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Live Art, Life Art.

A critical-visual study of three women performance artists and their documentation

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PhD Creative and Critical Practice
University of Sussex

July 2013

Declaration:

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature..... Date.....

University of Sussex

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PhD Creative and Critical Practice

Live Art, Life Art.

A critical-visual study of three women performance artists and their documentation

SUMMARY

This thesis is a 'practice-led' project that uses observational documentation methods, a long-term collaboration with three live artists, and a narrative analysis to encourage a visual way of 'knowing' the person who makes live art, the performance work itself and the reality of producing and archiving live art.

My practice of documenting live performances produces digital representations of the three artists I collaborated with. The fragmented and non-linear expressions of the live performances, which can be viewed in the video documents, also find echo in the life history interviews of the artists. Triangulated with an examination of the artists' websites, these diverse texts provide insight into how the live artists make sense of their embodied autobiographical experiences in a virtual environment. A post-structuralist narrative analysis proposes that the live and online performance-narratives constitute the artists' self as 'an artist' and examines these texts for ideas of the 'self-portrait' and of 'life as experienced'. The research suggests this is especially helpful to the audience's meaning-making processes when engaging with Live Art.

The thesis investigates the three artists' representations of the body, specifically their strategies to compel a disruptive reading of nudity, femininity and motherhood. Other performative strategies found in these artists' work lead to discussions on ritual enfolded in performance, based on Richard Schechner's (1995) understanding of iterative practices, and of participatory incantations that integrate narratives found in myths into narratives of selfhood and community.

This thesis aims to develop the understanding of contemporary performance art practice through examples of three artists' autobiographical performativity in live and online environments. The thesis advances narrative theory beyond its literary framework through a visual and practice-based approach. By linking narrative theory with visual methods this project seeks to demonstrate that experiential approaches could be relevant to narrative researches, visual anthropologists, performance ethnographers, as well as live artists, all faced with the inevitability of mediatisation. It contributes to ideas on the digital dispersion of the live artists' identity as not a fracturing of the unified body experienced in live performance but instead as a place for the artists to exercise agency through virtual performativity.

The thesis consist of two parts, a website (<http://bsdroth.wix.com/thesis2013>) and a written text. The online videos and the written text, when read together, form a performative analysis towards a 'knowing who' of the artists. It contributes to the growing interest in methodologies that investigate, document and present cultural experiences and their perceived value. The online presentation of my practice also demonstrates the digital and virtual environment the live artists' work operates in, as exemplified in this thesis. The website is a physical manifestation of integral ideas in this project, around authenticity, ownership and virtual experiences.

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Thanks to the Live Art Development Agency for access to its Live Art archive as a valuable study resource. Thanks to Kate Norgate from the Crick Crack Club and Lauren Jury at Arnolfini Gallery Bristol for documentation access. Also thanks to Mishko Papic and Mario Bouhaidar for technical advice with my videos and websites.

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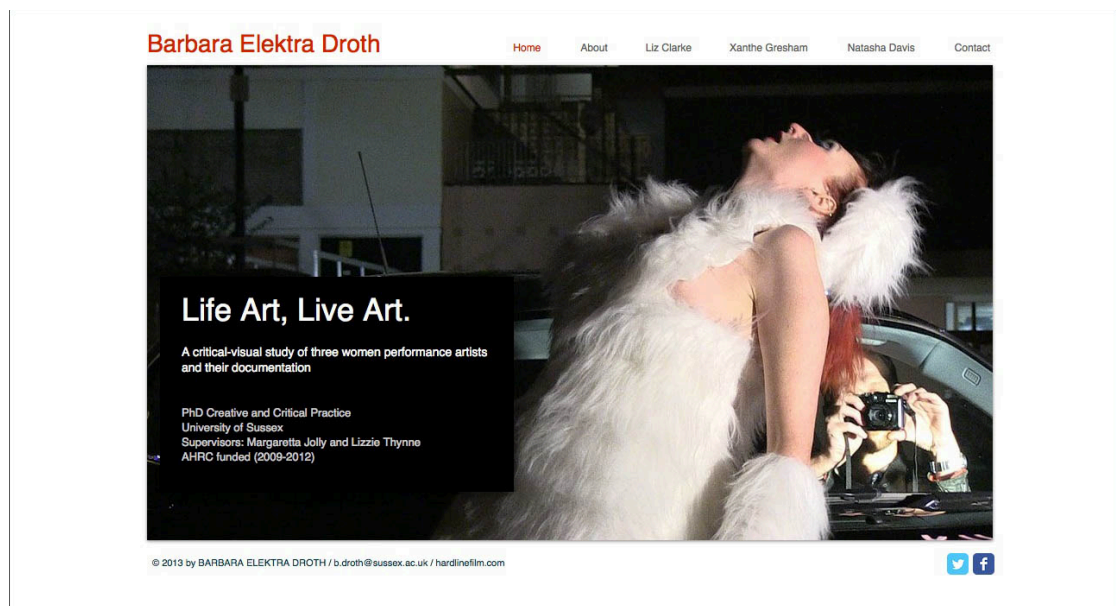
PREFACE

There are two parts to my thesis. Beside the written part there is a website hosting the documentation of live art I produced over a period of three years. These videos can also be found on the DVD at the back of this document. However the website is the preferred site to view my practice: it is interactive; it clearly frames each of the artists and allows for cross-examination of them; it constantly evolves and is updated regularly; and it functions in relation to the artists' own online presence.

Here are the important links to the online practice material:

Thesis website:

<http://bsdroth.wix.com/thesis2013>



My YouTube Channel (to view clips full-screen size):

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BarbaraElektraDroth>

Liz Clarke's website:

<http://www.lizclarke.org>

Natasha Davis' website:

<http://www.natashaproductions.com>

Xanthe Gresham's website:

<http://www.xanthegresham.co.uk>

1 INTRODUCTION

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Research aims and questions | |
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Research aims and defining questions

Who is the artist of performance art? How do we know her and how can we enjoy her story? Can the autobiography she offers in her live performance and life interviews weave together a complex “‘whoness of the doer’ in her unrepeatable singularity” (Tamboukou 2011: 4)? This area defines the terrain of this thesis, where I propose that post-structuralist narrative methodologies provide an especially fruitful way in answering my questions about the performance artist. My first aim, therefore, is to show how and why a interdisciplinary investigation of three performance artists provides a sense of the artists’ construction of their identity as an artist and as a woman making live art. I ask how this fits in with other theories of interpreting live art and its documentation, and if my visual methods can provide additional sense-making of the live artist’s labour and its wider cultural meanings. My second aim is to examine representational issues around ‘the artist’ through a narrative approach and through ideas of self-portraiture and experiential narration. I do this through triangulating my practice of video documenting live performances with life history interviews and the artists’ online texts, and by considering the videos in themselves as narrative investigations of the artists. The mediatisation of the performances through my video practice raises interesting questions on the live artists’ quest to represent themselves and their work to an increasingly virtual audience. My project examines how these outside factors impact the artists’ inner construction of themselves as ‘working artist’.

Background

I have been filming installations and live performances ever since my time at Glasgow School of Art and later The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I

recorded both my own and other artists' work. The complexities around documenting ephemeral works have been the stimulus to combine my film practice with academic research. This also addressed my desire to understand why artists perform live, how to 'read' performance, and if filming can provide a deeper way of knowing and reading. Then what exactly defines performance art? RoseLee Goldberg in her seminal book on the history of performance art states this art form is difficult to pin down:

"By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is life art by artists. Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself. For it draws freely on any number of disciplines and media for material... deploying them in any combination" (Goldberg 2001: 9).

I propose to use this open definition of performance art as a way to talk about various live works that I either experienced 'live' or viewed as documentation. Lois Keidan, co-founder and director of the Live Art Development Agency, describes performance art as, "Art that is alive, active and ephemeral; art that is interested in the potential of the body and the possibilities of space and time; art that invests in ideas of process, presence and experience as much as the production of objects or things" (Keidan 2004: 2). In this project I mainly talk about live art (lower case) where I mean art that is alive in the way Keidan and Goldberg describe above, and as the term used by the artists I collaborated with in exchange for performance art. Live Art (in capitals) here relates to the cultural strategy defined by Keidan and the Live Art Development Agency.¹

The most discussed women performance artists in academic publications are Marina Abramović, French artist Orlan, and Bobby Baker. Abramović and the documentary film on her retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York called *The Artist is Present* is a pertinent example I will refer to throughout this thesis. Orlan's live plastic surgeries apply technology to what Orlan herself refers to as self-portraiture (Orlan 1996, Kaufmann 1996) and I will look at her process of performative self-portraiture in connection to the three collaborating artists. Bobby Baker is frequently discussed in narrative analysis of performance (Smith

¹ See the agency's website for a full definition:
http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about_us/what_is_live_art.html

and Watson 2001, Heddon 2008). Her example is helpful for my analysis of Xanthe Gresham's work, as both these women's performances consist of semi-autobiographical storytelling. In contrast to Smith, Watson and Heddon, I approach my research as a practitioner. The relevance of practice-based research lies in the experiential observer-perspective, which I will argue adds a new analytical dimension to text-based writing. The nature of experiencing the live through the lens, the motion of filming it myself, necessitates a degree of focus where I felt I could insert myself into the creative process. I wanted to participate in the translation between looking at art, making sense of it and sharing that experience with the reader. In the process of 'doing' the documenting it becomes a research method that creatively generates material that can be re-viewed by researchers unfamiliar with the live artists themselves, and enter a discourse on performance that brings visual and textual images together.

As part of my fragmented work history I worked for five years in the world of advertisement and there gained a valuable non-art perspective. It made me keenly aware of both the public positioning of the live artist as outsider and the struggle of artists to 'own' their own representation, almost in terms of branding. Another major influence on my practice and my interest in stories was sparked by my time studying at the Centre of Narrative Research (CNR at the University of East London), where I learned about oral history methods and narrative theory. It was there I first started to wonder about applying video technology to interviews and questioned how to incorporate visual material into an academic context. In this project I search out the interconnections between observational documentary film practice and the life history tradition in social sciences. My production of visual interpretations of the three artists' narratives is based on the concept that aesthetic expressions, such as found in my video clips of the performances, can touch us and elicit implicit meanings of life experiences (Gendlin 1992), and that such visually-based forms of knowing can add new dimensions to a textual analysis.

For the narrative theorists whose work frames this thesis, the subject (in this case the artist) is constructed not discovered (Smith, Watson, Tamboukou). I therefore

embrace a collaborative process that emphasizes shared authorship and considers the artists' identities as not fixed but constantly reformed and adjusted. I acknowledge my own cultural shift from filmmaker to researcher, each discipline with its own set of rules and impositions, as another construct subjecting the construction of 'the artist' in this project. My grasp of the artists' identities was formed by the very discourse between the opportunities and constraints that our individual collaborative process presented and thus can never offer a complete conclusion.

Timeline

In 2011 nine artists responded to a call-out I posted on *Artist New Work Network*. Two further artists were referred to me by word of mouth. I decided on certain criteria for selecting participants for my research project, namely that the artist:

1. Defines herself as a woman
2. Defines herself as an artist
3. Creates performances for live audiences
4. Considers herself 'emerging'
5. Lives in Britain

The reasons for setting up these criteria in this order were five-fold. Firstly, I wanted to work with women to be able to focus on commonalities such as the body and motherhood. I felt it is relevant to highlight the contribution women make to art and live art. By researching contemporary woman artists' embodied self-representations, the thesis engages with historic links between performance and feminism (Grosz 1994, Jones 1999, MacDonald 1995, Taylor 2003). In the performances that are part of this project, issues of gender and femininity crop up as part of the wider performance history discourse as well as reflecting more specific auto/biographical explorations. Second and thirdly, it was important that the participants should consider themselves to be 'an artist' and a performance artist. The act of self-definition and of shaping their identity in terms of 'occupation' 'artist' in relation to a live audience is the cornerstone of this research project.

Fourthly, I wanted my participants to be at similar stages in their careers. I sought out emerging artists who had little or no prior media coverage or academic references. For example Davis (2010) states, “*I feel like I’m very emerging, I’m right at the beginning, of, you know if there is a career as an artist, somewhere at the beginning.*” I felt that emerging artists’ stories have not been told and retold. They are not yet fixed by others in writing. The artists are still ‘making it up’, are still shaping their own sense of identity. I wanted to capture the fluidity of the artists’ sense of self when it has not yet been ‘named’ or categorised into a solid form. I was also interested in finding out if an emerging artist has particular economic needs regarding documentation that are relevant to their ability to become an artist. Lastly, I wanted the artists to live in Britain so I could personally experience their work and when possible video-document it.

I conducted two-hour long oral interviews with each of the eleven artists who volunteered to participate in my research. The semi-structured interviews explored their life history as ‘an artist’. Some of the interviewed artists then became unavailable or disinterested and I ended up with three performance artists who collaborated with me consistently over a period of two years: Liz Clarke, Xanthe Gresham and Natasha Davis. I also held many informal discussions with these three artists on their work processes. Additionally I followed the artists’ online self-representations in the form of texts, images and video material they posted, in order to understand how they present themselves as working live artists in virtual environments.

From 2011 to 2012 I video documented Gresham’s and Clarke’s live performances and made this video material available to the two artists for their own uses. In contrast Natasha Davis invited me to record her in her home and studio in order to show me the props for her performance trilogy. This resulted in a short documentary I called *The Life of an Artist in 100 Objects* (2011), after the popular Radio 4 program running at the time. Davis selected to perform a re-telling of the role of each object so that *100 Objects* acts as an exhibition of material evidence of the performance as well as a performance to camera itself.

The video material I produced reflects the individuality of artist and performance, but also the personal relationship of our collaboration and the type of access I was able to gain to the work. Clarke and Gresham's prior documentation was sketchy and often initiated by an outside source, for example the venue, which left them with little control over the outcome. These two artists were glad to have constant access to my video documentation. On the other hand Natasha Davis fully integrates documentation into her workflow, with help from her boyfriend who documents all her shows.

My open-ended collaborative methodology invited both collaboration and resistance. Even where the artist did not take up my documentation as in the case of Natasha Davis, conversations *about* the process of collaboration/resistance reveal forms of agency that the artist takes up in order to determine the development of their career and identity as artist. The artists' websites also provided insight into how access to documentation technology affects the artist's overall long-term career development and indicated how the artists negotiate their live work in relation to virtual audiences.²

For this thesis I use the following terms to refer to my visual materials. Two videos I made, Davis' *100 Objects* and Gresham's *Introduction to Goddesses*, are referred to as *documentaries*. I use the term documentary for these two videos because the artist performs directly to the camera, and to highlight the greater editorial intervention in regards to my authorship, such as added soundtrack, titles and voice over. All other videos are *documentation* of live performances. I consider the full documentation footage of the live performance as *archival documentation*. A shorter edited version of this footage is referred to as *video clip*. These clips sum up the performance in 3 minutes or less and are aimed at new virtual audiences. The clip is a representation of the full performance with the purpose to give the viewer a *sense* of the performance rather than a complete reproduction of the piece. Most

² For example Liz Clarke has been able to use my video documents to secure further Arts Council funding.

artists represent their performance work through these kinds of documentation clips or through still images.

Methodology

For this project I applied two main methodological approaches. Firstly this is a 'practice-led' project that uses visual methods to examine the self-development of three performance artists. It does so by documenting their live performances with a video camera using 'focused viewing', as outlined below. Secondly, the three artists are case studies for examining the concept of 'the artist' through a narrative analysis. My method triangulates a variety of textual and visual material. These include the artists' live performances witnessed by my camera, life interviews with the artists, and online iterations of the artists' visual and written narratives. These sources have symbiotic relationships with each other, and my practice and theory iteratively feed into each other.

