DRHA paper
Turin 2023, Joanne Bob Whalley & Lee Miller

Firstly, thank you.

Bob: In her keynote on Monday, Annet Dekker encouraged us all to embrace the inevitable gapping of the archive. She reminded us that curation is always a framing, and as such is determined, directed, and informed by intent. The question of the digital serves only to underscore the inevitable obsolescence and ephemerality of the archive. If everything disappears, then perhaps we must simply train ourselves, or should that be retrain ourselves, to tell stories. A speculative imagining of the once-or-never-was tangible.

Lee: Of course, stories are no less partial or prone to forgetting. Everything uttered is framed in discourse. We can never fully get outside of the story being told to get to the story itself. To our ears, this reminder of Dekker's on Monday brought with it a certain anxiety from those listening in the room. The questions asked were framed through mitigation, through bargaining.

But what about? But what if?

Bob: Dekker, in her invocation of the distributed dramaturgical response to the destruction by fire of the National Museum of Art in Rio de Janeiro already offered a response to 'what about' and 'what if'. That the refractive nature of the digital archive is inherently speculative.

Lee: Or perhaps that is what we chose to hear her say, because if everything uttered is discursive, then so too is the reception of said utterance. Perhaps we chose to hear the questions and responses in this way because we knew we would be speaking about the distributed dramaturgies of volumetric capture, which in turn has left us grappling with the speculative, because it moves us so far beyond the grounded, embodied ways inherent to our history as performance makers, that we need new ways to be with.

Bob: Paul Carter's 2004 book *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* is one such way in. He offers:

'[t]he term 'material thinking' describes a kind of procedural consciousness, a way of knowing in which thinking and making are inseparable. To think through materials, then, means to devise a method that thinks with them, a method that taps into their potential to become something they have not been before'.

The distributed dramaturgical strategies employed in the digital reconstruction of the Rio collection is just this; a materially different way of thinking and thus being.

Lee: This in turn takes us to dance academic Freya Vass, when she discusses the dramaturgies of William Forsythe's ensemble, she finds that there are a series 'distributed dramaturgies': 'distributed in a broad plurality of senses: among participants, across individual and shared dramaturgical practices, and across different spaces and times' (Vass-Rhee, 2015: 89).

As we begin to approach creating work for a volumetric capture system, this plurality is different, spread across unknown devices, unknown objects, unknown tech. It is never the less 'distributed', leaving us feeling thin, wild and frayed at the edges, anxious. Speculation opens up the space for anxiety, which is perhaps why we find ourselves thinking of the advice offered by scientist Rachel Armstrong on ways of sitting with speculation:

'Black Sky Thinking is [...] reaching beyond current frameworks and pre-determined projections, into the terrain of the unknown. But more than this, [it] bring[s] this unknown into the present in a way that has immediate effects and engages others, always cognisant that the 'Future Is Messy', not linear and deterministic' (Armstrong, 2017: n.p.)

Bob: Armstrong's Black Sky Thinking helps us to remember that we are refractive bodies. We see things through others, and by the time that the light has left them, and reached us, it is inevitable that we are seeing it differently. And the words of Armstrong refract through us and lead to others, to the writing of Lola Olufemi who focuses on the uses of the feminist imagination and its relationship to futurity, political demands and the imaginative-revolutionary potential, writing that reminds us that when connecting point A to point B, we should always invoke the otherwise.
She offers her reader:

'a note on language - If I ask you to connect point A to point B and you inevitably draw a straight line, what do you think you think of history? If you draw a circle, do you think of history as living commotion, a sprawling mess of the not-quite-said, or did-it-actually-happen, or what-year-was-the-massacre, or what-ushered-in-the-epoch? I want you to remember that most things are an invention. I am not the first person to invoke the otherwise, and I won't be the last. Most concepts with potential start to droop from overuse. I might present it to you limp. Indulge me! I write to say, I do not wish to box you into the otherwise. We are not trying to put a finger on it; I bet you have heard that before. Here, the otherwise is a linguistic stand-in for a stance against; it is a posture, the layered echoes of a gesture. I promise you that no approximations will be made. Only pleas, wishes, frantic screams, notes

on strategy, contributions in different registers. Substitute the otherwise for that thing that keeps you alive, or the ferocity with which you detest this world' (Olufemi, 2021: 3).

