

“...and the stage darkens” Laure Genillard London

review by Rozemin Keshvani

A show that is even more intriguing than its title, “...and the stage darkens (or this voice is a big whale)” draws inspiration from Peter Shaffer’s 1965 farce ‘Black Comedy’. Shaffer’s play begins in total darkness, but reverses the lighting when a power-cut shuts off the electricity in the play’s mansion flat setting. The actors must learn to navigate a fully lit stage as if in total darkness, calling upon each actor to become intensely aware of her own proprioception. Proprioception is an interoceptive awareness – the conscious perception of sensations from inside the body that create the sense of the physiological condition of the body, such as heart beat, respiration, satiety, and sensations related to emotions.¹

Not seeking to overtly disorient the viewer, “...and the stage darkens” presents seven works through which we are invited to become aware of the self in its act of perception. In this way, the viewer may assume a critical awareness of her mind and body as instruments through which perceptual awareness becomes possible. The play raises interesting issues from the perspective of the audience who are normally unaware of their own proprioception. Through the experience of the actors, the audience acquire a meta-level awareness of the actor’s proprioception which provides a platform for critical audience participation in their experience of the performance. It is this critical awareness that this exhibition harnesses through a presentation of works which systematically isolate and engage our individual senses. Like the audience in the play, we begin to recognise the ‘staging’ within the exhibition space as an overarching set of directions propelling us forward. Certain ideas become important as we navigate the works, – choreography, construction, direction, activation, performance.

“and the stage darkens” begins with an artwork on the floor below us – Frederic Pradeau’s strange *Desertificateur 2005*, a mound of calcium chloride framed by terranium lamps. The calcium chloride acts as a desiccant trapping the moisture in the air, literally imitating a process of desertification, while the heat from the lamps then returns the moisture to the floor to form small pools surrounding the work. *Desertificateur* draws our attention to sensations associated with moisture such as thirst, dryness, dampness. Its recycling of the moisture in the room replicates the biofeedback of self-awareness, a continual process that involves oppositions, return and re-evaluation. Overhead one occasionally hears Laure Prouvost’s sultry voice in her sound pieces, *Pink Cloud 2012* and *This Voice is a Whale 2013* – “smells of the sea, she swims away...there’s a big pink light cloud slowly coming down from hovering ...” while at eye-level on the wall are six images from Franz Erhard Walther’s, *Portfolio 1974*, an artist who pioneered working with the body as a form of social action and who understood his art as an ‘instrument for process’, offering up material, particularly fabric, as opportunities for individual participation and institutional transformation.

Descending the stairs, we encounter Haroon Mirza’s captivating *Tescotrain (Homage to Guy Sherwin) 2012*, a work of three vertically stacked interlocking monitors playing two short videos the artist filmed through his car windshield on a rainy evening with his iphone. The top LCD television provides a night-time street view of a shopping plaza shot from an angle that accentuates the artificial light, its central feature a partially burnt out and flashing neon Tesco extra sign, the letters “ex” no longer visible. The motion of the windshield wipers forms an intermittent arc from within the frame interrupting the landscape; its hypnotic wave-like motion alludes to the wave form of energy that is light and sound. On the bottom a widescreen cathode ray tube television plays a second night-time scene. A stream of flashing lights stretch diagonally across the widescreen

simulating the lights of an oncoming train. A track-like copper strip is taped to the screen and connected to the analog television. The copper strip acts as a conductor, reading the flashing screen and replaying it as analog distortion. The work dissects the audio from the light in our experience of neon reconnecting these in a series of three interlocking monitors, LCD, widescreen cathode ray and analog, using different signals whose energies are transformed into feedbacks that generate different experiences. Light becomes sound, sound becomes light and together they become the new form of energy we experience, both recoding past events and disassembling them to interact as a future contingency. Technologies merge to create something new. Each monitor acts as an imperfect transducer converting the signal from one form of energy into another form of energy. The work might be described as “lost (and found) in translation”.

