photography was allowed." (Heathfield, 2004:169)

In reality, *Stealth* was photographed in front of a black cloth in a very small studio; the negative twisted and blackened to make it look as though the artist is falling through the air in the middle of a large dark space (Heathfield, 2004).

Newman saw the series as an "aspirational portfolio" a way of "creating, or at least imagining, new performance works." (Heathfield, 2004:168). "Documentation inscribes the existence of an object in history, gives a lifespan to this existence, and gives the object life as such – independently of whether this object was 'originally' living or artificial." (Groys, 2002).

Despite the fact that it is fictional, the idea that there is just one photograph in existence, taken from a single perspective, that of the photographer (under strict instruction from the artist) is compelling. Newman supplies us with the information that the photographer was not present for the entirety of the performance, so we find ourselves trying to piece together the remainder of the event. By only supplying very minimal visual information, she has made the work so much more engaging for the 'post-audience'. As viewers, we are required to use our imagination to place ourselves at the event – an almost participatory activity that acts to strengthen our relationship to the piece and to our memory of it.

The Leasing Of An Image

When a work is appropriated or re-enacted, does the new form that it takes automatically act as documentation of the original? Could portraying it from a different perspective somehow strengthen the work by re-affirming our mental connection to it? Or weaken it both by damaging our memory and the existing documentation of the original?

After Walker Evans

After Walker Evans from 1981 is the most well known of Sherrie Levine's photographic appropriations. This is thanks to the controversial discussions that it sparked regarding authorship and originality. By appropriating such well-known works, Levine asks that "images be seen in an entirely different context than that in which they were first made." (Burton, 2011:3). Re-photographing a photograph is a simple act, with the appropriation looking almost identical to the original. But what dramatically transforms it from the original in this case is *who* made it. According to Burton (2011:3), "Levine's images of images suggest that every picture has a malleable history." Her intention, then, is not to 'document' as such, but to use the documentation of an existing product with an existing history as a tool for projecting a new reading onto it: one that questions gender, authorship and originality (Burton, 2011). Levine's choice to *photograph* the photographs of Walker Evans immediately draws associations with the act of making documentation, due to photography's strong history of being used in this way. By effectively making a simple 'documentation' of Evans' photographs,

Levine has managed to project a new reading onto his images, without needing to alter their physical appearance at all.

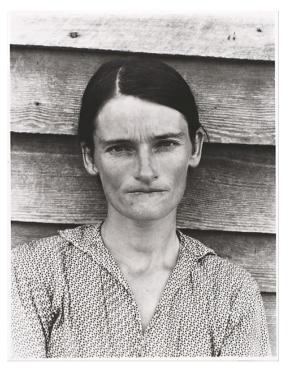


Fig. 3. After Walker Evans

Same Same But Different

In 2005, collaborators Elmgreen and Dragset exhibited *Same Same But Different* at Galerie Klosterfelde in London for Frieze art fair. Their piece – a booth located next to the booth of gallery owner Martin Klosterfelde himself – was an exact copy of his. It came complete with a Martin Klosterfelde doppelgänger wearing identical clothes, glasses and a wig made of Mr. Klosterfelde's own hair. The two booths had the same configuration and furniture, and displayed identical artworks. Both gallerists (real and fake) handed out identical business cards. Many guests, some of whom had known Mr. Klosterfelde for many years, reportedly mistook the doppelgänger for the original (Dragset and Elmgreen, 2011).



Fig. 4. Same Same But Different

The Many Guises Of The Little Prince

Similarly to Elmgreen and Dragset, I too became really interested in the idea of appropriating another artist's work in a situation where the original was simultaneously present. The group exhibition *Passenger* at KHiB in 2015, provided me with the perfect opportunity to play with this concept. Upon receiving the rough floor plan, I noticed that my work was to be shown in the opposing space to Lin Wang's *Little Prince*, which, after having only recently finished working with it in a theatre production, I felt very familiar with. Already an appropriation of a popular children's book: *The Little Prince*, Wang's piece lent itself perfectly to my concept. I wanted to see how I could playfully experiment with the group dynamic and the fundamental structure of a 'group exhibition', so I created *I Think It's Going To Be Little Prince*.