1. Practice-led and visual methods

The videos I made are both the outcome of my filming practice and a methodological process.

First let me state what I did not do: I have not attempted to make a single documentary featuring all three artists. I have not followed them backstage to find 'behind the scenes' material. I did not interview the artists' families or co-workers. I have not asked others to define the work or personality of the artist and have not myself commented in voice-over on the subject matter.³ Instead, I set out to document the artists' live performances over a two-year period, and to track what happens to the documentation and the artists themselves. The key in this process was that the collaboration had to be led by the three individual artists. This involved their resistance to being represented through visual forms other than their own work.

³ In chapter 3 I will discuss my method in detail and compare and contrast it with the HBO documentary representation of performance artist Marina Abramović's live performance at MoMA.

To find models for a less-interventionist form of filmmaking I turned to anthropology-based visual methods. As anthropologist Tim Ingold states, “The objective of ethnography is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience” (Ingold 2008: 69). Through an observational perspective I describe how the artists act in their role of live artist. In this research I see documentation as a lens-based, observational process and at the same time I inject some visual experimentation to better represent the artist’s work. Artist Leslie Hill calls this kind of hybrid approach “closer in spirit” to live art than “a set text” (Hill 1998: 46). My videos in this way provide a ‘sensory’ method for re-telling my first-hand experience of the performances and allow the reader to examine the performances in a visual way. Of course, performance is the central expression of the live artist *as* artist and is to be experienced live. However, increasingly performance artists rely on video documentation as an integral part of their work and my project focuses on this role documentation plays in *their* lives (as artists).

The creative practice of this project is more than the documentation of live events and should not be read as binary to the written text. Ellingson and Ellis outline an autoethnographic method as “a social constructionist project that rejects the deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political” (2008: 450–459). My visual approach embraces such constructionist ideas. The interviews and my videos shed light on my total interaction with the artists by including personal thoughts (theirs and mine), stories and observations as a way of understanding the social context of ‘the artist’. The videos are containers for the complex positioning of artist, audience, researcher, filmmaker and reader.

In this sense my project is part of the wider turn of creative practice-as-research⁴ and its concern for how academic writing styles inform the types of claims made. As sociologist Laurel Richardson states, “I consider writing as a method of inquiry...form and content are inseparable” (2000: 923). In this project, video

⁴ See the Journal for Media Practice for many discussions on this.

documentation is a form of inquiry like writing and offers an alternative form that cuts down on "the false separation of how things are presented from what they express" (Stafford quoted in Grimshaw 2005: 5). The videos are thus a form of research text in their own right. The challenge of my practice-led approach therefore was not only how the performing body could be mediatized but also how this material could be presented in an academic context.

Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood (2002) champions performance as a mode of knowledge: "not the academic way of 'knowing that' and 'knowing about' but rather a way of knowing tied to action, to hands-on doing, experience, participation, personal connection: 'knowing how' and 'knowing who'" (2002: 153). My practice-led approach is based on these ideas. Experiencing performance live and through the video lens enables me a different knowing of the artist compared to textual analysis. This ephemeral knowing through the performance of experience is part of a "whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert" (Conquergood quoted in Loxley 2007: 154). My research method therefore includes a personal journey of witnessing the *liveness* of the live performance and the artist's autobiographical presence during the interviews away from the stage. In order to write about these artists I first needed to experience the work through the lens and then repeatedly and creatively play with the digital versions of it. I believe that embedding my practice into the process of textual inquiry enables an experiential reading and understanding of the artists and their work.

Elin Diamond states the live artist's refusal of theatricality is a weapon against notions of a "textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favour of the polymorphous body of the performer" (1996: 3). There is a parallel between this idea and my attempt to enter the 'textual authority' of academic discourse with my visual narratives. To insert the documentation videos as forms of analysis means to ask for a more performative reading of the text, where 'reading' the videos becomes the hands-on 'knowing who' that Conquergood describes above. I hope the reader will continuously cross-reference the text and the videos, relying not only on the words but also finding independent meaning in the video images.

2. Narrative methods

While I have been inspired by visual ethnography in seeking a film practice appropriate to the peculiar challenges of live art documentation, intellectually, I position my thesis as a whole within the theoretical framework of auto/biography studies, referring to theorists such as Paul John Eakin, Jerome Bruner, Maria Tamboukou, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who all relate to ideas of life as a narrative construction. Maria Tamboukou states, “The responsibility of the narrative researcher is crucial in facilitating emergence, creating conditions for connections to be made and meanings to emerge” (Tamboukou 2011: 8). My aim with both my practice and my analysis is to create meaningful connections between the artists, their live work and their life. I therefore apply narrative analysis through the entire practice-led process: I examine the embodied narrative of the performance, the visual narrative of the documentation, the life interview narratives, and artist-authored online texts.

Paul John Eakin states, “When it comes to autobiography, narrative and identity are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other”(Eakin 1999: 100). As I will argue in chapter 4, I consider the performances of the artists as auto/biographical narratives and as self-portraits and hence examine the links between live art and the artists’ autobiographical constructions. As case studies for experimentation with visual narrative analysis I inquire how the artist ‘knows’ (or gets to know) herself, how she negotiates her life, work and documentation, and how she represent herself as a *live* artist in virtual environments.

The first research method I used for this project was interviews. Historian Joan Sangster argues interviews are more than individual memories but also reflections of work, social power structures, notions of femininity: “These narratives, rather than being simply contradictory and ambiguous, or individual representation of memory, are reflections of, and active rejoinders to women’s work and family experiences” (Sangster 2009: 104). The value of my interviews with the artists lies

in the individual expression of the artists regarding their life experience and the wider insights this sheds into the artists' work. Again, I have applied a post-structuralist approach to the interview material rather than positioning them as 'truer' than their performances on stage. As Sangster further states, "A close examination of narrative form helps to uncover layers of meanings in women's words, the simultaneous stories that were being played out and the script around which the interview was moulded" (Sangster 2009: 100). The interviews also shed light on my subjective position within the research process and indicate some of the outside factors that frame the narrative construction of the artists' self, including gender, education, and belonging.

Narrative analysis here is not restricted to the interviews, to verbal or even to linear narrative. It encompasses embodied and mediated selves as well as fragmented and non-linear forms of expressions. Hence the video documents in this project are examined as visual narratives. They stand as representations of the artist's work but also function as constructions of 'the live artist'. The video documentation of live performance is a visual narrative constructed by the camera, and also by me through the editing process. Narrative (in written text) is a form of analysis but it also is a mode of representation (in edited video clips and web sites). I here expand the concept of narrative beyond its traditional associations with temporally ordered forms, following Tamboukou, Smith and Watson.

My submitted videos come in different forms that reflect the individual autobiographical acts embedded in each artist's work, different levels of mediation of both on and off-stage performances, and the collaborative dynamics developed between the artists and me over a period of two years. Each of the three artists' performance work is different in style and content, and collectively, their performances highlight the breadth of live art practices in Britain today. This diversity (in terms of thematic content and visual style, as well as practical differences of duration, venue and camera access) provides rich ground for examining the artists as individuals and also as members of the live art world.

As part of the process of this thesis, I documented six of Liz Clarke's shows, four of Xanthe Gresham's, and one of Natasha Davis'. I have archived all ten full-length documentations on a dedicated hard drive in my studio. Some of this material has found a permanent home, for example in the archive of the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol.⁵ I also have created individual short video clips representing each of the shows for the artists to distribute digitally. These can be found on various online sites, such as the artists' own webpages and on YouTube.

For my written discussion I focus on six documentation clips and one documentary. These are submitted on my thesis website [<http://bsdroth.wix.com/thesis2013>]:

- KKK (Clarke 2011)
- Filth Queen (Clarke 2011)
- The Last Trick (2) (Clarke 2011)
- Baba Yaga and the Virgin of Guadalupe (Gresham 2011)
- Goddess to Go (Gresham 2011)
- Pussy's in the Well - The Goddess Under the Pavement (Gresham 2012)
- 100 Objects (Davis 2011)

My YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/BarbaraElektraDroth>) contains additional video clips of the artists that point to the fact that I cannot possibly 'sum up' the artist and her life in my thesis. They underline the ever-evolving nature of auto/biography. These additional videos provide optional background to the artist's continuing work as of course do the artists' own, growing websites. My practice therefore aims to capture the construction of the artist's identity as a *process*, where iterative construction and fragmentation of (visual) narratives indicate the mutable nature of selfhood.⁶

⁵ Arnolfini Gallery has video copies of Liz Clarke's *Big Inflatable Me* and *I'm Losing the Edge*. The Crick Crack Club has video copies of Xanthe Gresham's performance *Baba Yaga*.

⁶ I discuss this in detail in chapter three, *Life/Live Narratives*.

Introducing the thesis chapters

This chapter is my *Introduction*, where I provide a background to the project and state my research aims. I have outlined my practice-led methods and emphasised that the thesis consists of two parts, of which the website offers significant contributions to the written chapters here.

In chapter two, *The Artist and Live Art*, I situate the idea of the artist and live art in a (art) historical context. I look at some examples of the live artist in the media, such as the HBO documentary *The Artist is Present* (2012) on Marina Abramović. I examine how pre-existing images and myths about ‘the artist’ influence and shape the self-construction and self-representation of my three collaborators.

In chapter three, *Documenting and the Document*, I investigate key debates about the relationship between live art and its documentation as these have often been framed in terms of betrayal of liveness in an over-mediated world (Phelan 1996). Yet clearly there is an increasing convergence between the two forms of representation. I examine how I contribute to this dialogue with my own practice methods.

In chapter four, *Life/Live Narratives*, ideas of auto/biography provide a framework to examine the link between life and ‘live’ (performance) narratives. I explore the concept of the self-portrait and the idea of ‘life as experienced’ (Bruner 1984) to make meaning of the artists’ contemporary art practices.

In chapters five and six, *The Body* and *Rituals*, I explore specific strategies the artists devise to represent their body and embodied autobiography. What becomes evident is that these artists are deeply involved with questions of belonging, longing and identity, even as they explore these in quite different ways. They also all share a fascination with bodily life, which I argue is related to their experiences as women. Through my videos and critical commentary I move between the visual and written texts, to explore painful, joyful and puzzling stories of nation, war, family, mothering, sexuality and love.

The final chapter is my *Conclusion*. I summarise my arguments and reflect on my experience of collaborating with these three artists. I evaluate how I contribute, through my own performative participation in this project, to the practice of documenting live art. I argue that my video practice is a form of performative 'writing', defined by Peggy Phelan, which I use to introduce three emerging artists into an academic context.

2 THE ARTIST AND LIVE ART

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Introducing the three artists | |
| The (live) artist | |
| The (woman) live artist at work | |

In this chapter I introduce the three artists of my collaboration. How do we view these performers and their place, as live artists, among other art forms? What is the role of the live artist at work and what importance does the audience play at live performances? I contextualise the three artists among other existing representations of the contemporary artist, such as found in art history texts or in cultural representations like documentary film. Such material provides a means to reflect on the multiple myths of 'the artist' and examine to what extent this affects the nature of self-construction by my collaborators.

Introducing the three artists

Natasha Davis is based in London but she is originally from former Yugoslavia. Davis' strong identification with being from another country attracted her to a workshop with Helen Paris and Lesley Hill called 'autobiology'. She considers Helen Paris 'a huge influence' on her subsequent exploration of autobiographical material as art. Her performances often refer to the lack of belonging and the memories of a shifting past. The other dominant theme in her work relates to the ill or medicalized body also based on autobiographical narratives.

Davis creates beautifully lit installations with which she interacts in various physical and mediatized ways. Through interactions with objects she becomes part of a highly constructed visual image that functions like a snippet of memory. In all three of her solo shows Davis employs multimedia such as film sequences, pre-recorded sounds, and hand-held electronic recording devices. She says about her performative style, *"Sound is incredibly important to me, and light is incredibly important to me. So my lighting designer and my sound collaborator is an extremely important person in the process of the making all work"* (Davis 2010). Texts spoken by her during the performance hint at autobiographical storytelling and are

sometimes in a different language, authenticating her belonging to another culture and country. Her work could be aesthetically compared to the tradition of the New York Performance Group (later Wooster Group), who also work with objects and theatrical devices. Venues where her work has been shown include many live art festivals, a refugee group exhibition and the Chelsea Theatre in London.

Davis earns her living through arts funding and as a producer of other performers, including Bobby Baker. Prior to her performance career she worked for the Arts Council as Theatre Officer. She is a confident early career live artist and very active in self-promotion. Her boyfriend is in charge of documenting her work, helps update her website and is technically fully equipped for such tasks. This meant that I did not document any of her performances I saw. Instead the artist offered me to film her and her objects in her studio. Her website is www.natashaproductions.com.

Liz Clarke is a Bristol-based British artist. I first met her for our interview at the Residence, an artist collective in Bristol, where she is a member and which reflects her dedication to working as an artist. Liz Clarke, Liz Council, Betty Bruiser: this artist has several public identities and I was intrigued to find out if these were all separate personas. She explained that Liz Clarke is her artist name and Liz Council is her married name. Betty Bruiser is her burlesque stage name. During my research I noticed that as she becomes more confident as a live artist, her emphasis on Liz Clarke creates a clearer distinction from Betty Bruiser's cabaret persona.

In her work Clarke challenges high and low art distinctions by incorporating popular forms such as burlesque, loud pop music and gay iconography, into her performances. Clarke describes her work as "*very messy... in the margins of performance art, cabaret and theatre*" (Clarke 2010). Another aspect of her work is body-based endurance performances, a style most famously associated with Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Franko B, Marina Abramović and Kira O'Reilley. Working on the theme of grief this work involves ritualistic, sometimes painful, and abstract acts such as piercings with needles or slow repetitive interventions like blowing up balloons. Her work shows the influence of her mentor Ron Athey, known for his

post-AIDS endurance art. Venues where her work has been shown include gallery environments such the Arnolfini Gallery, alternative venues like the Cube, and Live Art festivals.

Clarke earns her living through arts funding and what she calls 'socially engaged work'. Under the name of Dare Devil Divas, a fully funded project, she for example co-led a controversial workshop at a woman's rape shelter. In her workshops Clarke applies the burlesque form to therapeutic expression of autobiographical memories. She tends to shy away from self-promotion and has recently found a producer to help her with that aspect of her career. She does not own any technological equipment but has friends who design her website and sometimes document her work. During our collaboration I documented several of her live performances. Her website is www.lizclarke.org.

Xanthe Gresham is a London-based British artist. I first met her at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge where she brought their Persian manuscripts to life through vivid re-performances of the illustrations. This is an example of how she straddles both performance and storytelling in her creative work. Her storytelling repertoire includes myths and tales from around the world, fragments of which often find their way into her live art.

Her autobiographical performance art monologue is a style most famously associated with Karen Finley, Spalding Grey and the contemporary British artist Bobby Baker. Gresham's six solo-shows consist of long monologues around the subject of a specific goddess, interweaving myths, fairy tales, autobiographical experiences, and past and present realities. She has collaborated with a female drummer and a male harpist and employs imaginative simple props and costumes to inhabit the characters during her narration. She often makes use of personal photographs to illustrate the authenticity of her life history, using low-tech visual aids such as a slide projector. Gresham describes her work as, *"I've always done odd stuff because I am a bit odd, I never tried to be odd that's just how it is"* (Gresham 2010).

Gresham's performance narratives entice the audience to participate in vocal rituals, songs, gestures or in personal exchanges with the artist. A recurring theme in her work is the subject matter of sexuality, fertility, and female types embodied by various goddesses, or cultural characters such as Mary Poppins. She lists performance storyteller Ben Haggerty as her mentor. Venues where she has performed include Soho Theatre, the Barbican, Northern Stage and various storytelling and performance festivals.

