

Disappearing Acts

Yael Flexer & Nic Sandiland

[a video of the *Disappearing Acts* performance is in this same issue¹ — Ed.]

Since 2005 my works in different ways have touched on notions of disappearance.² *Disappearing Acts* (2016) co-created with digital artist Nic Sandiland placed disappearance at the centre, as its key thematic and choreographic concern. The work references disappearance textually and choreographically throughout, often humorously or knowingly. This paper attempts to tackle the theoretical notions or discourses tied to disappearance, namely presence and absence or performance as a 'rehearsal for absence', appearance and disappearance and in/visibility as well as discussions around representation and the material presence of the body in the context of dance performance. The writing traces the ways in which these ideas manifest or are interrogated in *Disappearing Acts* and the ways in which the work untangles or even demonstrates some of these philosophical threads.

Yael Flexer is co-artistic director of Flexer & Sandiland. She originally formed the company as Choreographer in Residence at The Place Theatre, London. She has created 13 full-length productions, touring throughout the UK and internationally. The company recently completed research for a new intergenerational work *Acting Our Age* as well as touring *Curiouser* for family audiences co-produced with dybwikdans, Norway. Yael leads professional training & commissions in the UK and internationally. She completed her PhD in 2013 and co-directs mapdance, the University of Chichester's postgraduate repertoire touring company. **Nic Sandiland** is a UK-based artist whose work explores new choreographic forms through installation, performance and film. He originally trained as an electronics engineer before studying dance and performance in the late 80s. Over the past 30 years he has made movement-based works focusing on simple pedestrian choreography. His film work has been shown worldwide and on UK TV (Channel 4). Nic is currently a senior lecturer in fine art at Middlesex University.

¹ liminalities.net/16-2/disappearingacts.html

² These include *Doing, Done e3 Undone* (2007/8), *The Living Room* (2010/12) and *Weightless* (2014).

*Disappearing Acts*³ is interdisciplinary in its approach yet generically is primarily read as a dance work. As such it offers a particular viewpoint on notions of absence and presence, disappearance and displacement (Gilpin 106-121). As inferred from the title, *Disappearing Acts* employs disappearance as a performative strategy, pointing to the construction of performance and in this way critiquing and dialoguing with performance theory's discourses of re/presentation and dis/appearance (Phelan 1-33, 146-14; Lepecki 1-9 & 124-139; Lepecki 45-51 & 123-131). Beyond the theoretical dimension the work follows other thematic threads encompassing a contemplation of loss, death and darkness as felt bodily experience. It also hints at dark political times, pointing to a parallel between theatrical performance strategies and the performative aspect of acts of terror (*Disappearing* 11:28:13:14).

Disappearing Acts is performed in close proximity to the audience seated in a circle of swiveling chairs. The dancers mainly perform inside the central circle with some sections performed outside the audience's circle. Throughout the work the dancers pass through the audience to enter and exit the space creating a permeable or shifting boundary between the audience and the performers. The work includes dense, intricate and fast paced ensemble choreographic sections as well as more intimate duets which are interspersed with textual sections written by Wendy Houstoun as well as sections co-devised with dramaturge Pete Phillips delivered and constructed in distinct modes.⁴

Disappearing Acts also incorporates bespoke lighting and sound created by Sandiland. As props they offer particular images such as amber roadside beacons associated with nighttime and hazard warning, or, lights worn on the performers heads reminiscent of deep-sea anglerfish (*Disappearing* 05:53:06:13). Alongside

³*Disappearing Acts* was co-created with digital artist Nic Sandiland and myself together with Flexer & Sandiland company members Lyndsey McConville, Luke Birch, Aya Kobayashi, Julie-Ann Minaai and Nicholas Keegan and collaborators: writer Wendy Houstoun, dramaturge Pete Phillips, stage lighting designer Natalie Rowland, composers Karni Postel and James Keane and costume designer Holly Murray. The work premiered at JW3, London, in May 2016 and toured extensively throughout 2016 in the UK, and Norway.