Lee: When Litó Walkey writes of a twenty-five year history of choreographies, she describs them as thick descriptions 'in the sense that they are calling out to the multiple voices, temporalities and parameters that exist as co-equal, mutually independent and fully collaborative partners inside the processes. Rather than merging tracelessly into the service of a representative terminus, these partners 'remain themselves inside'. Particular and transforming, each partnership is an encounter, an intersection, a portal, a source of energy and a point of departure' (Walkey, 2021: 90).

Bob: Sharing with you this eleven-second clip of Lee's first experiments in VolCap require just such a pause and level of detailed consideration, not least because of the evident paucity of actual material to discuss. Much like Walkey, I will borrow the approach founded by Gilbert Ryle and later developed and popularised by Clifford Geertz. The term 'thick description' emerges from Ryle's discussion of what constitutes a meaningful explication in social practices. In differentiating between mere action and the significance behind that action, Ryle provided examples, such as the difference between a twitch and a wink. While both might look similar, a wink carries with it intention, context, and cultural meaning that a mere twitch does not. Clifford Geertz adopted and expanded upon Ryle's concept, taking its consideration into the realm of anthropology. For Geertz, "thick description" was a way to capture not just behaviours but also their embedded meanings in cultural contexts. It is just such thickness that I invoke in the introduction of Lee, and the way in which his disembodied embodiment serves to illustrate the rich potential of material as a route to understanding. Lee is evidently not in dialogue with his audience; his gaze is self-regarding, his physicality draws in, and while he does eventually open up, it is into an action and not into engagement. He is surrounded by cameras, and as such is navigating the assumed, or perhaps the performed-projected uncertainties of an imagined audience from whose gaze he cannot retreat. There is no here and now moment (to borrow from the keynote of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev BAKAR-JEF) he is engaged in the performance imagining the as yet unknown looking-at of an audience, who will either be positioned (in the case of this short clip) by the animator, or potentially by the machine learning of the unreal-engine, or the active agency of the audience member wearing a VR headset.

Lee: By unacknowledging the camera (for what else can we call performing in front of hundreds of cameras encircling the 360 degree performance space?) his is not a one sided conversation with an absent other, but it is nevertheless freighted with the co-creative or co-constitutive processes familiar to live performance. In dialogue with Rancière's Emancipated Spectatorship, Karen Barad's Intra-action, and John Fiske's Audiencing, his brief choreographic score even at a remove, and acknowledging the unresponsiveness of his interlocutor in the space, it nevertheless points to the

messy entanglement of audience / performer subjectivities.

And of course, he is a puppet, which is important. Or if not important, it is at least relevant to today's conversation. It was some many months ago that we were asked to produce the abstract that frames what we are offering today. In that abstract, written with the certainty that tends to stain the speculative, we suggested the following: 'While there might be little novelty in acknowledging the challenges presented in the documentation of live performance practice, or the close relationship between documentation and dissemination in the context of artistic research, there is nevertheless still work to be done on the dramaturgy of the document. By considering emergent protocols and workflows for capturing material from existing archives in XR formats, and documenting large-scale, live performance using volumetric capturing techniques, this presentation seeks to consider the potential impact that these developments might have upon the dramaturgical strategies employed within ephemeral, process-driven performance practice'.
You will notice that so far there has been little real reference to such technology, and yet Lee's brief intervention into the field of enquiry that includes the dramaturgical potential of the volumetric stage helpfully points there.