Gresham earns her living as storyteller, working in museums and schools and has worked extensively for Tate Britain, the Museum of London, British Museum and the V&A as a respected member of the storytelling circuit. Her documentation has been sporadic over the years and mainly edited by a boyfriend, who also looks after her website. During our collaboration I documented several of her performances. I filmed some visual material for use within her shows, and several monologues 'introducing' her live shows specifically performed to camera. Her website is www.xanthegresham.co.uk.

The (live) artist

Although the Romantic period in the European West of the early 19th century is associated with the birth of the cult of the artist, these ideas retain extraordinary power and reach today. Art critic Carter Radcliff (1988) suggests that "the desire to create art is frequently indissociable from the desire to be an artist, of the kind we hear and read about" (quoted in Freeman 1993: 39). These ideas about being an artist not only exist in cultural representations but also are alive with the artists I interviewed. The three artists I collaborated define themselves as 'an artist':

"I do consider myself an artist (laugh) and I considered my self an artist even before I was considered an artist by label" (Davis 2010).

"Yes, I do consider myself an artist. Even saying this gives a little shiver. Because that's something I am only just being able to claim for myself. It's been a long struggle to get there, to be able to claim that for myself" (Clarke 2010).

"Yes I would call myself an artist. And an artisan. I think (artisan) is a bit more like cathedral making, where you didn't put your name to it, you don't say 'it's my story' but 'it's from the grandmothers on whose shoulders I stand'" (Gresham 2010).

Mark Freeman, in his study of a group of New York-based aspiring artists, investigates the construction of artistic identity and notes how the myth of the artist revolves around the artist being a particular kind of person and leading a particular kind of life (1993: 40). He writes, "The fashioning of their selves in relation to their art was carried out with a definite product in mind: many wanted to become Artists, like the ones they had heard about, whose personalities and canvases loomed in their minds like magical visions" (Freeman 1993: 252). My collaborators each said they've "always wanted to be an artist" and their use of the term contains a reaching for something ephemeral mixed with a practical desire of belonging to the art world as art practitioners.

Natasha Davis states that being an artist is *"a way of living, I suppose freedom, sort of being in charge of what you do, what you say; independence. And also being part of the sector, contributing to the sector"* (Davis 2010). What stands out in her interview is the wish for freedom and independence, yet also a strong desire to be 'part of the sector': the art world. Freeman's study showed the importance of "affiliative belonging", where the artist feels as an artist through "some sense of true membership, in something larger than themselves" (Freeman 1993: 271). Gresham said in her interview, *"A support network is important because I am not a believer"* (Gresham 2010). And Clarke explains, *"I've always struggled with belonging to groups (laughs). Yeah, I've kind of always felt like an outsider. But saying that I belong to the artist collective residence where we are now"* (Clarke 2010). This seems to indicate that rather more is at stake for the artists than simply doing art (Freeman 1993: 254), and that the very process of becoming an artist and belonging to the art sector is especially important to the emerging artists I interviewed. I will show that this 'becoming' is an on-going, iterative and necessary part of the artist's life as an artist and in turn shapes their performative narratives.

In his research Freeman discovered several myths around the (self) identification of artists that are echoed in the interviews I held with the artists. These include the idea of the artist being deeply insightful like an eternal innocent child with pure vision [*"I've always had it in me" (Clarke 2010)*]; one who cannot help being an artist [*"I've always performed. I can't imagine anything else" (Clarke 2010)*]; one who is born with a gift as creating is like being god in a small way [*"It's a kind of state of mind, a state of being and that is something that I kind of have had all my life" (Davis 2010)*]; one who has a strong attraction to death [*"I looked at pre-Columbian material and there's so much materials there around death which interests me" (Davis 2010)*]; one who walks the line between sanity and insanity as in the artist-madman [*"I have a strange brain, it really is very circuitous and goes off on tangents and does U-turns... it comes across a bit mad" (Gresham 2010)*]; and one who is free from society's restrictions to conform [*"Artists are outsiders, not all of them, but I feel an outsider in society" (Gresham 2010)*].

Freeman points out that both creativity and its conditions are socioculturally constituted and refers to Marx and Engels (1981) who suggest that, "The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals and its suppression in the broad masses ... is a consequence of the division of labour" (quoted in Freeman 1993: 36). We are ordinary people while the artist lives an inspired life that we can only witness from the outside. We look at the artist's work to observe the life of the artist and how it stands in contrast to our own existence. Gresham states "*[People] get stuck in forms and get stuck in trying to please authorities and cease to think for themselves. I think (long pause) they are liberators, artists. Art speaks to the deep bit in us that is thinking for itself*" (Gresham 2010). This binary concept of the artist as thinking and being different from others is a recurring idea that we shall see underpins much of the identity construction of the three artists in this research.

Whereas a painter can hide away in the studio, performance artists make themselves visible during the performance and give access to themselves in public. They can literally be seen *at work*. The live artist is more observable in action *as artist* than other visual artists. This explains for example why Jackson Pollock became associated with the performance of painting.



Figure 1 Pollock in his studio c. 1950

In 1951 the Museum of Modern Art showed a colour film of Pollock engaged in a 'heroic' performance of artistic activity with paint and canvas. The emphasis was no longer on the object but the activity of creating art. Since then Pollock is known by photos of his *act* of painting as much as for the actual resulting paintings themselves. This representation of the artist's performative and publically consumable self-image is created and supported by the wider art world context. Erika Fischer-Lichte states:

"With the rising significance of art it seemed impossible to leave it exclusively to the artists, those mysterious and brilliant creators of the artworks. Henceforth, a constantly growing army of critics, theoreticians, administrators, censors, and agents supervised the necessary compliance with art's autonomy " (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 202).

Today's institutions of art, developed out of a co-operation of artists, critics, and spectators, shape the main narrative around the artist and initiate ideas of history worth exhibiting and preserving. This construction is furthered in the media through for example cinematic depictions of artists. Below I will examine how far 'official' cultural narratives determine the narrative of the individual artists of my research.

As a visual artist I have been taught to link performance history to its lineage from painting and sculpture. Theatre scholar Bonnie Marranca contests this version of history by noting the 'exclusivity' of the performance/art world's discourse that fails to "incorporate the knowledge of theatre history and criticism, shaped by

hundreds of years of intellectual scrutiny and debate” (Marranca 1999: 14). This gives an insight into the wider options from which the artists elect their self-identifications, and acknowledges the complex historic positioning of such a self-declaration. Natasha Davis clearly associates herself with the art sector: even though she did not go to art school but studied literature it seems her interest in art passionately developed during her years at the Arts Council.⁷ Liz Clarke had a fine art education and hybridises it with burlesque and cabaret performance forms. Xanthe Gresham, with an English degree at Oxford and later drama studies, straddles storytelling with performance. This hybridity is of course the very definition of live art. What they have in common is their perception of themselves as a performing artist. I therefore use the term ‘artist’ throughout this project as the self-defining term used by the artists to describe themselves.

In my interviews the artists struggle to define ‘performance art’ and often responded in negative formulations such as, “It is not theatre... there are no personas” (Davis 2011). Theatre has more to do with impersonation and role-play and so the artists insisted on being artists and stated that they could not help themselves from performing. Goldberg identifies this as a phenomenon of Live Art: “Unlike theatre, the performer *is* the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative” (Goldberg 2001: 8). This creates what director and performance theorist Richard Schechner calls the “me” and the “not not me”, a double negative relationship with the self that is simultaneously private and social (1985: 112). In my discussion throughout we will see this “twice-behaved behaviour” is what enables us to search performance (and my documentation of it) for autobiographical signifiers.

The (woman) live artist at work

The body in performance is “always both a vehicle for representation and, simply, itself” (Auslander 1990: 186). Schechner (1985) observes much the same phenomenon when he builds on J. L. Austin’s breakdown of any distinctions between non-serious or fictional speech acts and ‘real’ life, finding no fundamental

⁷ Davis later studied Arts Policy and Management see the artist’s website for full CV.

difference between role playing and being just ourselves, between life and fiction, or reality and illusion. Anthropologist Victor Turner insists performance is constitutive: performance “makes, not fakes, social life” (quoted in Hamera 2011: 321). Schechner describes the complexity of ‘not exactly doing things’ during performance, or the inadequacy of any simple opposition between *really* doing or being and *not really* doing or being (in Loxley 2007: 145). According to Schechner’s theory the working artist is neither pretending (‘acting’) nor really herself. There is no absolute difference between art and life but rather the “boundary between the performances of ‘life’ and ‘art’ is shifting and arbitrary” (Schechner quoted in Loxley 2007: 159). The collapse of artist and artwork into one body raises many issues of identity. It is not easy (or even possible) to prise apart the performer from the ‘not-performer’ but, as we shall see, the artists are clear that they are never ‘not-artist’, not even in their daily life.

One of these identity issues revolves around the problematic of the body itself. Gender is inevitably a determining factor in shaping the artists’ identity and in the reading of her female body. The artists and myself are aware of being a woman; each of us acknowledges gender and femininity influencing (the reading of) our work. Gendered experience emerges strongly in the interviews and in some of the performances. In my interviews I asked the artists on their views on feminism and this is how they responded:

“I am not learned in feminism but, and I just, I just, I just work with the body. But the female and feminine and the empowerment and the power of that body is so important to me in the work. And in my other creative work that I do (i.e. socially engaged art workshops). We are not particularly talking about that now but I guess it all interchanges, with empowering other women through celebration because it is so discouraged in our society.” (Clarke 2010)

“I don't actually really think about [feminism] a lot. Obviously, because I am a woman I can only relate woman's experience and woman's view of the world. The work isn't specifically about women, or women's experience rather than man's. But I suppose you're right, that there is a line of feminine, a line of woman in there. Clearly it's a women's body. There is also references to my mother's mental illness, however vague. So I suppose a lot of material is about a woman, stages in life I suppose in women's life... things around woman and a woman's body. But it's not a starting point, no it's not one of the starting point of creating work.” (Davis 2010)

*“I was very angry about patriarchal narrative. I came to it too late, maybe if I had dealt with it in a nice unit in feminism at university (laughs). Somehow it bypassed me.... Then I looked at the patriarchal war narratives I was doing and I felt physically sick. I thought how can I tell this, even if I give it a peaceful twist I was still telling these war stories, violence orientated... Then I started reading books about feminist narrative and feminist history, and my main book was Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess* – it changed my life. She is a great heroine of mine. I read it like a novel and that's when the goddess pieces started. I thought wow! Like reading Virginia Woolf again. Oh wow this is how women think! It heals a lot.” (Gresham 2010)*

It seems for these artists, acknowledging the body, gender and femininity within their performances does not automatically imply a wider political identification with feminism. Gresham for example explains her spiritualist take on feminism as not rooted in theory but in her autobiographical experience. As Marranca has noted, “In today’s critical climate, it is easy to ignore the fact that all women who perform, and their work in different historical eras, cannot easily be subsumed under one heading” (1999: 20). Narrative methodology here becomes a useful method for examining the artists’ bodies in their live performances, through a focus on the unique life history of each artist. According to the interviews, the three artists do not consider their own female body as the primary driving force of their creative process. However, themes of fertility, gender and (sexual) objectification are very much present in these three performers’ work. Indeed their engagement with such issues continues a historic feminist engagement with the body. In chapters five and six I interweave elements of feminist thought into my discussion, especially when addressing the artists’ individual narratives around belonging, femininity, and motherhood.

Performativity is a concept that has been linked to both feminism and performance. Various theorists, notably Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, adopt J. L. Austin’s concerns with performative speech acts (Jones and Stephenson 1999: 2), in order to address gender, memory and narrative construction. In the wake of Judith Butler’s work, we find performativity defined as the active, repetitive and ritualistic processes that are responsible for the construction of subjectivities and a process through which the subject enters into the public realm. Anthony Elliot states, “Butler’s performative self can thus be described as a radical

Foucauldianism, in which performances on the outside congeal over time to create an illusion of the self on the inside” (Elliot 2001: 117).

Butler uses the term ‘theatrical’ without direct reference to actual theatre. The moment we are in the vicinity of the stage and wish to investigate performativity the term becomes less clear. Parker and Sedgwick state, “in its deconstructive sense, performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is the theatrical” (1995: 2). The implication here is a binary between performativity in a daily act of (un(self)conscious) citation and the conscious theatrical performance. The word ‘absorption’ here is interesting, as the women I interviewed seem deeply absorbed: absorbed in *becoming* an artist, that is, moving to some indefinable state that lies beyond ‘emerging’. This absorption is not limited to the production of live performances but one that seems to permeate their daily lives. They are so absorbed in being an artist that delineations between ‘being’ and ‘performing’ become blurred. It is an identity that congeals over time so that when they are away from the stage they are still ‘an artist’.

Phelan believes there is something ontologically performative in performance and states, “Performance and performativity are braided together by virtue of iteration; the copy renders performance authentic and allows the spectator to find in the performer ‘presence’. Presence can be had only through the citation of authenticity, through reference to something (we have heard) called ‘live’” (Phelan 1998: 10). My documentation refers to the liveness of the artists’ performances. The ‘translation’ of the live narrative to a mediatized narrative is not simply my creative interpretation of the performance. Rather it captures the performative nature of the creative process. In other words the documentation is not only a representation of ‘what went on’ physically in the time-space shared by camera and performer, but is in this research also a visual tool to tease out the performativity of the artist ‘at work’.

In light of this it is interesting to ask how these women artists experience ‘work’. My documentation of performance captures the working life of the artist, not their everyday life. For example, Maria Tamboukou’s study of seamstresses in the

archive advocates an interest in women's public involvement. This means not the 'private' diaries of love, dreams and family, but a focus on women's labour. Capturing the woman artist at work, during her performance, the lens takes notice of each artist's specific work dynamics. Deirdre Heddon states, "Performance, for most performers, not only has a cultural and social job of work to do, but is itself a literal work since it is often the performer's livelihood" (Heddon 2008: 169). In my project I consider 'being an artist' as a profession, a job that demands specific labour. My three collaborators are all full-time artists: for them art is their main method of earning an income. I asked them in their interviews if they can make a living out of being a performance artist and they replied:

"Amazingly, yes I can live [financially] on my work. At the moment I've been self-employed only for a year. And I make my living from my performance, from my facilitation and from commissions working with other people. I guess you could say my day job is Drastic Productions and producing and my artwork is my personal work, but I don't really make that distinction" (Clarke 2011).

"The combination of producing and being an artist has been working for the last three years and I suppose, it's a mix of hard work and some luck and just really persisting. It's a combination of you know, some performing fees, living very modestly and moderately (laugh) and not spending money and not having huge, you know, demands. I mean so far it's been, touch wood, great with the funding" (Davis 2011).

"Yes, I can. I've done really well financially, much better than if I was an actress. Unless I was in Hollywood (laughs). I've lived fine. It's [sometimes] like having a job, wheeling out the old stories. I'm not a pure artist all the time; bits of the day are hugely creative, bits are automatic" (Gresham 2011).