Fig. 5. Little Prince

Little Prince is a ceramic lamp, sat upon a rusting metal plinth. My desire to concurrently draw attention to the *present*, and to the presence of both pieces meant that performance was the obvious choice of appropriated medium. I myself would embody *Little Prince*, constructing a suit and helmet that resembled Wang's piece as closely as possible – even fitting a light into the helmet so that it would illuminate. Perched on a plinth that was painted to match that of the original, I held my body in the position of *Little Prince* for two hours on each day that the exhibition was running.

Wang was unaware of my work until the first performance.



Fig. 6. I Think It's Going To Be Little Prince



Fig. 7. I Think It's Going To Be Little Prince

As anticipated, our pieces were perceived as a collaboration, or the responsibility of a sole artist. Some of those familiar with Wang's practice simply thought that she had made a larger version of the original (not realising until closer inspection that I was in fact a person). But how does my appropriation of her piece act as a form of documentation? There were concerns raised that it could be seen as a way of mocking *Little Prince*, or even the artist – distracting

from the seriousness of the craftsmanship with an almost 'silly' embodiment of it; a dirty tactic for a cheap laugh. From that perspective my 'documentation' is viewed as damaging to *Little Prince*, especially while the two sit together, unable to escape each other's influence. But I believe that *I Think It's Going To Be Little Prince* can also be seen as a way of strengthening the original; of giving it something rather than taking something away. As the viewer, you pass through the exhibition and notice *Little Prince*; its beauty and craft. Navigating your way though a large group show means that you are constantly bombarded with imagery, giving each only a limited amount of time or thought. Then you encounter a repetition: something returning you to a previous image. You see the original from a new perspective: a different medium. You are transported back, this time with fresh questions and ideas. You are now more engaged – wanting to piece together this puzzle, much like how you are required to piece together Hayley Newman's *Stealth* from its single image and accompanying text.

Due to their simultaneous presence, the works could be, and were, perceived from both directions. Maybe Wang made a sculpture of my performance? Her work then becomes the documentation of mine to those that do not know the history of them (a history not at all embedded in the presentation of the works themselves). Imagining her work as if it *is* a documentation of mine, how does that alter my performance? It transforms something fleeting and ephemeral into something static and permanent – living to un-living – flesh to stone. It fights against this idea of performance as ephemeral, and fixes it down with a never-changing medium. Rather than 'damaging' my piece, it highlights through its inherent concrete qualities performance's 'biggest weakness': its temporality.

Reflect, Repeat, Relive

Generally speaking, re-enactments are created based on the documentation of the original performance. Austlander (2006) reminds us that performance recreations based on documentation may not actually recreate the underlying performance, but might instead be a performance of the documentation.

In 2005, Marina Abramovic realised the work *Seven Easy Pieces*: a collection of seven live performances. *Seven Easy Pieces* included five re-enactments of performances that she had not witnessed live, but that had nevertheless been profoundly influential on her own practice: Joseph Beuys's *How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare* (1965); VALIE EXPORT'S *Acton Pants: Genital Panic* (1969); Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972); Gina Pane's *The Conditioning, first of Self-Portrait(s)* (1973); and Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974). To this she added a re-enactment of her own 1974 performance *Lips of Thomas*, and an entirely new piece *Entering The Other Side*, which evolved out of this retrospective process (Biesenbach, 2010).

In order to analyse how Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* affects, alters and documents the original performances, I have selected one from the series to focus on: Joseph Beuys's *How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare.*

How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare

How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare was a solo performance by Joseph Beuys. During the three-hour performance he could only be viewed through the windows of the gallery, moving through the space holding a dead hare in his arms and whispering inaudibly to it. His head and face were covered in honey and gold leaf. A felt sole was tied to his left foot and an iron sole tied to his right. The performance concluded with Beuys seated on a stool, protectively cradling the deceased hare.