Bob: His puppet-self is important because of the lengths the animator has gone to to ensure that his puppet-self is not an interruption. And yet, although once upon a time, Lee really did stand in a studio in Grenoble and create a short physical score, his animation as we receive it now is dependant upon the body of another. Dramaturgical strategies of connecting the wider mise-en-scene to the active communication of a bodily presence are employed to unsettle the potential distancing that seeing the transition from green screen to digital environment might otherwise evoke. It is from here that we consider the title of this paper, and address the distributed dramaturgies of volumetric capture, which in turn allows us to grasp the nettle and discuss the technology, albeit in a glancing conclusion.

Lee: The volumetric studio to which we have been opaquely referring is the HOLOSYS™ solution built by 4DViews out of Grenoble. The HOLOSYS™ is a fully transportable volumetric capture system, with modular freestanding pods, allowing quick assembly and disassembly for on-site volumetric capture. Each pod has three cameras and three LED lighting panels. It has a capture volume of up to a diameter of 5m and a height of 2.4m. It captures at a frame rate of up to 60 FPS, and outputs to .4DRAW(1), .4DS & .ABC formats. The texture resolution is up to 2880 pixels, and it has a recording capacity of 110 minutes at one time, although the system is built with a storage capacity of up-to 30 hours of volumetric data. This is the out of the box solution, but it can be upgraded where necessary.

I offer the specifications here not because I am a particular fan of the metrics, but to remind us all that while a company offers these numbers as the selling point, from the perspective of an artist we

should understand them as the limitations. The size of the area that can be captured (a maximum of 5 meters square) immediately limits not only the bodies you can place in front of the camera, but also the potential for travel.

Bob: The knowledge that the performance is being captured in 360 degrees simultaneously shifts the idea of where we are being observed from, and obviates any possibility of actorly attempts to 'cheat' it upstage - there is no upstage, and the audience has the potential to move freely through the scene at any moment. And this is to say nothing of the potential that volumetric data might allow for new interactions with future and as yet unplanned digital representations from afar, or indeed how the captured data might have effects in distant or different virtual environments. The panoptic gaze is no longer imagined and feared, but actualised and deliberate. For the performer, context is unsettled, it is spooked, because it is always in a state of un-becoming. Whether encountered through a VR headset, an AR interface, or a flat screen manipulated in advance by an animator as shown briefly today, it is the speculative access through as yet unavailable technology which draws us forward.

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Title: Otherwising: The Distributed Dramaturgies of Volumetric Capture
(Co-presented with Joanne 'Bob' Whalley)

Presentation Details: 15 minute paper.

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The technical properties of the capturing technologies speak to specific dramaturgical affordances, and the need to acknowledge and account for this in any planning. The idea of spookiness and action at a distance comes into play here. Action at a distance is the concept where objects in the physical universe can affect one another even when they are not in direct contact or proximal to one another. Rooted in various fields of study, from physics to philosophy, perhaps the most notable instance of its use is in quantum mechanics, where "entanglement" allows particles to instantaneously affect each other regardless of the distance separating them. In classical physics, gravitational and electromagnetic forces also act over distance without direct contact. In the context of volumetric capture, action at a distance speaks to how the cameras function as a Benthamian intervention into behaviour. The knowledge that the performance is being captured in 360 simultaneously shifts the idea of where we are being observed from, and obviates any possibility of actorly attempts to 'cheat' it upstage - there is no upstage, and the audience has the potential to move freely through the scene at any moment. And this is to say nothing of the potential that volumetric data might allow for new interactions with future and as yet unplanned digital representations from afar, or indeed how the

captured data might have effects in distant or different virtual environments. The panoptic gaze is no longer imagined and feared, but actualised and deliberate. For the performer, context is unsettled, it is spooked, because it is always in a state of un-becoming.

In conversation with the technologist who has been supporting these nascent experiments, he passingly reflected that the current digital capture has fidelity up to the point of holography. The unknown potential of volumetric data moves us back to the question from Dekker's keynote, and towards another iteration of what if? We currently find ourselves less interested in the current ways of accessing the live performance captured in the volumetric suite. Because they simply do a more complex version of the documentation we have all spent years wrestling with. And it remind us of

Rather than look into the beam of what is, we prefer to imagine the light landing on the screen of that which has yet to come.