The stories that emerge in connection to earning money as an artist reveal individual constructions around the subject by the artists. For example, Gresham's immediate first response to my question was "Only because I don't have children" (Gresham 2011). Davis confesses her work of producing other artists is an important part of her earning activities: "I probably wouldn't be able to survive as an artist" (Davis 2011). Clarke also has some doubts: "I don't know if I could do this all my life, because having two wage earners who are precariously self employed is quite difficult" (Clarke 2011). Their construction around the subject of money in relation to being an artist indicates a degree of anxiety articulated

around being an artist.⁸ It is useful to see these narratives as both adhering to meta-narratives around the 'struggling artist' as well as resisting this trope by asserting their financial independence through successful art making

One might argue that documenting a performance artist is not the same as observing a seamstress at work. However in light of Butler's notion of performativity, the artist performing her 'art' on camera plays herself as an artist 'at work'. Just like a seamstress would be 'performing' when sewing on camera, artists on camera are also "social actors play[ing] themselves" (Nichols 1993: 224). Relating to the comparison of the seamstress doing the sewing, I will suggest the video material of the performances enable a reflection on the social practices visible in this depiction of woman artists at work.

My documentation captures the performance artist 'at work'. The point of transition from performing the labour of the artist to simply 'being' the artists at her place of work lies in the 'before and after' of the performance, the walking on and off stage. Fischer-Lichte states, "beginning and end of performance [is a] special type of transition, from ordinary citizen into spectator (from daily life to performance)... In theatre familiar established rituals signal the transition, safe passage from one state to the other" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 178). Marina Abramović and Ulay experimented with avoiding this ritual in their performance *Nightsea Crossing* (1982) where they sat across from each other for seven hours a day. They explained, "We wanted to avoid people seeing the beginning and end. When they come to the gallery we are already there, ... when they go at 5.00, the gallery is closed and the guard comes and tell us it's the end. The public only see one image."⁹ I do the opposite by including the applause in my documentation. During the ritual of applause the artist's body is no longer that of the subject but becomes that of the author, the artist at work, the person we credit through our applause. By including the applause in my video clips I include the performance of the artist *being* an artist.

⁸ This anxiety over an unpredictable, irregular income, Freeman notes, makes the labour of art a more "heroic" work activity than 'normal' jobs (Freeman 1993).

⁹ Abramović and Ulay interview in Nick Kaye (1996). *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents*. Harwood Academic Publisher.

My rejection of subjective documentary or biopic modes is particularly salient in view of their long-term depiction of women artists in the media. It is worth looking at some of these visual representations of the woman artist and note how they maintain specific identifying characteristics that influence how we read the live artist. I will therefore look at examples of women artists in the biopic genre and specifically at the documentary *The Artist is Present* (2012).

The hybrid methods of the biopic's visual language lend themselves well to exploring the theme of 'the artist' and through a mixture of fact and fiction introduce both the artist's private life narrative and public artistic output. Film theorists Anderson and Lupo (2002) found that within the biographical film, or biopic genre, "Artists, broadly defined as including performing artist, constituted the most common profession depicted" (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 95). The trope of the misunderstood artist suits the dramatized narrative trajectory: the obstacles an artist faces make for good plot points and highlight the marginal placement necessary to be(come) an artist. The artwork itself is usually secondary, the persona the main focus of the films.

Anderson and Lupo note the gender bias on male subjects: "Our sample continued the genre's emphasis on the lives of men, with only eight films concentrating on a single female subject" (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 95). Whereas for male artists their unique life is expressed through the contradiction of the artists' internal suffering always on the edge of darkness and their public genius, for female artists the focus tends to be on the private life and relationships with men such as lovers, husbands or fathers. We can see this in recent biographical films on woman artists and writers:

- Frida Kahlo (2002) and her "tempestuous marriage" to Diego.
- Camille Claudel (1988) sexualised and in the shadow of sculptor Rodin.
- Dona Carrington (1995) and her affair with author Lytton Stacey.
- Artemisia (1997) controlled by her painter father and later by teacher Agostino Tassi.

- Georgia O’Keeffe (2009) and husband photographer Alfred Stieglitz.
- Sylvia Plath (2003) and her marriage to poet Ted Hughes.
- Irid Murdoch (2001) and love of husband throughout her Alzheimer’s.
- Diane Arbus (2006) and love affair with “mentor” Lionel Sweeney.
- Jane Austin (2007) and “her romance with a young Irish man”.¹⁰

Significant in this is the cinema’s power to define what kind of artistic character traits and talents are worthy of cultural attention. Anderson and Lupo state that the biopic “continues to play a significant part in determining how our culture constitutes its notion of fame, and what it takes to be a celebrated figure” (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 96).¹¹ The depiction of the artist in mainstream media influences expectations of the artist’s biography and we find resonance of it in the self-narration of the artists I collaborated with.¹²

Anderson and Lupo write, “The lament of the tortured artist is a biopic trope with particular appeal to filmmakers who are, or fancy themselves, artists” (2002: 96). Indeed, the filmmakers’ depiction of the artist is in many ways an autobiographical reflection. By throwing light on the marginalisation of the artist the filmmaker gains visibility for his or her own art. One example of this is Julian Schnabel’s film on the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Basquiat* (1996). Schnabel, also a painter, later features as an ‘insider’ in Tamra Davis’ documentary *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* (2010), as if by making a film about the subject and being an artist himself he can speak with authority on another person’s life. Another example is *Nowhere Boy* (2009) about John Lennon, by the only woman director of a biopic I found in my research. Sam Taylor-Wood is a fine artist who was nominated for a fine art prize at the Venice Biennale in 1997 and is best known for her video portrait of David Beckham sleeping (2007), as well as her photographs of Hollywood men crying (*Men Crying* 2005). Rather aptly and certainly notoriously, she subsequently fell in love with the ‘nowhere boy’ actor whom she had elevated

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.imdb.com>

¹¹ The authors research showed for example, “Biopics continue to function as star-vehicles... performances based on historical characters produced at least one nominee, and often several, of Oscars between 1990 and 2000” (Anderson and Lupo 2002: 95).

¹² I discuss the autobiographical self-portraiture of the artists in more detail in chapter 4.

to play Lennon. Her life story would make a good film itself and we can see in its iteration of certain tropes. It seems that “the mystique of the artist, frequently manifested in the form of either grandeur or alienation” (Freeman 1993: 36) still has currency and is perpetuated back and forth between life and cultural representations. I went to art school myself and my interest in the subject of ‘the artist’ might well have autobiographical roots. As my video clips show, I have avoided the plot of confession or exposure either of the artists or myself. As I will show, auto/biography (mine and the artist’s) does not necessarily mean self-revelation. Yet, through these brief examples of popular treatments of the artist (as subject in cinematic media) I want to acknowledge my subjectivity in positioning live documentation within the social and cultural framework of ‘the artist’.

Marina Abramović is a rare example of a woman artist, and a *live* artist, with a long history of documentation and publication on her performances and persona. The Guardian writer Peter Bradshaw calls Abramović “the Maria Callas of performance art... a virtual legend” (Guardian: 5 July 2012). BBC4 presented her in a program titled *The Goddess of Art: Marina Abramović* (16/10/2012). Marshall Fine, writer for the Huffington Post, notes the power of the artist’s presence in the HBO documentary film: “By the end, you are caught in her spell... you can't help but be transfixed” (Fine: Huffington Post 06/13/2012). The film *The Artist is Present* (2012) made by HBO (Home Box Office, an American premium cable and satellite television network that is owned by Time Warner) is the most widely distributed documentary on a performance artist of any gender (IMDb 2014). This documentary illuminates some of the problematic of representing the live artist. It also comes notably close to the biopic genre by adopting several of its tropes in its representation of the artist Abramović.

The HBO documentary *The Artist is Present* pivots around Marina Abramović’s retrospective exhibition of the same name at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2010. During her live performance at the museum Abramović sat motionless for 736.5 hours over the course of three months, inviting visitors to sit opposite her and make eye contact for as long as they wanted. The HBO documentary does not only focus on Abramović’s exhibition and public

performance at MoMA but also devotes time to her personal past. For example, ex-lover and collaborator Ulay becomes part of the documentary's dramatic narrative, one of the biopic tropes I mentioned above. In this way the depiction of the artist's private life, of love, domesticity and the everyday (for example the cooking of a large pot of soup), aims to shed light on the artist and her creative processes. 'Behind the scenes' conversations articulate the artist's intentionality and provide the audience with (the illusion of) *knowing*: knowing and understanding the artist and that what she creates. Abramović's consistent performativity makes us forget we are in effect watching an extension of her public performance. We can see echoes of this process in the video *100 Objects* I made with Natasha Davis in her studio, where her narrative also interweaves the personal and 'private' with the 'public' art object.¹³

The HBO documentary had prime airtime on HBO's USA television channel as well as an international cinema release with presentations at Sundance and Berlin Film Festivals (Jan/Feb 2012). Later in the same year the film was released internationally on DVD. Digital iterations of the artist's representation encourage the notion of collectability of liveness and 'experience' and facilitate an economic participation in the art market. Abramović's example illustrates a profound change in how art is collected in the digital age. Although digital technology has given performance and other marginal art forms an economic platform, it has simultaneously destabilised the concept of liveness (and its ephemeral nature), much to the concern of some academics and practitioners (and the reason for establishing a Live Art Development Agency that seeks to re-dress this shift). Mediatisation in their view is seen as inevitable but not necessarily a positive development for the artist.

Phelan for example points out that without a copy live performance "eludes regulation and control" (Phelan 1996: 148). For Phelan this 'disappearance' is a great strength and marks liveness as independent from "the encroaching ideologies of capital and reproduction" (Phelan 1996: 148). We can see how this

¹³ 'Performing Belonging' in chapter 6 deals with the material objects and Davis' performative strategies in detail.

applies to Abramović's documentary, which fixes the artist within several institutional frameworks: her representation is contained within HBO's point of view (and television at large) and controlled within the institution of the museum. This is visible in footage of the museum guards regulating the audience's response to the artist, for example by forcibly removing a visitor who took off her dress. This is also *invisibly* present in the very framing of a live artist within the museum, positioning the performer within a specific cultural context. This publicising of the performance through a main art institution and a large television channel constructs meanings that broaden and deepen the artist's appeal.¹⁴ It is my opinion that the aura of this artist, her legendary and goddess-like presence and her ability to transfix us and put us under her spell as represented in the HBO documentary, reposition her performance work from the margins to the mainstream; in other words produce an artist no longer independent from reproduction and capital but an artist *with* great cultural capital. Abramović in this sense provides a clear illustration of the transfer of aura from the art object to the solo artist (Schneider 2005).

How can this help us understand my three collaborating artists better? Ludmilla Jordanova (2005) argues that a historical sense of preceding work, the artist's own sense of competition, the influence of teachers, economic settings and geographical location, create 'visual models' to be emulated. She states:

"In other words, artists themselves often have a vivid awareness, that can be termed 'historical', of what has gone before, and in making it manifest, as many did in their self-portraits, they speak to contemporaries about their debts and their filiations and lay down deposits for future generations to examine" (quoted in Tamboukou 2010: 55).

A history of representations of 'the artist' frames the understanding of contemporary creative work but more importantly it influences new artists'

¹⁴ I here apply Geoffrey Glass' (2006) concept, "By "broadening" the appeal of a work, I mean that it becomes meaningful to more people. Deepening the appeal, on the other hand, increases its appeal to those who already find the work meaningful (i.e. having use value). This could lead audience members, for example, to see a film repeatedly, propel them over a threshold at which point they are sufficiently interested to spend money, or incite them to continue the cycle of audience meaning-making and promotion" – a behaviour the film shows by interviewing people who went to see Abramović's performance many times, one person even tattooing the number of his visits on his arm.

strategies in shaping their identity as artists. The history of live art, embodied in iterated representations of artists such as Abramović, contributes a specific language of representation and interpretation of live art practice. This language forces a focus on the performer's body and also shapes the audience's expectation of radical or subversive content.

The preceding knowledge of both artist and audience, coming together in a live or virtual environment, determines the understanding of the artist and her work, but as Tamboukou points out, the artists' challenge lies in the shifting positions between being the artist, her self as her own subject, and the audience (Tamboukou 2010). For the three artists Clarke, Davis and Gresham the importance of the audience, and the role the spectator plays in the performance exchange, is a crucial aspect of their work. This is what they state in their interviews:

"I am very interested in the contract between the audience and the performer and how far you can push that. Their role is not just an audience, I want them to be more than that, to be part of that" (Clarke 2010).

"It's about the desire to work with the audience in a different way, you know, for me to experience what interacting with the audience meant, the material asked for that, and it was also to...yeah for that entire relationship...whether people will be...whether they would want to interact with the material, with installation, with me, whether they would want to touch... So it was like just experimenting with what people chose, what choices will they make"(Davis 2010).

"My audience relationship normally is very friendly and chatty. I think I like to be liked. One of the reasons I do performance is because it gives you a connection to the audience. You can play and chat. Generally I get on well with the audience, it is quite interactive. They give me confidence" (Gresham 2010).

The three artists express that their relationship to the audience is an important aspect of the performance itself. Although Auslander makes a strong argument for stating there are no clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones, we can see for the artists I interviewed the difference between live and recorded is an unquestioned embodied distinction. The audience is part of the meaning making process. The relationship the three artists hope to form with

the audience is based on delivering a way to read their performance both *as* Live Art (part of a larger historic art form) and as an individual creative interaction (a singular artistic expression/work of art). They achieve the former because, as I have pointed out in this chapter, the audience reads the live performance not in a vacuum but in connection to other associations around art/the artist, and the latter because the artists draw on their own autobiographical experiences. My documentation has to straddle this function for a new, virtual audience, something I will investigate in the following chapters.

In this chapter I discussed the idea of ‘the artist’ as embodied by my three collaborators and as depicted by the media. I argued that the reading of the documentation videos I produced for this project cannot be separated from the complex social and cultural contexts of ‘knowing’ the artist through for example the documentary on Abramović’s MoMA performance. In the next chapter I pick up the issues around documentation of live art and ask, how can the videos consumed by a non-live audience contribute to the ‘becoming’ of the live artists?

3 DOCUMENTING AND THE DOCUMENT

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| Documentary and documentation..... | |
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| Dispersal and collection | |

In this chapter I will investigate my own practical processes: I outline some of my visual methods and compare and contrast them to other documentation examples of Live Art. I then examine the document's function for the artists and their audiences.

My role as author is dual. On the one hand as collaborator I am advocating the artists' interest and I facilitate their representation of themselves as they see it. On the other hand in the role of filmmaker/researcher I form a critical opinion on what I see. This is what Schneider and Wright call the interplay of "distance and intimacy" found in both artistic and anthropological practices (Schneider and Wright 2006: 16). Intimacy, they state, is the currency of fieldwork, but equally important is taking up a position between the audience and the artists' world. As an author of 'a record of the live' I think critically about how to mediate what I see. I introduce my subjectivity unconsciously but also actively participate in shaping this representation independently from the artist's own assumptions around mediatisation.

There is an emotional currency involved in capturing the great effort of the performances. Indeed it is sometimes daunting to assume responsibility for the visual negotiation between the artists and the virtual audience of viewers who were not present at the live event and have no other framework for perceiving the artist's work. The collaborative element is therefore important to my practice process. As sociologist Les Back eloquently states, "Part of what I want to argue is that the lens is not always about the control and fixing of subjects. To see photography as merely a governing technology misses the instability and complexity of the drama that unfolds on either side of the lens... It is a mistake, I think, to see the lens as only looking one way" (Back 2007: 104). These artists look back at the camera and exercise a degree of agency during the documentation

process and later over the representation of the resulting videos. The videos therefore reflect the two-way interaction between the artists and me, the performance and the camera, the body and technology.

Key here is to 'read' my documentation in particular and my project in general "as a form of knowledge not aesthetics", as artist Bill Viola states in relation to his video work. He further states his videos are "not problems to be solved but, rather, areas to be inhabited, to be encountered through Being" (quoted in Schneider and Wright 2006: 16). I follow here Schneider and Wright's advocacy for research to experiment with new ways of transmitting knowledge that are not 'flattened' into text. They state, "Through the abstraction of writing, objects and the 'world out there' are reduced in dimension and can be dominated in a different way. Our argument is directed against this literally *flat* thinking in the presentation of anthropological research" (Schneider and Wright 2006: 13). I will argue that a narrative approach applied to observational filmmaking can create a productive tension between the desire to embody the experience of others and the desire to maintain some form of research rigour. My documentation in this way yields material that allows the reader to tackle embodied meaning through engaging with the visual narrative itself.