⁴ As is described through the paper some text sections address the audience directly or are performed in a presentational way such as performer Nick Keegan's 'disappearing magic-acts' (*Disappearing* 03:21:03:42, 10:48:11:27 & 13:15:15:11) and 'quiz show' (*Disappearing* 06:55:08:58), some are more reflective or poetic allowing the words to take prominence such as Lyndsey McConville's 'shipping forecast' (*Disappearing* 00:07:01:07) and 'questions' (*Disappearing* 11:28:13:14), some are ironic such as the 'prologue' (*Disappearing* 1:10:2:20) and 'epilogue' (*Disappearing* 16:38:17:41) delivered by me as the 'absent choreographer' on a mobile phone and some are conveyed in a story form such as the 'story line' (not shown in the video excerpt) in which interwoven stories on darkness and disappearance are delivered by the full cast.

other lights and props such as the mobile phone and a variety of ‘empty’ shoes these amplify a sense of absence.

As can already be gleaned from the writing the work is focused in its intention but acts as a kind of meditation on a set of ideas rather than attempting to offer a strict or limited set of meanings. The writing attempts to trace and negotiate the overlapping themes, trajectories and subjectivities drawn or assembled together in *Disappearing Acts*. The porous spatial boundaries and text in the work can be seen as a reference to the shifting situated-ness of being both Israeli, diaspora Jew and British artist, at once both here and there, occupying both or concurrently absent (Hall cited in Mock 75). This autobiographic position of the choreographer is negotiated with the collaborators and importantly the bodies, agency and live presence of the dancers whose artistic voice is prominent in and constitutes the work.

Absence

Heidi Gilpin sees disappearance and displacement not as a lack but rather, as useful “strategies for composition and interpretation of contemporary performance” (106). She argues that the loss of presence that lies at the core of live performance is particularly felt in dance “where often only the presence (and not the verbal language, for example) of bodies on stage is apparent one moment, vanished the next” (114). Gilpin discusses the impossibility of perceiving or capturing movement, movement as displacement and performance as the “embodiment of absence” (106) in a way that resonates with the choreographic strategies I employ in *Disappearing Acts*. She argues that disappearance entails: “both movement and the cessation of movement, to pass from sight, and to cease to be. It also registers a lack of representationality” (114).

In common with Gilpin (106-121), Andre Lepecki (128) argues that “movement is both sign and symptom that all presence is haunted by disappearance and absence”. Gilpin and Lepecki’s discourse is grounded in performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s writing in which she argues (as is well noted) that “Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility – in a manically charged present – and disappears into memory into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious” (Phelan 148). Lepecki sees Phelan’s “manically charged present” as a useful tool in destabilising an ontology of the ‘body’ and ‘presence’: “This body, visceral matter as well as sociopolitical agent...manifests its agency through the many ways it eventually smuggles its materiality into a charged presence that defies subjection” (Lepecki 6).

As will be seen the defiance of subjection or objectification manifests itself in a number of ways in *Disappearing Acts*. One such way is through the ironic use of corporeal absence or lack of presence or in Gilpin’s terms “lack of representationality” (114). *Disappearing Acts* in a very concrete way makes reference to a seemingly absent choreographer, the choreographer’s presence substituted by a

disembodied voice. The textual ‘prologue’ (*Disappearing* 1:10:2:20) and ‘epilogue’ (*Disappearing* 16:38:17:41) are only audibly heard (rather than delivered) via a mobile phone placed in a tiny spotlight at the centre of the space. The choreographer is somewhat authoritative:

Can I say how good it is to see you?

May I say how lovely you are looking tonight?

And can I add what a great privilege it is to be here? at this time – in this space – on this date – wearing these clothes – standing in this position – holding this script – saying these words – pausing like this now and then – taking a moment...

And can I say – what a big pleasure it is – to have this opportunity – this once in a lifetime chance to be so close to you all – so close and yet so far – Can I say that?