Knowledge of the data in the cloud removes the need to think of performance in terms of absence or presence, because to be speculative is to be always in the process of becoming. This speculative approach requires a kind of 'selective forgetting', in order that we might hope to construct coherent narratives of those bodies held in a perpetual panoptic moment. And as these bodies are rendered data, and held in the constant stasis of the not-yet, as Georg reminds us that their images have fidelity up to the point of holography, I find myself unpeeling from histories of categorisation, and wonder to myself what are your 'constructing categories'? How do you define your own corporealities?
What kinds of 'selective forgetting' have also been brought to bear on bodies/corporeality?

Their words make me want to divine extended ways of looking, things that sit alongside Gillian Rose's visual methodologies, for example, or draw on the embodied strategies of looking offered by choreographer Emilie Gallier, whose concept of the 'vection' of a spectator calls for an active engagement with, and narration of the experience. And I find that I am increasingly interested in the following questions:
What is the knowledge we produce as artists in relation to the process of transmission? What is it that we do? What do we say? How might the embodiment of our practice be transmitted? How is it disembodied?

We find ourselves shuddering to a stop rather than reaching a conclusion. The speculative nature of what we are speaking about surfaces more questions than it answers, and while we could try to move towards some sort of pat assertion that the landscape of performance art has always been in flux, and constantly reshaped by the tools, mediums, and ideologies of its time, it should come as no surprise

that with the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as volumetric capture and LiDAR scanning, we find ourselves standing at the precipice of yet another transformative era.

Inevitably, the inherent nature of emerging technologies means that they are often not fully understood, even by those employing them. Volumetric capture has evolving capabilities and limitations, meaning that the early-stage practices we are entering into are unlikely to fully leverage its strengths or might even serve to inadvertently expose its weaknesses.

Lee:
And perhaps that is why we are drawn to the story of it, as much as the practice of it. And if this frustrates you, please know that the lack of an ending could be understood as a central tenet of artistic research. Sociologist John Law writes that:

'[i]n practice, research needs to be messy and heterogeneous. It needs to be messy and heterogeneous because that is the way it – research – actually is. And also, and more importantly it needs to be messy because that is the way the largest part of the world is: messy, unknowable in a regular and routinized way. Unknowable, therefore, in ways that are definite or coherent'
(Law, 2007: 596-7)

Endings are often not clean in contemporary performance, they are often messy affairs, sticky with expectation or damp with disappointment. Endings are leaky things, and the potential for leakage within performance reminds me of a small moment in a piece I have never seen.

Bob:
Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never. (2010–12) by Chicago-based performance company Every house has a door.

I am forever struck by director Lin Hixson's description of the ending moments:

'At the end of *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.*, Stephen says to Selma in English and Mislav translates into Croatian the following:

Selma, I'm going to go out of the theatre and shout your name. Then I'll come back, and you tell me whether you heard me or not. Then I'll do it again a little further away until you can't hear me anymore. That way, we'll establish where the theatre ends. Ok?

Ok? Lee, ok?

Stephen and Mislav leave the room and shout from a short distance, 'Selma' . They return to ask her if she heard her name. She does. They leave again, travel further, and shout her name. They return to ask Selma once again if she heard her name. She does. They leave the room and travel farther than they have travelled before. Ever so faintly, listening closely and vigilantly, her name is heard. Time passes now as it takes time for them to return. Selma nods. She heard her name, barely. They leave again never to return. Selma waits and finally leaves'
(Hixson, 2013: 92).

Lee:
In these final moments of *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never,* Hixson defines the ending as **a thing that moves in two directions** (Hixson, 2013: 92). Hixson traces here a performance that you will forever constantly strain your ears for, a performance that is forever unfolding and unfolding - a field of performance space in its final moments that is growing exponentially, rather than diminishing. *Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never.* by Every house has a door refuses to provide a ending: where Selma is always listening for her own name, and Stephen and Mislav are still calling for her.

Bob:
Ending task: Choreograph an ending that lasts forever. One which we will constantly strain our ears for (one which is unfolding and unfolding).

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