Documentary and documentation

Artists have used video to document their work since the 1960s and '70s with the emergence of new technologies. More recently the reflection on the fleeting character of performance has itself become an area of intellectual and artistic practice and much has been written about the preservation and documentation of Live Art (Heathfield 2003, Keidan 2004, Newman 2008, and Schneider 2001).¹⁵ This discourse often focuses on an assumed binary opposition between live and mediated forms. It displays an anxiety about the death of the 'live' and problematizes documentation as an inaccurate representation of liveness (Jones

¹⁵ The Live Art Development Agency website provides a comprehensive bibliography: <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/publications/index.html>
They also have a list of publications specifically on documenting live art: http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/pdf_docs/documentation_resource_list.pdf

1998, Heathfield 2003, and Reason 2003). For example Adrian Heathfield summarises a concern for the cultural value of “the ephemerality of performance, its tendency towards disappearance” by positioning it in opposition to “all the forces that seek to place, name and contain it” (Heathfield 2003: 12). Peggy Phelan epitomises this view by outlining the unique *nature of being* of performance:

“Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity here, becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 1996: 146).

While the debate about the (in)difference of live and mediatized performance cannot be dismissed, for my practice it cannot be polarized into two opposing and mutually exclusive position either (where one states liveness cannot be effectively translated into another medium and the other that everything is mediated and liveness is not a unique quality). As we shall see, through a narrative approach my analysis moves away from binary concerns of live/digital towards a focus on the document’s role in the artists’ self-construction. My project thus explores two aspects of the documentation of liveness. The first aspect is to consider my documentation as a representation of the live performance’s visual narrative and examine it for the artists’ construction of their life and role as an artist. The second is to examine the filmic experience of the documentation itself, and its value in making meaning of the artists and their work as an extension of their live art activity. Here the question is partly if the sensory quality of film can represent the affect of performance and add to our understanding of the live work, but mostly, as I shall outline later, I propose that the artists’ websites hosting their documentation is a *continuation* of their live art practice.

My videos provide a way of ‘knowing’ as anthropologist David MacDougall (1998: 63) describes in his work, by creating a place of feeling and affect, not only rationalisation, in relation to the live performance and as cinematic products in themselves. Geoffrey Glass (2006) also gives convincing examples of affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication that are prevalent in everyday

contemporary life, especially within entertainment such as television, film, and video games, that I do not have space to list, but which Glass argues are virtual places of affective knowing. Auslander further suggests we can enjoy the documentation of live events, such as performer Chris Burden allowing himself to be shot, without knowing about the 'real' performance because "these pleasures are available from the documentation" (Auslander 2006: 9).

I agree that when looking for artistic meaning in the recorded performance art work the user must first query the relationship between the art and the documentation, and decide how far the collection method distorted the work it represents. However, I am not looking to my videos as a means to preserve the original live artwork, but instead consider them as a means to further the artists' ability to function as an artist. The videos placed online enable the artists to establish a relationship with the viewers that allow a sense-making to take place in a virtual environment. I therefore follow Auslander's (2006) suggestion of cutting out the debate of the document's relationship to the original to instead link the authenticity of the performance document to its relationship with the viewer. I summarise this shift as:

From: Original $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Documentation

To: Documentation $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ Audience

In the following section - rather than debate if my videos are in fact adequate documents of the performances - I will look at documentation, and its relation to the documentary form, as mediating "new insights into the ways in which people imaginatively and materially shape their lives" (Ravetz 2005: 78).

The debates about the validity of video documentation in live art are similar to long-standing debates within documentary theory – concerning the role of camera, editing, and filmmaker/subject relations in mediating the real as opposed to a more naïve view of the form as providing a 'mirror' of reality. According to Michael Renov, documentary is, like anthropology, another word for "institutionalised techniques designed for the representation of others" (2004: 225). Though I

elected an observational non-intrusive mode of filming I am none the less aware of the “who speaks to whom about what?” (Nichols 1993) that is inherent in any attempt to represent others meaningfully. I will therefore look at some other documentary examples to create a historic context for my practice and my own experiences of subjectivity.

Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) is generally regarded as the first documentary because his narrative imagination goes further than a simple record of the Eskimo’s life, exposing the blurred boundaries between fiction and documentary. In contrast Major Reis’s *Através do Brasil* (1912-1917) is, according to filmmaker Joao Moreira Salles, more admired by anthropologists than by documentarians because his images just “follow one another without any internal necessity” (Salles 2009: 228). The documentation of live art also becomes different things by different authors; sometimes a film experience in itself, sometimes merely an important record, and this is how I propose to look at documentation here. The following outline of my own practice methods will explain the kind of filmic experience my documentation aims to produce.

My practice is centred on a post-modern viewpoint in which documentary form can no longer be seen as an observation of ‘what is’ and a reproduction of ‘the truth’ but is instead a representation from a specific viewpoint which cannot be reduced to a simple ‘objective/subjective’ binary (Bruzzi 2006). In other words, the documentary form is not a direct record of reality but, as film, it is always a *constructed* telling of what took place. Many contemporary documentaries display the inevitable presence of the filmmaker as a demonstration “of the inherent performativity of the non-fiction film” (Bruzzi 2006: 198). Stella Bruzzi states, “What has occurred within the last decade (and performative documentaries are at the forefront of this) is a shift towards more self-consciously ‘arty’ and expressive modes of documentary filmmaking” (Bruzzi 2006: 197). My practice goes against this trend of overt author-performer documentaries. My approach suggests that the artists’ performativity itself points to the constructed nature of the document. By leaving the performance to the artist I make my authorship explicit, not through

personal appearance or commentary, but instead by formulating an observational visual style that makes use of several cinematic qualities that I will now describe.

First to clarify, my documentation cannot be labelled in terms of what Bruzzi (2006) calls 'performative documentary' because I do not act as a performative author. However my documentation practice is very much concerned with performativity: by returning to more observational methods I focus on the performativity of the subject (the artist) before the lens. Additionally I consider my own *process* of documenting a performative act, where the act of looking through the lens is a performative activity. I will describe in the next section how my project in this way demands of the reader to *perform* focused and imaginative viewing/reading in the way I performed such viewing at the live event.

HBO's documentary *The Artist is Present* (2012) is a good example of a documentary that employs a mix of video material and makes little distinction between the documentation of the live performance and other documentary methods, such as interviews with the artist. Even though the title of the HBO film is the same as that of the retrospective exhibition at the MoMA (*The Artist is Present*), the film contains very little actual documentation of the live performance in the museum. Abramović's performance is not depicted through the repetitive performance of the artist sitting in a chair, but rather through the drama of the audience queuing outside the museum and fighting to obtain the privilege of sitting in the artist's presence. We see a few selected moments of the artist's sitting (the act that actually constitutes the performance) but mainly the tearful emotive encounters that place the emphasis less on the artist's work and more on the audience's response to it.¹⁶

The *documentation* of the actual live performance within the documentary is framed and sustained by the narrative around it – the voice over, titles and interviews with the artist. They all authenticate the performance documents; the

¹⁶ The tears of audience and artist gained much publicity, in official news, cultural channels such as the museum website, and on social networking sites. On Flickr a private 'fan' made a photo version called *Crying with the Artist*, featuring 18 photos of tearful sitters, two of them Abramović herself. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/danadanica/galleries/72157624097111536/>

image and the text sustain each other's narrative. To offer documentation without this kind of framing, as I do, presents a different challenge. One of my strategies to address this I already mentioned in the last chapter, that is to pay particular attention to the opening title and the end of the performance document in order to contextualise the live moment within the video.

Auslander points out that mediatisation is now an integral part of our cultural productions, including the production of the 'live'. His claim that "the live event itself is shaped to the demands of mediatisation" (1999: 158) largely revolves around the media aspects *within* the live, the ubiquitous presence of the camera. For example, in a HBO behind-the-scenes production shot we see the filmmaker Matthew Akers sitting across the performer with his camera (figure 2). This photo illustrates the blurring between the live and the mediated performance. As we never see the camera in the film we cannot be sure how the images have been constructed: the 'return gaze' we see in the documentary might not be documentation of the live performance at all but might be (at least partially) constructed specifically for the camera.



Figure 2 Abramovic and Akers *The Artist is Present* 2012

In contrast to HBO's opaque construction process, the artist Gina Pane deliberately included the photographer in her live performances (Auslander 2006: 3). The photographer often blocked the view of the audience so they were aware of the mediated outcome of the performance even while it was happening. In my documentation of Clarke's performance *KKK* we can see this mediating process

taking place, as people outside the car can see the people inside the car take photos of Clarke through the windows. Filming Gresham from the front row of the Soho Theatre also fulfilled this mediatizing view for the persons sitting behind me but here I did not take on a deliberate performative role and only inadvertently became part of the live experience.

Film critic A.O. Scott is not shy to pick up that *The Artist is Present* documentary constructs more than a representation of the live event: "Like many other recent documentaries about artists, it is more celebratory than analytical, a kind of slick, extended promotional video for its subject".¹⁷ This interpretation of the documentary (and implied artist's self-promotion) illustrates how the unique transformative capacities of embodied performance "may be quickly recuperated within the restless economies of objectification, representation and consumption that characterise the West" (Heathfield 2004: 12). This implies Abramović's performance is read in line with other cultural products, for example a Lady Gaga pop concert, rather than as a subversive experiment that lies at the heart of Live Art. *The Artist is Present* exhibition never existed independently from mass consumption. In this sense, documentation material generated around the performance cannot be seen as fully separate from or binary to 'the live' nor as outside of the economy of the art market. Mediatization has become part and parcel of the construction of the artist. Mediatization can shift the artist's identification from 'looking in' on society (from the critical position of the margins) to becoming integrated into the cultural economy. I believe this is not the aim of the artist but a by-product of the mediatization process.

Seeing through the lens

I found the constrictions on documenting a live event are numerous, starting with physical challenges such as where to place the camera (for example complying

¹⁷ Quote from film critic A.O. Scott's article in the New York Times with the long title, *Artist's Fearless Aura, in Film, Chair or Tub. 'Marina Abramovic the Artist Is Present,' a Documentary on Her Life*. New York Times 12/June/2012.

with some institution's health and safety rules), how to deal with low lighting, unpredictable sound or running out of battery because there is no electricity source. In the case of time-based performances (that take place over many hours or even days) the vast amount of digital footage generated is difficult to shoot, store and edit. Mathew Reason (2003) is concerned about the document producing an all too neatly summarized version of the performance but I found the practicalities of live recording generally prohibit this.¹⁸

Documenting is not as simple as switching on a camera and letting it roll for the duration of the performance. People often don't realise how demanding documentation is – I have spent hours in a galley with an artist concentrating on capturing their work. It is worth mentioning here that MoMA photographer Marco Anelli spent the exact same amount of time sitting in the gallery to document the performance as the artist Abramović herself: the photographer was also present.

Observing through the lens is a strenuous way of seeing. It involves a selection process that actively and metaphorically focuses on the main action.

Ethnographers Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker invoke the dual meaning of 'to focus' and its relation to photographic/cinematographic practice to draw attention to a specific way of working observationally with the camera (2006: 138). The camera, they argue, is a tool that does two kinds of focus: you focus literally (the act of the eye trying to see something sharply and distinctly) and you focus in a figurative sense (directing one's attention to something particular and relevant). They state, "This interplay between literal and figurative focusing is characteristic of all documentary work and necessarily has an impact on the dynamics of [visual] research" (Lydall and Strecker 2006: 139). This makes documenting a 'live' undertaking, a unique and unrepeatable act of focus. My live 'performance' of filming is both a conscious selection process of images unfolding in front of the lens and an intuitive movement of eyes and hands. Metaphorically it is a creative dance with the buttons of the technological instrument where both my emotional responses and rational objectives guide the viewfinder.

¹⁸ An example of how difficult it is to document a performance is Chris Burden's video document of *Shot* (1971). The artist frames the (lack of) visuals narratively within the video document itself. To watch his video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE5u3ThYyl4>

Documentation is a process of translation (from live into digital) but also one of transformation. My practice records the event but then makes something else out of it. Poet John James, who writes poems inspired by performances, calls his work a “repetition which takes the form of an *echo* that repeats differently.”¹⁹ Video documentation is also like an echo: it does not exactly reproduce what happened first time. James further talks about “a stuttering”. A stutter disrupts the flow of expression by involuntary repetitions, prolongations of sounds and involuntary silent pauses. This is a useful way to think of live art documentation. The ‘jump cut’ is a related cinematic technique I use for the introduction of an unnatural hesitation, a stutter, applied for example in *Filth Queen*. This kind of cut abruptly communicates the passing of time as opposed to the more seamless dissolve used in most films, and is utilized for example by Jean-Luc Godard in *Breathless* (1960). A jump cut makes the viewer aware of the medium, conscious of the illusion of watching a representation, not reality. An echo or a stutter make visible the transformation process of the video medium and acknowledge the constructive activity that has taken place.

In the documentation of *KKK* we hear Clarke’s quavering voice sing *Dream Lover*, a sound fluctuating by her movement around the car and various distances to my camera.²⁰ The *KKK* video could be edited to a clean sound track of the original song but for me such ‘smoothing out’ produces an unrepresentative version of the ‘liveness’ and of the artist’s performative presence. Instead my video clip demonstrates a deliberate method of not cleaning up the documentation. During Gresham’s live outdoor performance of *Goddess To Go* on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral²¹ the camera and microphone’s presence became part of the performance. The live audience was aware of the mediatization process happening, not only in terms of Gresham’s performance but also of the spectacle of Occupy London. The video clip preserves the presence of media (the microphone in view)

¹⁹ John James in conversation at the ICA London, May 2012:

www.thewhitereview.org/features/existere-documenting-performance-art/

²⁰ The *KKK* video clip can be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS-9T3lljus&list=TLlzUPLRyRWel>

²¹ The video clip of *Goddess to Go* is on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dM15WLptaw&list=TLnLJa9VCM9q0>

and *the media* (the press). Gresham's video clip thus additionally comments on the performativity of a large political event.

My approach reflects filmmaker Stan Brakage's methodology, based on his view that 'amateur' is more true as a documentary method than 'professional' and his advocacy to 'de-professionalise' methods; to deliberately refute the 'truth' claim of documentary by avoiding filming techniques that make it 'look' more 'real'. According to Brakage, to be more amateur is to be more equal to the subject and this is in keeping with the 'shared authority' of my collaborative approach. In life writing and oral history similar dilemmas exist in relation to 'cleaning up' transcripts or for example in finding ways for the written text to closely convey the speech pattern of the subject. I believe my kind of documentary method is suitable for collaborations that are keen to produce material that shows the *process* of speaking/performing with all its inherent limitations.

In my documentation of *KKK* and *Filth Queen* I attempt to capture "the tension between the realness of the documentary situation and its artificialisation by the camera" (Bruzzi 2006: 191). I frame these two video clips with the entrance and exit of the artist and the presence of the audience, audible and visible within the documentation. This situates Clarke's performances in 'real' live situations. The videos are filmed in an observational mode but are edited in a heightened cinematic style, for example through close-ups and slow motion. I am however conscious of the concern that a photographic-based document can be 'too photogenic' (Heathfield 2004) and thus I aim to strike a balance in image-quality and manipulation. The image has to be clear enough for what it portrays to be recognisable and readable, but not photogenic in the sense it becomes a work of art in itself. In this research project I did not want the gaze to linger on the surface of the image and be distracted from the content, namely the live artist's actions, but tried to find ways that let the performers' performance continue on film.