Fig 8. How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare, 1965 Abramovic's re-enactment of *How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare* was formed entirely from studying its documentation. At the original event Beuys's audience were kept locked out of the room; unable to hear, and only able to see what he was doing by peering through the windows into the space. The result of this restriction was that his audience were not aware of the full narrative of the performance, instead having to piece together their own series of events from the small insights they had collected. Because Abramovic learned of the piece from its documentation, she was forced to invent her own narrative: a narrative that Biesenbach (2010:38) claims "remains a mystery" despite the audience being present in the space for the entirety of her re-enactment.

For the Seven Easy Pieces series, Abramovic stretched every performance to seven hours, in spite of whatever duration the original actually had. Therefore Beuys's original three-hour piece was distanced from its re-enactment instantly, simply by extending its duration.



Fig 9. How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare, 2005 As Abramovic's version of *How To Explain Pictures To A Dead Hare* is so different from the original in everything but its aesthetic elements, I wouldn't label it a 're-enactment' as she does. It is better to think of it as something else: "[...] an embedded documentation that can shift and mutate over time" (Biesenbach 2010:39).

"Abramovic is not seeking to create an "official" collective memory of her or her predecessors' creations. Rather, she is inventing a poetic, nonauthoritative [...] means to keep the work alive and relevant." (Biesenbach 2010:39)

In response to the previously outlined idea by Austlander (2006), in which he toys with the notion that performance re-enactments based on documentation may actually be a performance of the *documentation*; I would only label a re-enactment as such if the re-enactor was present at the original event. Meaning that Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* series should not be presented as a series of re-enactments, but instead as another form of documenting or referencing historical performances – a *tribute* perhaps?

Imponderabilia

Abramovic also re-stages her own performances, either using herself as the performer (like in *Lips of Thomas* from the *Seven Easy Pieces* series), or hiring other performers who were not present at the initial event. When Abramovic reenacts her own performances, this must surely become the closest form of documentation of the original event in existence. Though the same body appears in the same routine, the performance takes place in a different time, which sees audiences possess different knowledge and attitudes, and usually a familiarity with the documentation of the original. Abramovic herself has also aged, which will challenge how an audience perceives her. Therefore, the piece is naturally something separate from its first instance. An audience will not access it in the same way, and their response could differ hugely due to their preconceptions and shifts in society since the original performance.

During *The Artist Is Present* exhibition at the MOMA in 2010, Abramovic employed performers to re-enact a number of her own historical performances. For me, one that raised a lot of questions was the re-enactment of *Imponderabilia* from 1977. The documentation of the original has been influential on my own practice when considering methods for viewer interaction, spatial interventions and the use of live performance in order to encourage accessibility.

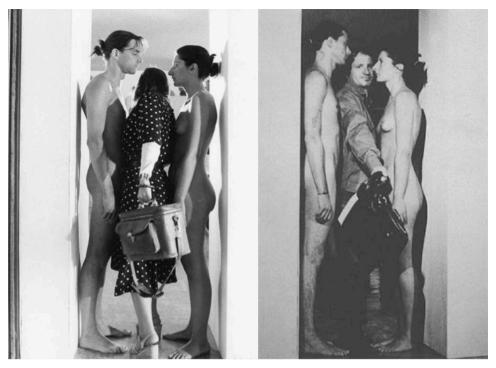


Fig 10. Imponderabilia, 1977



Fig 11. Imponderabilia, 2010

I found the 1977 performance alluring not just because of the unavoidable uncomfortable interaction between viewer and performers, but also because of the relationship between the performers themselves: Marina and Ulay. If familiar with the artists, the audience knew that not only were they squeezing through two naked bodies, but that they were interrupting the gaze of two lovers – an added level of intimacy in this already intimate situation. But when Abramovic employed several performers to re-enact the piece as part of *The Artist is Present* at the MOMA in 2010, the couples were not partners in life, just partners for the performance. And even if they had been lovers the audience would not have been aware of this in the same way that they were aware of Marina and Ulay's relationship in 1977.