It could be argued that the use of a disembodied voice is itself a strategy that “defies subjection” (Lepecki 6). It places absence at the heart of the work as much as pointing towards the construction of performance. The performative instructions embedded in the text such as ‘holding this script – pausing like this’ remind us we are witnessing a pre-scripted performance. It reveals the author or director’s hand at work, and the work itself as symbolic pre-rehearsed “organised content” (Pontremoli 5). In this way it also underlines the construction of representation as distinct to the corporeal presence of the dancers’ bodies. It highlights the nexus of choreographer/performers/audience, the way in which the work is constructed and co-authored by the choreographer and the performers and comes to be in the encounter with an audience.⁵

The mocking of the choreographer’s position, as a self-important authority, underscores the performative aspect of representation. It is also present in the epilogue to *Disappearing Acts* (16:38:17:41) in which I deliver an endless list of well-known quotes, albeit altered; as if refusing to ‘leave’ and end the work, it begins with the statement, “I am going to start finishing off tonight with the well-known words we know so well – used by everyone – who wants to be unique and individual...” Immediately undercutting the authority of the choreographer. The refusal to end is ironically accentuated with lines such as: “A long goodbye never did anyone any harm, a woman and her microphone are soon parted”. The text eventually fades to silence (and black out). “The long goodbye” satirizes disappearance as well as serving to close the show.

⁵ See Bannerman & McLaughlin (67-68), Butterworth (177-192) and my previous discussion on notions of inter-authorship in Flexer (36-37 & 165-167).

As discussed above the use of props equally conveys absence of physical presence, in particular the phone, ‘empty’ ordinary shoes (*Disappearing* 00:07:00:51) and a set of robotic Michael Jackson ‘moon walking’ shoes (*Disappearing* 11:13:11:27). While these are often used in a humorous way the contrast between the highly charged dancing and felt presence of the dancers in close proximity and the ‘empty’ props remind us of this absent presence. This is particularly apparent in performer Lyndsey McConville’s two text sections: ‘the shipping forecast’ (*Disappearing* 00:07:01:07) and ‘questions’ (*Disappearing* 11:28:13:14). These are delivered on a mic seated at a desk outside the audience circle and have a more reflective quality. In the ‘shipping forecast’ (*Disappearing* 00:07:01:07),⁶ at the start of the show, the audience comes in and sees pairs of shoes placed in a line lit by the amber beacons, the shoes ‘standing in’ for live bodies. The ‘questions’ (*Disappearing* 11:28:13:14)⁷ section, is performed in the dark with only the amber lights flashing on an off, briefly lighting the dancers in an almost spectral way highlighting a sense of void. The dancers move in space between the light flashes, the affect of which is visually disturbing as they cannot be visually fixed by the audience who loses their spatial reference points (Golańska 12). The amber beacons in this section are occasionally placed in a way that is reminiscent of a crime scene outlining the space of a dead body.

Grounded in new materialism Dorota Golańska, in her discussion of ‘dark tourism’ and specifically ‘dark installations’, argues that “dark installations cannot be simply seen as objects coded with predetermined memorial meanings. Rather, their memorial nature is a matter of material-semiotic event. Their operations can serve as illustrative instances of how matter and meaning are entangled and how they co-produce each other” (13). Similarly, Vivan Patraha in her discussion of performing presence and absence in US Holocaust museums suggests that “intimate material objects document and mark ‘goneness’ and the loss instead of simply substituting for them through representation” (99). In her description of the US Holocaust Museum’s exhibit of a roomful of a pile of shoes collected by the Nazis, she states “in their very materiality the shoes mark presence as much as absence[...]the shoes, as objects made to perform, do ‘not reproduce’ what is lost but rather help us to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost” (Phelan cited in Patraha 103). Gilpin more positively suggests that “presence can only be conveyed by absence, [...] the performance of emptiness makes a perception of existence possible” (120).

Gilpin, Golańska and Patraha argue for the materiality, both of the object and its encounter, the residue of loss and absence as felt experience for the viewer.

⁶ The text in this section written by Houston is based on the shipping forecast, altered to accentuate images of darkness, fog, and night street lighting.

⁷ ‘Questions,’ also written by Houston, is a list of hard-hitting questions which focus on the performative aspect of acts of terror.

Patraka suggests this performative strategy not only highlights disappearance but also, in its intimacy, creates “a site for community of witness; as strangers we are confronted with the presence of others [...] we experience multiple perspectives, the sense that no single perspective can absorb this information” (101). It is important to note that *Disappearing Acts* is not thematically concerned with the Holocaust, however it does more abstractly confront a sense of loss and memory both personal and collective with particular reference to Israel, as well as themes of death, darkness and dark political times. It too calls for the presence of the viewer as witness in its intimate proximal staging in which the audience is on view, and, in this way questions notions of belonging, togetherness and community.