My method contrasts starkly with that of photographer Manuel Vason. Vason's photographic sessions with artists are collaborative performances for the lens, resulting in a 'pose' that expresses the essence of the performer's live work.

His photographs and videos are “either restaged anew or developed specifically for his camera” (Johnson 2007). Vason uses this visual technique to document physically far away from the actual live performance, whereas I document the public event itself. His method is equally collaborative to mine but it produces very different visual materials. Vason is praised as an artist himself for his depictions of other artists while I do not foreground my role as artist in this project. As the effort and difficulty of capturing a live event is often lost in the outcome, especially when compared to more spectacular photographic artwork such as Manuel Vason’s, this project seeks to revive the ‘art’ of observational-style documentation of life performances.²²

In his video *Panorama* (2011) Vason asked artists at the Venice Biennale to select a still frame of their show and hold this pose while he panned his camera 360 degrees around it to show every perspective of it. With this technique Vason addresses the often-expressed concern of ‘fixing’ a live work by recording it from a particular angle. I would argue the single camera angle that I apply in some of my documentation reconstructs the single viewpoint of the seated live audience. The fixed frame fulfils several functions: it registers the “imposition of a form onto reality” and does so by determining “the limits of the visible and the knowable” (Russell 1999: 158). In the video we can only see and know what the camera saw and the fixed frame visually transposes its limited viewpoint into the videotext. According to Catherine Russell, a fixed frame “points to the subject of perception, and also to the four sides of the frame, beyond which is the continuity of the real as defined by the discontinuity of the frame” (Russell 1999: 158). The fixed frame also echoes the computer screen through which we connect to the live work in another time and place, and thus becomes a kind of stage for a virtual re-performance.

In Clarke’s *KKK*, where the audience could take up different viewpoints by walking around the car or choosing inside/outside, I did indeed inhabit those multiple positions with my camera. A circular edit also reflects the artist’s movement

²² There are creative entry points where my training as artist adds value to the collaboration: as I often do not have control over the live filming situation, it is usually the editing that foregrounds the artistic contribution I make to the representation of the live performance.

around the car. In contrast, the *Last Trick (2)* was recorded from a seated audience position, and the edit's single point of view emphasises the still pose of the performer on stage.²³

In my project I found that a very visual performance such as *KKK* makes the transition into a mediated form with greater ease. Relying on the power of the image and not the entirety of a story, the performance of the body-artist is already inherently more cinematic. In my practice I found the enduring body can be cut more easily into digital pieces and be presented *as* representation whereas a verbal narration cut up often loses meaning altogether: body-based performance maintains its integrity in the image of itself. I conclude from this that documentation succeeds best when the translation into the digital medium is *about* representation of the performative body and not the reproduction of a performance narrative.

Peggy Phelan (1996) considers the performance body in pain as a 'sharing', where the performer projects their pain onto the spectator and makes them the site of suffering. Phelan calls this, "the recognition of the plenitude of one's physical freedom in contrast to the confinement and pain of the performer's displayed body" (Phelan 1996: 162). The event is a test of endurance for spectators as well as for the artist. Each person has to decide when to leave, whether to stay through the boredom and the pain of standing for hours.²⁴ Placing real physical pain within an aesthetic framework challenges the spectator's ethical relation to the spectacle. Endurance performance addresses a larger question revolving around how can we understand present configurations of suffering, especially in a post-modern (post-9/11) context? What is the cultural work that performances of physical pain do? It is through 'sharing' the pain of the artist and through being placed in a voyeuristic position (Phelan calls her spectator role 'cannibalistic') that we are provoked to ask such questions of ourselves. It is this inner ethical dispute and its unfolding

²³ I describe the performances' details in chapters five and six.

²⁴ Theatre historian Marla Carlson describes this inner dialogue during Abramović's seven-hour long re-performance *The Lips of Thomas* at the Guggenheim Museum in November 2005 (part of *Seven Easy Pieces*). Carlson describes feeling guilty taking a break in the museum café and felt she 'owes it' to the artist to stay and endure with her. <http://www.hotreview.org/articles/marinaabram.htm>

over slowed-down time that infuses the enduring performance with its unique Live Art constitution and that is particularly hard to capture in a short edited video.

In contrast the lens can capture clearly very visual and cinematic qualities of some body-based performances, such as Liz Clarke's for example. As filmic documents, the video clips I made of her performances are very *watchable*, offering an exciting cinematic experience. They are also more *readable* than for example edited documentation clips of Xanthe Gresham's monologues. That is because Gresham's monologist performance is powerful in its entire narrative journey, one that cannot be interrupted easily without disturbing its meaning. These findings might not surprise a life writing researcher, who encounters a similar problem trying to re-present very long oral history transcripts or correspondences which just don't work well in excerpt but are wonderful altogether. The process of editing, of cutting the performance into a short clip, robs spoken text its narrative continuity. This abbreviated re-presentation also fails to transmit the *live* constitution of performative speaking: it is not easy to portray visually the concentration of prolonged speaking and listening. In other words I found it is easier to transmit on video the labour required of sharing the artist's physical pain, than the labour required of listening to long spoken narratives.

Endurance art invokes the dynamics of pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion, love and hate. This is the very essence of cinema. The drama of pain fits the filmic medium well, both in its rich visual focus and the dramatic arch of change over time – for example during her four-hour long performance *St Judy* (2010) Liz Clarke's body transformed:

"The audience had followed me for several hours very systematic, and the body was getting more vulnerable as it was getting more messy and I was tired and cold and wobbly... and I was physically shivering and a lot of time nearly losing my balance... [then] the needles came out and I was bloody" (Clarke 2010).

The deterioration of the body can be dramatically observed and summarised in a before-and-after contrast. Before performing *Last Trick (2)* (2011) Clarke drank a shot of alcohol to thin her blood so she would bleed more. She did this to authenticate the 'realness' of her broken skin and to heighten the visuality of the

performance. As American poet and literary critic Susan Steward points out, “We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable” (quoted in Pustianaz 2008). One could say that the blood and pain of endurance body art is a more reportable event compared to a monologue that on the surface lacks newsworthy quality.

Artist Leslie Hill feels that, “For the more visceral aspects of live art, technology will always be hard pressed to eliminate the adage, ‘You really had to be there’” (Hill 1998: 46). In Clarke’s case I argue the opposite, namely that visceral aspects translate well into digital video and are well reflected through the technology’s inherent sensory capacity. Video technology offers many interesting options not to recreate but to translate performance. The construction of ‘liveness’ in video can be supported through cinematic techniques such as the close up, slow motion, creative editing, and inclusion of other visual or oral references. For example the documentation clip of *The Last Trick (2)* shows close-ups of the needles being pulled out of the skin.²⁵ This describes the action in more detail but more than that it provide *a feeling* of what is happening to the body. Video when encountered online can thus be experienced as “closer in spirit” to liveness than text or photography.

In the performance space the spectator sees and experiences differently to the camera lens. Our multiple senses make connections on many levels unreachable by the lens. However camera technology provides artificial methods, such as the close-up, that allow us to perceive anew. In relation to this Walter Benjamin coined the notion of ‘optical unconscious’ in order to suggest “the new realm of experience made accessible by photography in a similar way as psychoanalysis constituted an access to the psychic unconscious” (Elo 2007).²⁶ Benjamin believed that “equipped with the camera, the eye sees more virtually than it can read actually” (Elo 2007). Zooming in on specific details is a *performative* application of the camera’s integrity that allows us to see differently. It raises interesting

²⁵ This can be seen this in the video clip on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ie9ShJqV88&list=TLXpJKVG8rw-Y>

²⁶ This article is online http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_15/article_01.shtml

questions on visual literacy. From live to document there is a loss, but also something new is injected: the cinematic.

In critique to documentation Phelan argues the person *feels* more in the shared performance space-time than the camera 'instrument' can (Phelan 1998: 10). But the camera is operated by a person who witnesses the live, and thus infuses the apparatus with their subjectivity. It is true that, unlike the live performance, watching documentation allows a comfortable distancing to the performer and act; we can fast forward, rewind or skip a video clip at our leisure. However, the *act* of documenting, that is, my live presence at the performance, engages with real issues of presence bound by shared space-time. This results in different people documenting events so differently. It has also meant for me that some days I do a better job at capturing the liveness than on other occasions. The site also impacts this process. For example when I had to negotiate the busy outdoor space at St. Pauls that Gresham shared with the Occupy London movement, my camera 'body'²⁷ had to 'dance' between the performer and audience in order to document *Goddess to Go*.

The end result of this performative act of filming, the video clip, cannot fully reflect the experiential process I went through, and is only really the visual surface of an investigative process. However I tried to show that the nature of the cinematic together with the performance of the filmmaker's dual 'focus' (including a filmic focus on the performance's sensory constitution) can convey (some) visceral aspects of the performance. This way the documentation re-presents the performance and the artist 'at work' as a virtual experience.

Dispersal and collection

The creation of live performances is only a small part of the artists' on-going self-construction. After the performance the artists generally facilitate the consumption of their performances through the dispersion of documentary

²⁷ This phrase is used by performer La Ribot. In her handheld video work she considers the body as camera operator (corps opérateur). <http://www.laribot.com/spip.php?article131>

material. They place the documentation of their work into a complex public framework that involves websites, archives, grant applications and many other sites of contact that enable the artists to authenticate their creative work. This allows the transience of performance to morph into the more permanent economy of documentation. Smith and Watson insightfully ask, “What kind of autobiographical subjects are produced and verified in a culture that commodifies self-authentication?” (1996: 7). In this section I will discuss what happens to the performance text after it took place live and what that means in terms of the artists’ self-authentication.

The term ‘site-specific’ contrasts with the ‘placelessness’ of the digital or online environment. The notion of place is an important one in live art and its specificity is often hard to capture in any form of documentation. The fact that the internet disperses the specific site of the artists’ work across vast channels such as YouTube, means that contextualizing information is often lost on the exact time and place we are seeing.

But the Internet is not necessarily placeless. It is still a specific site of contact with the artwork. Indeed we talk about a *website* – with a specific web address, one that can host a community of users interacting in specific sited ways. Francesca Froy states, “Large numbers of newsgroups have formed around people’s differences of interest to encourage people to explore diverse aspects of themselves and form multiple temporary coalitions” (Froy 2003: 142). The artists’ websites are specific sites of contact that enable two-way communication between audience and artist. This is where the artists iteratively authenticate and contextualise their work. For Hill, performance found on a website generates site-specific understanding about the art and artist (Hill 1998: 46). Hill concludes that the online environment is an “at least as contextually complex and inherently circumscribed by cultural and critical referents” (Hill 1998:43) a location as a live venue. I am raising these points here to break down the binaries between live and mediated. The act of understanding the artist might be less dependent on cohabiting a live site with the live art, and more about unravelling narratives around the other sites where we cite or encounter the artist.

This takes us to the notion of the 're-context' - how art is used and displayed *after* it is made. As Tamboukou points out:

“The interpretation should therefore be particularly attentive to the processes of recontextualization: what happens to the work of art when it is placed in a different context of analysis and understanding and how this recontextualization can create new levels of meaning that are trans-disciplinary” (Tamboukou 2010: 55).

Documenting a live performance re-contextualizes 'liveness' in various different forms and sites: online and offline, as words and images, as re-enactments and as re-appropriations. This transferal from a live medium into a mediatized version generates a separate text in a separate time and place. This creates a *shifting* context of the artwork and the various ways in which we encounter it. The moment the performance moves from one medium to another, one site to another, it enters another set of historical, social and cultural meanings.

One example to illustrate what I mean here is the visual contrast between my *Baba Yaga* clip and Gresham's own version. Her website clip uses my video footage but was not edited by me. In choosing different segments and with sparkling inter-titles her clip looks more like a commercial 'trailer'. This demonstrates the fluid nature of video and how visual material can be used for multiple and shifting purposes. In this example Gresham constructs visual narratives according to how she requires to represent her self: her sparkly online version emphasises her traditional story-telling roots, while her application to the Arts Council that used my edit emphasised her creative individual performance style.²⁸ Documentation can in this way become a form of re-staging the performance according to a particular projected autobiographical representation.

As I mentioned earlier, my documentation does not function to displace or replace the live but to play with new possibilities; to produce a new artefact; to create a filmic (performative) space. Benjamin (1999) calls this *translation*. A translation

²⁸ To see Gresham's online *Baba Yaga* version for comparison to mine, visit her website or view it on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=6xSRii6RiRk

process is at work in any filming, from the 'real' to the cinematic, from personal witnessing to a digital compression of the event. Video technology causes a reduction of the event, but this distillation of the performance also provides a representational essence of the artist and her work. Within a short three minutes we get a pretty good idea of the particular style of work and the 'kind of artist' we are looking at. In my research I found that this identity distillation, symbolically captured in a short video clip, is key to the consistent self-representation of the artists. This can be seen in how the artists' websites constitute the sum of the artists' numerous representative parts, such as their biography, artworks and writings.

Smith and Watson state, "Sites establish expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told and will be intelligible to others" (2001: 56). They point out the link between narrative, location and content. An example might be how we read Natasha Davis' auto/biographical representation of belonging on her own website as opposed to her biography in the legal setting of taking British citizenship. The artists' creative selection and control over their virtual representation reveal (make visible) aspects about the construction of themselves as 'an artist'. In this sense I perceive my documentation as being re-appropriated by the artists to function as self-portraits. The artists turn the documentation into visual texts that trace their performance history and thus shape a narrative around their creative labour.



Figure 3 NBC News: Public response to the new Pope

In our present cultural framework there is a compulsion to document the moment, to capture something fleeting and possess evidence of it (figure 3). The artefacts created around a live performance fulfil a consumer role and authenticate two-fold: for the artist it authenticates their work, for the spectator it authenticates their presence. Whether Lady Gaga or the new Pope, a sea of hands stretches towards the performer, each hand holding a phone to record the event. The act of preservation allows us to participate in the owning, selling, sharing and collecting of live events, including more recently also of art.²⁹ For example I counted four people on Facebook posting photos of Clarke's performance *KKK*. The audience's role is then one of participation: participation in the production of as well as the consumption of art. My research seems to confirm that the virtual space is a transactional space between performer and audience. The autobiographical subject 'the artist' not only self-authenticates but is also verified through participation by others. This post-performance consumption and (re)distribution is still precarious, sometimes a threat to the artists' ownership of their creative material, sometimes a blessing of free publicity that brings new performance opportunities or at least increases the artist's public profile.

This process de-constructs the idea of *uniqueness* around performance and its binary to the reproducibility of documentation. Auslander argues that live performance "could now be said to partake of the ontology that Benjamin ascribes to photography: 'From a photographic negative... one can make any number of prints; to ask for an 'authentic' print makes no sense'" (Benjamin quoted in Auslander 1999: 50).³⁰ Each individual lived moment is of course unique and unrepeatable. However not all performances are one-off events and many artists re-perform their work. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) for example was re-performed by the artist in 2003. All three artists I collaborate with perform at least some of their pieces multiple times. Liz Clarke's *KKK* (2012) was first performed (and video documented by me) at the Cube in Bristol, then re-performed by the artist for

²⁹ Most major museums now permit *photography* for private, non-commercial use. See this article for details: <http://www.artnews.com/2013/05/13/photography-in-art-museums/>.

³⁰ I expand this point later with Schechner's argument that there is no 'original' and 'copy' in performance (see p. 101).