When the original *Imponderabilia* was made, body art as a medium was exploding in the contemporary art scene. Many performance artists were employing shock tactics, with nakedness as a common tool. In 2010, when *Imponderabilia* took place for the second time, it existed in a different contemporary scene from the 70's. Performance art has moved on, and 'shock tactics' are primarily associated with body art of the past. Therefore, I'm finding it difficult to understand what benefit it is to an audience or to the artist to reenact the piece, especially without using herself and Ulay (despite the fact that they are no longer in a relationship).

In spite of this, however, by re-enacting *Imponderabilia*, Abramovic brought viewers so much closer to the original event than any photograph would have ever taken them. The viewer was able to *participate*, an absolute key in breaking down barriers between live art and its documentation. I define participation as a physical interaction with the performer or within the performance arena, as opposed to merely being present for the performance.

The Knowledge Of Those Present

As previously questioned: if a performance occurs and documentation is made, does it matter if an audience is present? What is it that an audience *gives* to or *takes* from the piece? Or can a combination of giving and taking from the audiences' presence give rise to a less tangible form of documentation – a kind of *knowledge*?

The viewers' presence gives so much to the performance. Their attitudes, body language and physicality act as a live feedback for the performer; simultaneously creating another layer of the performance that is again fed back to them.

An audience is effectively a collection of individual recording devices. With an archive of events, sights, sounds and reactions imprinted onto their memory, they allow for individual and alternative perspectives from that of the traditional single-perspective camera.

If viewers are in some way involved in the making of the piece through an interaction or participatory action, this archived memory could be strengthened further. With the viewers' memory of an event enhanced, maybe it is possible that this intangible form can exist as the only documentation of the event? Or maybe it allows for alternative, less visually 'accurate' forms of documentation to take centre stage.

In order for it to exist as a tool to engage the post-audience as well as the present audience, the documentation cannot exist purely in the mind of the viewer. Therefore, to enable those who were not present to engage with the documentation, a conversation, reflection or a shared post-performance exchange needs to occur with those who were present.

Expression Of A Calculated Motion: Leaving A Trace

The Event

The performance (or occurrence as I would prefer to think of it) of *Expression Of A Calculated Motion* will only take place once, on the opening night at Bergen Kunsthall.

In an attempt to strengthen the viewers' relationship to the work, I will focus on the idea of giving those who are present some kind of heightened experience or knowledge. Through the performers' choreography I will force an interaction between viewer and performer. The audience will need to navigate their way through the choreography in order to reach the remainder of the exhibition. Although this will not be a difficult task, it will evoke a physical relationship to the work, and in particular to the bodies of the performers and fellow viewers in the space. I have purposely chosen a walking choreography to encourage audience members to relate to the performers' actions on an instinctive human level. With these tools I hope to utilise the viewer as the aforementioned 'recording device', reflecting upon the piece from his or her own personal perspective postperformance.

The Trace

The exhibition itself continues to run for three weeks. Therefore, I have been considering ways to confront the issue of re-presenting the present (the events of the opening night) for the post-audience.

I have been devising approaches for those arriving post-performance to access the piece, without offering them documentation that will give a false sense of 'having been there'. The investigations that I have carried out throughout my project and the subsequent writing of this text have led to the work and its documentation being challenged, altered and streamlined. The main point of access for those that will not be present for the occurrence is the sound piece that accompanies the one-hour choreography on the opening night. The sound will continue to resonate in the space for the remainder of the exhibition, acting as a pre-fabricated trace of the performers' movements. It will pan across all four speakers, surrounding the viewers with an immaterial sense of migration while they stand or move within the territory. The speakers themselves possess a bodily presence: sat on stands at approximately the height of an average person, they serve to represent the bodies of the performers who once inhabited the space.

As a response to Hayley Newman's idea of presenting minimal documentation, my choice to only present the space and the sound piece post-performance will require viewers to piece together a version of events from the limited information available to them. By encouraging an interaction with the documentation in this way, I hope to create a secondary type of participation: one that serves to make the work more engaging.

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