Performing absence, displacement, appearance and disappearance

The performance of absence, appearance and disappearance is felt throughout *Disappearing Acts*. Throughout the work the dancers create spaces that are suggestive of an absence of ‘an other’, and the duets and groupings which form the main choreographic bulk of the work were created with this choreographic instruction in mind. The sense of absent body or, as often referred to in choreographic terms ‘negative space’, is particularly noted in a series of duets we named ‘street light duets’ (*Disappearing* 03:44:05:52) towards the early part of the show. Each duet concludes with one dancer lying down and another standing, in which, following a short blackout, the standing dancer is replaced by another, as a kind of disappearing act (echoing a series of ‘disappearing-magic acts’ presented and delivered by performer Nick Keegan throughout the show (*Disappearing* 03:21:03:42, 10:48:11:27, 13:15:15:11)). A key ensemble section we named the ‘folk dance’ (08:59:10:48) also uses a similar strategy, here ‘negative space’ duets are interspersed with group sections, where often one of the dancers is initially held or touched by the group only to slip away leaving an empty space.

Another group section, ‘the lighthouse’ (*Disappearing* 06:14:06:53), performed in a circle of blue-lit spotlights forming a circle outside the audience uses a similar movement vocabulary, here again the dancers disappear in blackout only to appear elsewhere, in a different spot. Alongside the constant play with appearance and disappearance, ‘now you see me, now you don’t’ disappearance as displacement or as trace is implicit in the movement vocabulary with its emphasis on sequential movement rather than shape or fixity. This active play between appearance and disappearance, the displacement and dislocation of bodies in space echoes Gilpin’s discussion: “In the act of movement, of ‘putting something in another place’ there is the displacement of a body. In the act of interpreting movement, then, there is the displacement of a displacement” (108). Gilpin sees displacement and disappearance and their inherent instability as a mode of reading dance and as an enabling choreographic tool, noting, “disappearance can be witnessed only in the moment of its passing, at the threshold between presence and absence” (108) which movement makes possible.

Rehearsing absence

The notions of disappearance, trace, loss and death are summarized, reiterated and satirized in a section which we named 'the quiz show' (*Disappearing* 06:55:08:58). Keegan poses a series of questions to performers Aya Kobayashi and McConville, who, seated on the swiveling chairs as part of the audience, attempt to answer in movement, as contestants in an absurd game show. Some of Keegan's questions include:

Can you name all the words taken out of the Oxford dictionary this year?

What is the missing word from the following sentences? A, Into a thin air; B, Off the face of the earth; C, In a puff of smoke.

And later...

When something was standing and suddenly lies prone we think of it as what?

When somebody who was moving suddenly becomes still we begin to wonder if it is what?

When a person who was standing in front of you is no longer in the same room we think of that person as what?

As the quiz show continues Keegan's speech seems to trail off, he does not complete the questions. Equally the dancers' gestural movement is only minimally traced or 'marked' rather than fully executed. This trailing off is also notable in the final ensemble movement section of the work (*Disappearing* 15:12:16:37) where the dancers repeat images we have seen throughout but in an almost sketched way, tracing or re-tracing their steps but not fully, gliding across the floor as if in the process of fading. This section is followed by the epilogue, which also fades away, the work repeatedly enacting its own disappearance.

'Showcology' and the in/visible

In contrast to the fading or tracing quality, in other sections of *Disappearing Acts* and particularly in the 'folk dance' (*Disappearing* 08:59:10:48) the dancers physically manipulate one another. This highlights a degree of violence, which is amplified through repeated images of 'dead bodies', dancers lying on the ground (in the 'folk dance', 'street light duets' and McConville's 'shipping forecast' and 'questions' described above). Sitting in the circle, the audience is visually and spatially framed within the action, the audience is constantly seen by other members of the audience, engaged in the act of viewing. The ethical dimension of witnessing the action (and the reiteration of death) is further underscored by performers looking

in on the action as “on-stage witnesses.”⁸ This reminds us of Patraaka’s notion of “a community of witness” (101).