Tescotrain revisits the question of mind/body dualism and challenges us to wonder whether the body is merely an instrument of perception, not so different from other instruments of perception, just another form of technology capable of reading and interpreting data. *Tescotrain* is visceral. It enters deep within the body, simulating the sound of the heart as might be experienced from inside the body – proprioception – to become a coherent acoustic-visual composition that directly addresses the artist’s interest in the synthesis of light waves and sound waves to create a new form of perception.

Echoing Mirza’s installation is Laure Provoust’s delightful yet somewhat dark video installation, *Deeper 2010*. In twist of comedic intervention, the artist reverses the iconic Sony cube monitor to face the floor. Provoust’s screen mirrors the screen in Shaffer’s play, an inversion of expectations that is both layered and intensely funny. Remaining mostly hidden, the image casts a shadow of shifting colours on the floor below while the artist’s voice forms a conspicuous soundtrack of increasingly anxious supplications: “I wish it was dark here and deeper...and feel it pushed a bit further, in, deeply in, in, be in the work, deep in, deep in the work..... I wish the floor would go deeper, and this video would go deeper, pushed in, pushed in...deeper, deeper in, deeper. I wish the video would go deeper. I wish this work were deeper, deeper. I wish this could push the floor further and deeper and this floor would be deeper...” A self-portrait of the frustrations inherent in the creative process, we can almost feel the artist pressing on the inside of the screen as she pushes the monitor deeper and deeper in the floor. The monitor takes on the form of the body of the artist while we are given a glimpse into what transpires in her own mind.

Separating these two powerful installations is Florian Roithmayr’s *Grotto 2013*, a seemingly casual intervention into the viewer’s experience that interrupts two spaces. Its canopy of blue fabric activates the possibilities latent in Walter’s images upstairs, while opening a space which allows us to appreciate Ryan Gander’s *It’s got such a good heart in it 2012*. A wallpapered digital print, Gander choreographs the scene, presenting a tantalising narrative through the flattened image. One can quite literally feel the lioness experiencing pleasure from rubbing against the roped ‘cat scratcher’. Staging and positioning within and without Gander’s work is critical. Just what is a lioness doing in this basement gallery? Imprisoned in her cage as she is imprisoned in the image as the work becomes imprisoned in the institution as the mind seems imprisoned in the body. What was performance becomes image; while image when activated by the viewer, once again becomes performance.

This idea is also explored in Elaine Cameron-Weir’s subtle *Corsage, Night Light 2013*. Known for creating work that stimulates the olfactory senses, it is the absence of an expected smell that draws my attention. Corsages are typically made from flowers. Flowers are typically fragrant. Yet *Corsage* is work of neon and fabric. The fabric is white neoprene – the illusory purity of a bride. A chemically engineered material often used in manufacturing space suits and wetsuits, neoprene

raises a host of environmentally sensitive issues. It is known for its distinctive smell and can also be a breeding ground for odorous bacteria. Unlike Mirza who focuses on neon's fluidity – the sound waves and light waves of neon, Cameron-Weir speaks to neon's quality as material – the glass tubing which can be shaped and then becomes brittle, in contrast to the neoprene – material which, like experience, may never be fully shaped and has the potential to transport us to new spaces.

“and the stage darkens” presents work which together activate our psycho-physical awareness of ourselves as a physical embodiment within a larger space that is at once outside and inside. It gives us a glimpse into our awareness as a multi-dimensional matrix, a possible world, and by its critical engagement of the viewer within the exhibition platform, it puts forward a new reading of the art exhibition as a possible *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

¹ The term interoception was introduced 1906 by C.S. Sherrington in his work, *The integrative action of the nervous system* (Yale University Press, New Haven) 412, see Wolf E. Mehling, Cynthia Price, Jennifer J. Daubenmier, Mike Acree, Elizabeth Bartmess, Anita Stewart, “The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA)”, PLOS One (<http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0048230>) accessed on 28 November 2014.

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