Arnolfini Gallery (2012) and a year later commissioned for IBT13.³¹ Similarly Natasha Davis lists eight re-performances of *Suspended* on her website. In her interview she tells me:

“Rapture has shown maybe in five or six places. I still feel that is a relatively fresh piece, and because they are a trilogy, they're sort of interconnected, I would like to show them probably for at least, I would say, for another year or two, and maybe forever, I don't know” (Davis 2010).

Xanthe Gresham's *Aphrodite and the Real Red Shoes* (2005) was performed at multiple venues over a span of five years, though it is worth mentioning here that this is one performance the artist no longer wishes to re-stage. Gresham feels her own life has moved autobiographically away from the content of the performance, and she no longer feels comfortable performing the heightened sexuality of *Aphrodite*.

As a documentarian, I find performance's singularity in relation to its repetition very interesting. In performance there is often a fine line between what is one work and another and “to find this line for performance art there must be negotiation between performance art's ability to be restaged and each performance's singularity” (Mazella and Watkins 2011: 29). Re-staging makes it clear that, contrary to frequent perceptions and historic representations, performance art is usually not a spontaneous unrepeatable act but is in fact the repetition of an artist 'at work'. This de-stabilises the art history discourse that places Live Art in opposition to theatre, where live art's uniqueness contrasts with theatre's repeated role-playing. It also highlights the 'work' involved in this form of art. This way it allows us to perceive the labour of the artist taking place behind its performed manifestation.³²

As we have seen, the relationship between live art and documentation has often been fraught and contested, yet it is also creative and constantly shifting. Not surprisingly there is much discussion about the archiving of it all. This is a two-sided debate: on the one hand there is resistance to creating archival materials

³¹ In Between Time Performance Festival 2013.

³² Seeing a performance as 'work' draws closer comparison to making a sculpture for example.

that are considered inadequate at representing the live or might supplant it; on the other is the fear of losing much cultural heritage by the lack of live art archiving activity and systematic collection. In the latter, the document becomes relevant beyond the artists' own needs and enters broader implications related to heritage and cultural transmission. Pustianaz states that the archive raises "crucial questions when it comes to the legacy and survival of time-based, site-specific forms of art and creativity" (Pustianaz 2008: 2). Indeed who and what gets chosen to be archived? Are emerging artists side-lined because of cultural assumptions around archiving live art? The growing documentation in the study room at the Live Art Development Agency is a reassuring testimony to archival activities of contemporary performance practice taking place and represents a pressing desire by the agency to remember for current and future audiences. The Museum of Modern Art in New York put such archival considerations into practice when it carefully documented every visitor sitting in the chair across from Abramović. This meticulous documentation captures not only the artist but also the audience's performance: 1,566 portraits of every sitter find representation in the official online MoMA archive.³³

On the other hand, Laura Molloy's study at University of Glasgow, *Digital Preservation Europe* (DPE), expresses concerns that artists are not taking "the necessary activities required to adequately preserve their work" (Molloy 2012).³⁴ Though Molloy might be right that not all live artists document their work (effectively) I venture to say the problem is not so much that artists do not document, but that those documents are not systematically collected in one place. There are several online archives such as The Live Art Archive,³⁵ which struggled to find a new home after funding cuts. But none of these archives have a

³³ You can find this portrait collection on flickr:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/themuseumofmodernart/sets/72157623741486824/with/4478825111/>.

³⁴ Laura Molloy PhD research: <http://tapra.org/news-calls/working-groups/documenting-performance-working-group-2/2012-conference-abstracts-and-biographies-documenting-performance/>

³⁵ The Live Art Archive is held at the University of Bristol

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatreollection>. Also the Routledge Performance Archive is held at Birkbeck University: <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/lib/elib/databases/arts/routledge-performance-archive>

submission process that would allow for the uploading and housing of emerging live art. The artists I interviewed were not aware of a national live art archive for them and seemed to feel too 'emerging' to submit their work to any 'official' archive they might have heard of. Although my thesis is helping to highlight their work as making an important contribution, a future project is needed to examine how emerging women artists could be included in wider forms of cultural transmission.³⁶

In this chapter I outlined my documentation techniques in relation to recording live art and other documentary forms. In the following chapter I will show that documentation for the artists is not a holding on to the past as much as a means to shape the future: it is a present-day tool for them to present themselves as a working live artist and enter a wider cultural discourse around live work.

³⁶ A starting point was made by *Sounding Performance*, a web site and archive for an AHRC funded workshop series called 'Towards an Oral History of Performance and Live Art in the British Isles', which took place in 2007 and intended to bring together practitioners, scholars and archivists to develop methods and approaches for an oral history project in the field.

4 LIFE/LIVE NARRATIVES

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| Auto/biography and the self-portrait | |
| Life as lived, experienced and told..... | |
| Virtual performativity | |

In the previous chapters I set out the two key areas of context for my research -the (live) artist and my documentation practice. In this chapter I examine the discourse on auto/biography and ideas of the self-portrait in relation to how the artists talk about themselves and appear in their performances. The videotexts provide a lens through which I examine links between 'live' narratives and life, and see if they illustrate that "autobiographical performance brings to the fore the 'self' as a performed role, rather than an essentialised or naturalised identity" (Heddon 2008: 39). This is in line with the postmodern position that identity is multiple and fragmented (Smith and Watson 1996, Tamboukou 2010): by problematizing identity construction my practice and writing follows traces of the artists without building a sense of a fixed 'whole'.

My argument is based on a theoretical understanding of the inseparability of self and narrative. Judith Hamera states, "Narrative is a fundamental means of imposing order on otherwise random and disconnected events and experiences. Since narratives are embedded within discourse and give shape to experience, storytelling and the self are closely linked" (Hamera 2011: 335). Smith and Watson (1996) have argued that creative practices are always informed by who we are, as subjects modified in time and space. Heddon summarises the now largely accepted idea that the self is implicated in all epistemological endeavours, by stating "we have nothing but ourselves from which to work and about which to speak" (Heddon 2008: 7). I therefore propose to view performance art as a form of visual story telling, and the video documentation of it as a further narrative layer. I view the artists' websites as collection points for their stories about their life and work. I consider what these online visual narratives by/about the artists mean to both the artists and the audience/viewer. By theorising a link between 'life' and its performed representation (live, on video, online) I do not assume an easy or

transparent relationship between a lived life and its portrayal. Having indicated in the previous chapter that performance is always a form of citation (Schechner 1995) I am however pointing towards the unstable nature of fictional/real in performance art as a means to understanding the artist better in a wider social context.

As I suggested before, the documentation of live performance requires the performance of focused viewing by any reader looking for evidence of the auto/biographical constructions by the artists. Donna Schwartz states, “In making the case for making pictures I am suggesting that pictures can offer us ideas and an irreducible experience that cannot be restated or translated into linguistic terms. They can generate novel ideas and inference” (Schwartz quoted in Prosser 2011: 481). I thus again encourage the reader to watch and experience the performance-documentation online (or on DVD) and infer their narrative meanings in cross-reference to my written observations here.

Auto/biography and self-portrait

There are several reasons why I approached the three artists’ work in terms of auto/biography. The first is that in our interviews the artists each state that their work is somehow linked to autobiography:

“Whilst a lot of [my work] is based on autobiographical material it also has a fantastical dimension. There is material there about health and care and something terrible happening to the body. There is material about my lack of identity and not belonging to a particular country” (Davis 2010).

“I don’t think you ever get away from that [autobiography]. The last piece I made was a lot more abstracted but it still had these autobiographical starting points” (Clarke 2010).

“My work is metaphorically very autobiographical. I might choose a story that is not actually true though the essence might be true. The story will make you simplify things or play. The essence of it is true but the literal facts might not be. Also if you are fitting autobiography around stories to a title and an aim, then you’re selecting, you’re manipulating your life story to fit in what the audience wants to hear, how your conclusion is going to go. All performance storytelling, good storytelling, is autobiographical” (Gresham 2010).

The three artists emphasise that during the creative processes of making art they implicitly draw on their own life experiences. Furthermore, for two of the artists, Xanthe Gresham and Natasha Davis, fragments of their life experience are also explicitly incorporated into their performances. For example Davis in her performance talks about becoming a British citizen and Gresham re-enacts the scattering of her father's ashes. The interviews also revealed that the artists perceive little separation between their private and public self. They express their own sense of being an embodied autobiographical self that performs:

"The artist Natasha is not, if at all is barely, any different from producer Natasha or ex-Arts Council, or ex-British Council Natasha, or Natasha in the Middle East or Natasha in Greece, so no... definitely there is no persona" (Davis 2010).

"I do have different identities and with the different names it's all a bit crazy. But with all the roles I always think I am me and can't really get away from it" (Clarke 2010).

"We all have different identities, but [even when] in the Iranian stories I dress up, the actual energy is always the same" (Gresham 2010).

We can see here that the artists make no clear distinction between who they are when performing or when taking on other roles. However performing the role of being an artist requires access to individual experiences as part of the creative process. These life experiences shape the artists' visual vocabulary and gestures. Claire MacDonald states, "This reference to the real life persona of the artist is central to performance art... She may take on a role, but it is her own, mediated by her own presence and actions" (MacDonald 1995: 189). This supports the idea that even abstract and non-linear performance narratives, such as in Clarke's piercings for example, are not without autobiographical traces. The choices each artist makes to construct her performance for a live audience (or a camera lens) are distinct derivatives of their individual subjectivities. We can see this in how differently they represent themselves live and online, and in how they explain the origins of their work in terms of very specific life-experiences.³⁷ For example Clarke states, *"There is a series of work over the last three years that use the same motives and metaphors and that has always been around issues to do with my*

³⁷ I give specific examples of this in chapters 5 and 6.

personal grief" (Clarke 2010). Or Gresham says, "*The first goddess show has been about personal grief... It has been therapy. They [the performances] have got me out of a bad time*" (Gresham 2010).

The connection between narrative and self has been amply theorized, but what is so relevant here is that performance seems to offer a visual experience of such theories. As Eakin points out, "Narrative here is not merely *about* the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self" (Eakin 1999: 101). Of course the self is much more than being an artist and neither performance nor video can summarise all of selfhood "given the multiple registers of selfhood" (Eakin 1999:101). But the performance is part of the artist's life experience. More than that, being an artist is part of her sense of self. For example Clarke states, "*I couldn't function without making art. I can't imagine anything else*" (2010). And Gresham states, "*The [performances] saved my life and I never looked back, have never really done anything else since*" (2010).

Besides an implicit autobiographical process there are also deliberate acts of identification build into Davis and Gresham's work particularly. Smith and Watson point out, "Autobiographical acts involve narrators in 'identifying' themselves to the reader. That is, writers make themselves known by acts of identification and, by implication, differentiation" (2001: 32). Gresham and Davis make themselves known to their audience by performing various unique episodes from their 'real' life experience and by authenticating them through visual 'evidence'. For example Davis screens a video document of her taking the oath to become a British citizen, and she fondles the hospital bag with the scribbled medical identification number that contains her cancerous uterus. Gresham projects images of her travels through Mexico and shows us family photos. Each performance then is a *visualised* narrative 'painted' with the artist's presence. One might say their performances are performative forms of self-portraiture.

The term *self-portrait* frequently comes up in relation to autobiography (Heddon 2008: 8). The 'objectively' portrayed body has in the course of art history, and under the influence of psychoanalysis and Freud, become a doubtful (if not

impossible) means of visualising the self (Nairne 2006). As art theorist Francis Borzello states,

“Self-portraits are not innocent transcriptions of what the artist sees in the mirror: they are self-dramatisations. Like autobiography, self-portraits attempt to tell a coherent story - rarely THE truth, but more intriguingly, a truth that suits the author” (Borzello 2001b original emphasis).³⁸

I will use this definition of the subjective self-portrait to examine the collaborating live artists and their work. The performances of the three artists make visible “an artistic process of self-inspection and self-reflection” (Watson 2002: 352). Their subjective experiences are embodied during performance, like a transformative commentary on lived life. Turning this commentary into a ‘moving’ image they become sitter and painter simultaneously. This is problematic especially for women artists. They face what art historian Whitney Chadwick calls “the difficulty and paradox of being both active creative subject – a maker of meaning – and passive object – a site of meaning” (2001: 14), which Chadwick claims can only be resolved through performing the self. We can see this in *Filth Queen* (2010) for example, when Clarke addresses the paradox of female subject/object by performing her gender.³⁹ She consciously highlights a female construct (Beauty Queen) through costume and make-up, music and sexualised gestures. This portrayal departs from the incidental and the private Clarke in order to produce the portrait of an essentialized beauty (queen). Clarke does not reproduce her autobiographical self as a ‘truthful’ representation but as an idealised image, as a “*transformation of the self*” (Gadamer quoted in Tamboukou 2010: 56).

It is useful to combine the above ideas with Michael Beaujour’s compelling argument for self-portraiture as a separate genre from autobiography. He states, “The absence of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography” (Beaujour 1991:2). He sees autobiography and memoir as a chronological narrative that presents a sequential logic of events. In contrast he sees the self-portrait as works that are not chrono-logical, but that are arranged

³⁸ To read the complete paper: <http://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2001/mirror-mirror-self-portraits-by-women-artists/conference/paper-5>

³⁹ The video clip of *Filth Queen* can be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0hsQFkLDPA&list=TLT6Agv1QrXCw>

using a different logic to that of time, perhaps dialectical or thematical logic. The self-portrait is for him a montage, poetic, metaphorical and analogical, not a literal representation but “a text that is *not quite* an autobiography” (Beaujour 1991: 3 original emphasis).

This is a good description of the qualities of the three artists’ performances. I have argued the *process* of creating performance art is autobiographical. But the delivery is not bound to life’s chronology: it unfolds by an alternative inner creative logic. As we will see in the following chapters, the themes of belonging, motherhood, sexuality and mythology shape the three artists’ performative self-portraits according to each artist’s subjective interpretation of their own life. In the performances we often do not find a linear narrative thread, nor at times a verbal narrative at all. Good examples are Davis’ ritualistic movements or Clarke’s non-verbal body piercings and the use of music soundtracks to advance the narrative. Tamboukou, in reference to painter Gwen John’s self-portraits, points out that, “Self-portraiture is an *autographic* practice rather than an autobiographical one: an artistic intervention on the experience of the self, a response to the self, not a representation of it” (Tamboukou 2010: 19). Similarly, within the event of the performance an artistic intervention occurs. It occurs ‘inside’ the experience of the self and is simultaneously a response to the self. This marks the performance as an autograph, a signature of the self.

Psychologist Robyn Fivush’ (2011) notion of narrative coherence⁴⁰ is relevant here. She concludes that a mature autobiography is normally more than a collection of unrelated memories. Rather it is “a more or less coherent account of how individuals understand their own development and of how they have tried to lead a meaningful life” (Fivush 2011: 5). She points out that a lack of coherence manifests as *discoherence*, by which she means “a lack of organization or causal connections among disparate events in one’s life” but not necessarily as *incoherence*, defined as “fragmented and contradictory narratives of individual events” (Fivush 2011: 5). For example Gresham and Davis perform more or less disconnected autobiographical episodes that are sequentially non-linear and

⁴⁰ Based on Habermas and Block’s (2000) definition of narrative coherence.

abstract. The audience cannot always see any causal connection between the various sequences. How do we make sense of this as a whole? I believe we start by reading their performative telling not as incoherent but instead as *discoherent*.