The ‘performance’ of death or violence can be seen in Phelan and Lepecki’s formulations as a rehearsal towards absence: “the way in which the body constantly represents itself as always being at the verge of self-dissipation (this persistence of re/presentation being so many rehearsals for absence, for death)” (Lepecki 6). However, in the work death is treated as matter of fact. Rather than sentimentalised, demanding empathy, or conversely using death as a shock tactic, the dancers lie down, get up and lie down again, or are compliant in their manipulation, reiterating it as a kind of game or rehearsal. This could be aligned with Gilpin (111, 114), who sees repetition as a choreographic strategy that foregrounds disappearance and its relation to memory.⁹ Or as aligned with Alan Read’s assault on performance theory’s discourses of death and loss in which he calls for a theatre of life, recognising the fact that after all, death in theatre is only “make-believe” (67).

Read argues for appearance or show making through his term “Showcology” (22). My interpretation of his ‘theatre of appearance’, is a theatre that admits to artifice, in the sense of revealing its modes of performance making, or what I often refer to as ‘the act of performance’. Appropriated to my works, this describes the way in which the works declare their appearance through their direct address of the audience and at the same time are conscious of their artifice. Some examples in *Disappearing Acts* include the performance instructions included in the prologue, the way in which performers Luke Birch and Keegan position Kobayashi’s body in the ‘shipping forecast’, just so, presented as a body performing a ‘dead body’ (*Disappearing* 00;33:00:44).

This approach is particularly demonstrated in the series of ‘disappearing acts’ (*Disappearing* 03:21:03:42, 10:48:11:27, 13:15:15:11) presented by Keegan as a magician or master of ceremonies (who also delivers the ‘quiz show’ as a 1970s game show host). These are ironically delivered, directly addressing the audience commenting, and placing an emphasis on the performativity of the act rather than the actual ‘disappearance’ or magic. There are supposedly five acts, although only four are announced as one has presumably disappeared. The theatricality of the acts is accentuated with drum rolls, costume and props. Three acts simply point to appearance and disappearance, Sandiland and myself quickly slide to the floor from our chairs in the blackout assuming a ‘dead body’ position following a lengthy drum roll at the start of the show, McConville seemingly disappears behind a small golden curtain held by Birch as Keegan’s ‘sidekick’, and Michael

⁸ See Freedman (73) and Flexer (80-84) for a discussion on witnessing and on-stage witnesses.

⁹ See Gilpin (110-111) for a further discussion on repetition and its relation to memory and trauma.

Jackson's empty shoes make an appearance as they moonwalk by themselves across the space. These acts are purposefully ropery, overdramatic and silly highlighting their own performance.

The final act (*Disappearing* 13:15:15:11) is introduced by Keegan as follows:

I'm going to attempt something that might make you feel a little bit strange, something that might undermine the very reason you are here, Disappearing Acts number Five: the audience disappears.

McConville as Keegan's sidekick here supports the act activating a smoke machine. Yet when Minaai and Birch begin to move together with eyes closed the act presented is surprisingly delicate and touching. In trying to find each other in the space with eyes closed the duet references notions of visibility and in/visibility "Interior and exterior, visible and invisible are two modes in which Being appears, and they reveal themselves with even greater clarity precisely in the dynamics of corporeity" (Pontremoli 2). This can also be seen as a return to Lepecki's "defiance of subjection" (6), the dancers refusing the audience's gaze.

For Peggy Phelan (2, 20-21 & 152) performance operates as a site of both representation and its failure, and as a site for intimating the 'unsaid' or 'unseen'. I appropriate her notion of what evades representation to refer to the way in which dance or embodiment offer both the visible and invisible, simultaneously interior and exterior, subjective experience and its objectification. This also echoes dance theorist Ann Cooper-Albright's (12-20) writing on the tension between dancing as an internal somatic experience and the inevitable fact of being seen (within performance). In closing their eyes, and in Keegan's proclamation of "the audience disappears" there is recognition of this internal bodily experience, one which the audience might corporeally sense, but nevertheless can never 'see'.

The defiance of being on view in this duet is coupled by the choreographic insistence on speed and overabundance of movement material or visual information in the rest of the work. As touched on at the start of this paper, the episodic nature of my works juxtaposing movement and textual sections alongside the use of digital technology avoids narrative or dramatic development and reject any sense of totalized meanings instead highlighting an ambivalence (which also carries a political dimension). On the one hand, the works commit to an 'authenticity' of the body (as is felt in Birch and Minaai's disappearing act duet) as well as dancers' representation, whilst at the same time placing doubt at the heart of that representation. The choreography is strewn with moments in which all five dancers move at great speed, at the same time, making it impossible for the viewer to capture the entirety of the choreography. As suggested by Gilpin "There is always an excess in vision over and beyond what the subject can master in sight" (108).

This overabundance intentionally exhausts the viewer, making the dance in Yvonne Rainer's words "difficult to see" (Lambert-Beatty 1).¹⁰

Visibility is further complicated through the 'in the round' setting. The work is full of what choreographer Rosemary Butcher termed as "visual holes"¹¹ (69), the things the audience cannot quite see due to speed or because of where they might be sitting in the circle. "Visual holes" can be understood as a form of in/visibility resonating with Phelan's notions of the 'unseen'.

Re/presentation

For me these choreographic tactics, and the dancers' relationship to the material acts as another form of defiance or ambivalence towards representation. The dancers use subtle gestural and facial expressions throughout the work, commenting on their own or others' representation and performance as well as the work itself. The overabundance of movement happening concurrently in different parts of the stage, the use of speed, "visual holes" and commentary prevents the viewer from framing or 'fixing' the dancers within representation. This highlights the tension between representation and the material presence or 'present-ness' of dancing bodies as already suggested by Lepecki (46-47).

Grounded in phenomenology Alessandro Pontremoli discusses the way in which dance concurrently presents and represents the body. "Presenting a body invariably implies reference to the concrete life of the performer, who acts in front of the spectators trying to affect their experience. The body is that ineliminable residue which generates a material form of the expression... perceived by the spectators as somebody's active experience and not as a mere passive object to be observed." This, as discussed above, is particularly felt in Minaai and Birch's disappearing act duet in which the dancers are observed in their sensuous engagement with one another, trying to find each other and complete the duet with their eyes closed. For Pontremoli, in common with Golańska (6), the encounter between audience member and performer is an encounter experienced by "two incarnations" (Pontremoli 1), "this encounter actually happens on the material plane – a material (or a body) encounters other material (or another body) with which it forms a creative and aesthetic assemblage" (Golańska 6). Yet, at the same time, "the dancing body is a body provided with form: for the spectator watching it, it is a powerful symbol-making machine, even before being perceived as a mechanic and biological object. Each action, each gesture, each sequence of movements is spontaneously interpreted by the spectator as a programme within a continuum of organized content" (Pontremoli 5).

¹⁰ See Lambert Beatty (1-8) and Wood for a further discussion on choreographer Yvonne Rainer and her formulation of 'dance is difficult to see'.

¹¹ See Butcher, Pollard & Melrose (61-69) and Flexer (79-81) for a further discussion of choreographer Rosemary Butcher's Scan and the term visual holes.

The juxtaposition or overlapping of presence and re/presentation is accentuated and palpably felt in *Disappearing Acts* through the proximity to the dancers, the permeability of the boundaries of the space and the dancers' skin, their charged and sensuous dancing and their direct gaze and address of the audience. It is also felt through the ways in which dancers interpret, comment and reflect on the movement or text and on the work itself as a feature of their performance, dialoguing with representation including its socio-political dimensions. What *Disappearing Acts* then attempts to do is to both 'affect' the audience as much as conceptualize the very act of performance and its disappearance. The aim is that disappearance is both viscerally and emotionally felt as much as intellectually understood and interrogated by the viewer. When the dancers touch one another, they are both touching and being touched, at the same time, they also reflect on the meaning of touch as both physical material and conceptual, aesthetic or even political framework of ideas.¹²

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¹² Hence a sense of hesitation is felt in the 'folk dance' (as the dancers question their relationship to the material – to Israeli Folk dance? To the sense of togetherness it might con-
spire?)

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