It seems to me that the particularly fragmented aspects of my project's performance art reflect the lack of linearity conveyed in the artists' lives. There were dramatic shifts in the live history of the three artists, from teacher, producer or social worker to performing artist; from traumatic/religious/sheltered childhood to mother/childless/infertile adult; from observer of art to creator of art; from outsider to belonging to the art world. Freeman (1993) similarly found with his group of New York artists that their role did not fit into traditional social patterns of singular geographical locations and vocational roles across lifetimes, which caused a constant struggle of *becoming* (an artist). Freeman concluded that without traditional linear progression, the life history of artists formulates around the myths and struggles of becoming/being an artist (Freeman 1993: 305-306). I believe the performances of the three artists reflect this struggle in various ways.

The three artists' *live* narratives (their performances) do not organise themselves into a coherent series of events, or smooth out contradictions of ideas, forms, images and storylines. Instead, as part of the performance process, the artists ask the *audience* to make sense of the ruptured autobiographical moments and the non-linear performative structure (Glass 2006). At the live performance, with the narrative unified in the body and the voice of the artist, the audience experiences a *personification* of the abstract performative episodes. Considering the above ideas I believe the *discoherence* experienced during the performance creates a framework for understanding the artist's identity as complex, multiple and fragmented: it places the interpretative emphasis on the puzzle of life itself. In other words I believe that in order to understand live art the audience weaves together the artist's performance and life into a meaningful order.

To build on this it is useful to consider Roland Barthes' idea that real life is experienced as 'scrambled messages' (communications brouillées)(quoted in

Andrews 2010: 151). I see the raw and non-linear nature of performance art as a parallel expression to 'real' life experiences. For example Gresham says:

"I don't approach things in a linear way. So it comes across a bit mad, a bit performance arty. Not that performance art is mad; but it often looks a bit unconventional. So by chance I've come into that [performance] world, not because I try to but because I come across that way" (Gresham 2010).

Barthes argues that art differs from life because we tend to structure our experiences into narrative form and "lend to them a coherence and unity which raw life does not contain" (Andrews 2010: 152). I will argue below that the ontology of performance art on some levels mirrors the unfinished nature of life and thus provides a narrative link between life and live art.

Life as lived, experienced and told

Anthropologist Edward M. Bruner (1984) makes the useful distinction between a *life as lived*, a *life as experienced*, and a *life as told*. I am going to apply this concept as a means to understanding performance art better. Bruner defines a life as told as "a narrative or several narratives influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context" (quoted in Moen 2009: 302). What we read in an autobiography, what we witness during an interview or see in a performance could then be described as 'a life as told'. The life as told, as has been argued by Ken Plummer and Molly Andrews among others, is 'more or less' a fictional statement about the real life lived, and influenced by not only external factors and contexts but also by the internal instability of memory itself. Whether told to an oral historian, a video camera or an art-loving public audience, the life presented is always mediated by the cultural conventions and the context of telling.

Plummer states that autobiography shows "the ways in which a particular person constructs and makes sense of his or her life at a given moment" (Plummer 1983:105). One might say then that the life presented in the performance is a creative meaning-making act, not an accurate reflection, of a life *as lived*. We don't know what 'really' happened to Natasha Davis in Yugoslavia but we witness how

she re-views her past from the performative moment's perspective. Indeed, Victor Turner (1995) suggested that it is through performance situated in the body that we not only reveal meaning, but reveal ourselves to ourselves and others. Performance narrative is then (among many other things) for the artists a method of constructing sense of life.

Following on the idea that 'life as told' is indeed not the same as 'life as lived' I want to focus on Bruner's third category, *life as experienced*. Life as experienced seems to exist ontologically between lived and told. If 'a life as lived' is what actually happened then 'a life as experienced' consists of "the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is" (Moen 2009: 302). I want to suggest here that traces of *experienced* life can be found within live art.

The audience experiences live performance largely through visceral expressions of images, feelings, thoughts, and meanings known to the performer, the person whose life is birthing the performance, and felt by the audience as sensory resonance (Phelan 1996). The performance displays the artist's "artistic experiments with seeing, knowing and representing the self" (Tamboukou 2010: 57). For example Clarke's performance of physical pain evoke feelings and images that allow the audience to experience, rather than to be told through specific linear stories, the artist's *feelings of pain and loss*. They understand the artist's experience in a way that cannot be put into words but can only be sensed, because some experiences⁴¹ are unspeakable. 'Life as experienced' cannot be *told* but perhaps it can be performed.

In her interview Clarke explains what her performance rituals signify and reveals the very personal motivation for her endurance work:

"I am interested in the needles and their relationship to the body. The needles come from the medicalized procedures that my sister went through ... who I lost three years ago. And so I began making that work, I mean I guess it is a cathartic process. Yeah, I think that's where the more extreme, definitely the

⁴¹ Molly Andrews (2010) for example has argued that trauma is an experience that is unspeakable.

breaking of the skin and the piercing, became extremely relevant. Because I was looking at certain parallels and certain medical procedures that linked herself and myself” (Clarke 2010).

This indicates that for Clarke the body is the site of autobiographical knowledge (Smith and Watson 2001). As a live artist she develops body-based strategies to instigate some form of emotional release. Clarke’s live body piercing is not only a public art performance but also an enactment of a personal nature. These abstract gestures perform the real and symbolic pain of some personal disclosure.⁴² Her performative imagery *feels* like an interior message she is willing to share but not willing (or able) to spell out. Schechner (1985) coins this performative situation ‘as if’: the performer acts as if she were someone else, in this case a performer on stage, but in doing so performs the ‘not me’ and the ‘not not me’ simultaneously. When Clarke’s skin is broken with needles the body becomes “a textual surface upon which [her] life is inscribed” (Smith and Watson 2001: 37), her personal life on her performative body. Sharing the pain compels the audience to consider deeper scars; that the bleeding body expresses a life experience that cannot be named but is deeply felt and physically carved into the body.

In contrast Xanthe Gresham’s body does not reveal the invisible burden of being childless, though every narrative she constructs is inscribed by this experience. We don’t see the marks left by Natasha Davis’ cancer or her migration *on her body*. But instead the artist constructs a creative organisation of her autobiographical memory into a particular visual unfolding of her narrative. Meaningful episodes in her life - the migration, the cancer, and the change of her national identity from Bosnian to British citizen - seem to become metaphors for political tragedy and larger illnesses. The artist states,

“Maybe not many people will see ‘oh this person has cancer and this is their uterus’, but they will understand that something terrible happened to the body and that’s how it relates to something terrible happened to the country” (Davis 2010).

⁴² Her gestures include acts such as lacing up her actual skin like a Victorian corset, with metal hooks fastened into the skin.

Davis makes a case for universalising her personal history but I do not think the strength of her work lies in addressing larger political or historical events, such as the break up of former Yugoslavia. Her performances can indeed inform us of a particular Serbo-Croatian experience, since Eakin (2001: 295) reminds us that autobiographical memory is always socially and culturally constructed. But Davis does more than engage in a sanctioned form of telling. Her non-linear gestures and movement mixed with autobiographical references express her 'life as experienced', in images and feelings. Because much of her trauma is unspeakable she has found a performative way to make meaning of her life's events.

I have tried to argue here that the non-linear, scrambled, and dis-coherent narratives of how we experienced our life, which cannot be adequately turned into words, might find resonance in performance art. This is because, as Jerome Bruner argues, "a life as led is inseparable from a life as told – or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner 2004: 31). Taking these ideas into account allows for a reading of performance art as a constructed narrative used by the artists as a vehicle to express 'a life as experienced'.

Virtual performativity

I want to expand the above ideas around live art to the documentation material I created, and ask if they can also reveal aspects of the artists' 'life as experienced'. Is there a relation between the documentation of live art and the idea of self-portraiture? How does the digital medium of video documentation shape autobiographical live experiences in an online/virtual environment? Can new communication technologies such as the Internet provide an *extension* of the body's operational field rather than constitute an escape from the body? I will argue that the documentation of my practice acts as a digital surface for the performed body, and an electronic site of knowledge of the person who performed. Hence, using the documentation material as 'paint and canvas', the artists are able to construct another kind of 'self-portrait' online.

Documentation is a ‘becoming’ towards other activities, not just an end in itself. One of such activities is documentation becoming an online video clip. We can see a website as a collection of artefacts, providing secondary source material for ‘knowing’ the live event. The website’s primary function is then to be a place where the artists can host the ‘ghost’ of their past performances. The website’s secondary function is to be there for the audience, which I will discuss further on.

In light of the ideas I have already developed, I see the artists’ use of online space one of constructing mediated versions of their self as an artist. Froy points out, “Understanding our relationship to the internet as an extension of our bodily agency, rather than a disembodiment, is useful here. Our bodies can still be seen to provide a point of continuity over time without necessarily providing any fixity or containment of identity of self” (Froy 2003: 143). The artists construct virtual identities that continue their performative selves: through video clips on YouTube, photographs on their personal website, posts on Facebook and Twitter they extend their bodily agency as live artists. These channels all archive and shape their past and present life and work. Through visual digital reproductions they *perform* themselves online. Liz Clarke explains it in our interview:

“To be able to say that [I am an artist] has meant I have been able to promote my work, to push it and to be publically out there as an artist. And things like a web presence, which never really mattered but now it obviously does. To fashion how the world sees me and to put myself out there as that thing, that’s been really powerful for me” (Clarke 2010).

Within a virtual environment Clarke feels empowered to fashion herself into ‘that thing’: the artist.



Figure 4 Homepages of Davis, Gresham and Clarke 2013

Froy points to the internet’s role in reducing the boundary between ourselves and other people: “One of the ways in which it is doing this is by blurring our notions of

the private and the public" (Froy 2003: 144). For example on Facebook we can find pictures of Liz Clarke's son, who is not part of her construct as artist but authenticates Clarke as a person outside of her role as artist. This establishes a parallel narrative to her public artist self. The artists are even able to create multiple narrative framings depending on how they want to be perceived. This brings with it its own problematic. Clarke is aware of this tension:

"So even on the website, how do I present myself? On the one hand I do this really extreme work, on the other I am doing a project with homeless boys for the Arnolfini [Gallery]. Am I allowed? Does that sit... you know people who are going to employ me to do one thing, how do you present yourself when you do both? Where does it sit personally as well?" (Clarke 2010).

Clarke acknowledges the challenge of consolidating her various autobiographical 'selves' into one singular online representation. She feels she cannot be defined as a single homogenous entity. Smith and Watson state, "We are a postmodern society in which the disappearance of an unproblematic belief in the idea of true selves is everywhere compensated for and camouflaged by the multiplication of recitations of autobiographical stories" (Smith and Watson 1996: 7). The documentation of the live artist's work is part of an authentication process. It strikes me that the multiplication of the artists' representation actually reflects the artists' astute awareness of the complexity around their autobiographical recitations. Clarke further states:

"I think my work straddles quite a lot of areas and I think that's something I really enjoy and like to play with but makes it hard to quantify. Some of my work you may describe as neo-burlesque, some is body-based practice, some is durational ... it fits in the margins of performance art, cabaret and theatre. [...] And I do think some people struggle with compartmentalising the work. Oh it's burlesque; oh it's this. I hate that on one level because some people refuse to program my work, but I love it on the other because that is what it is about for me" (Clarke 2010).

We get a sense here of several outside factors influencing the artist's creative processes. And there are many forces impacting and regulating the artist's narrative: government bodies, arts funding, educational institutions, and intimate spaces of family and church. They all understand the artist differently, require different representations of the artist for their needs, and end up carrying different biographical narrations about the artist. As Smith and Watson point out,

recitations of personal narratives are “embedded in specific organisational settings and in the midst of specific institutional routines or operations” (Smith and Watson 1996: 10). They refer here to companies keeping bits of our information in files, keeping fragments of our personal narratives and then dispersing our autobiographical information “across a heterogeneous field of institutional locations” (Smith and Watson 1996: 10). Smith and Watson term this ‘the profile’: our medical history, work history, credit history, educational history - all establishing individual profiles of our lives. These profiles form various versions of our story/ies and are thus, according to Smith and Watson, instrumental sites in shaping selfhood. Medical records shape the narrative around our health; bank records evidence our spending habits; documents of labour (such as the C.V.) chronicle our life at work; and, to further their argument, the documentation of performances makes meaning of the artist’s claim to being an artist and chronicles her history of art labour.

To contextualise these ideas further it is useful to draw on Bakhtin (1981) and his belief that even within a single perspective there are always multiple voices and perspectives. The language we use has already been ‘borrowed’ from others (Robinson 2011). This multiplicity and ‘borrowing’ describes the digital communication structure of the Internet (Landow 1994). In a virtual environment various versions of ourselves are repeated and interrelated. This can feed positively into the artists’ discourse, as I mentioned before, in an increased exposure of the artist. But videos can also be ‘borrowed’ and reframed without the artist’s agency. Gresham experienced this misrepresentation when one of her performance-stories was sold without her consent over the internet. She said,

“I found out that they are everywhere on the internet, people are selling them for nothing, there is a horrible picture of me, it is basically (pause) theft. Of intellectual property... [Performances] are like physical things that have been crafted in a very practical way so it is like someone has stolen them” (Gresham 2010).

The “hurt” Gresham felt from this was not due to a financial loss but a loss of ownership and lack of control over her self-representation. It also indicates a tendency towards public personas ‘belonging’ to the public. Artist Ursula Martinez

experienced this when one of her videos went ‘viral’ and was being shared without her consent. In response she produced a performance, *My Stories, Your Emails*,⁴³ that speaks to the notion of authorship in a digital environment. Martinez entered into an email correspondence with the perpetrators and solicited images from them, which she then publicised in her performance. This is a good example of ‘talking back’ as a strategy that creatively exposes assumptions of private and public that the live artist faces.

These examples illustrate that through digital media the artists get to know about their work through its representation *by* others. Cultural anthropologist Jay Ruby states, “We are coming to know the world through symbolically *mediated* versions of it we make for each other” (Ruby 1980: 172 original emphasis). The artists’ own virtual positioning cannot be separated from the cultural multitude of voices they operate in, other sites that carry versions of the artist, for example cultural institutions, festivals or popular venues.⁴⁴ I am also contributing to the artists’ representation through my research activity. When I post a video of an artist on YouTube or Facebook, my friends click ‘share’ and they, along with their personal narrative framing around the clip, disperse yet another version of the live artist and her work. Such iterative narrative framing is especially interesting in the way it frequently develops anecdotes around the art/artist, which in turn shape the narrative around the live work.⁴⁵

Digital coverage of the artist’s work can in this way add weight to their *live* narration of self. The autobiographical presence that the artists embody in front of an audience has frequently been shaped by previous exposure and knowledge of their work and their status as an artist in a wider cultural context. The act of recognition we are talking about here takes place during the repeated performance as artist. Philip Auslander (1999) points out that cultural value increases through media attention, repeated viewing, and by transmedia coverage. Abramović is

⁴³ *My Stories, Your Emails* show was performed at Soho Theatre, London in March 2012.

⁴⁴ For example Davis has a student profile on the Warwick University site, an author page on the Unbound Publishing site (<http://thisisunbound.co.uk>) and is discussed on an artists collective blog (hatchnottingham.wordpress.com).

⁴⁵ Hayley Newman (2008) has theorized ‘anecdotes and myths’ around live art.

again a good example of an artist who is framed by extensive documentation of past performances, repeatedly reproduced in art, theatre and history books. Her past performances have become an integral part of her autobiographical construction on and off stage. Abramović has described herself as the 'Grandmother of Performance Art'⁴⁶ but this identity was not inborn: she can only claim it through a body of documentation and repeated acknowledgements of her perceived cultural value. The HBO documentary includes numerous references to the artist's impressive archival body of work. Such footage of the past constructs the artist's present cultural value, which is illustrated by people queuing all night to see her, by Lady Gaga mentioning her as inspiration, and by extensive press coverage of a normally more marginal art form.

In contrast, for emerging artists documentation and its distribution is often a challenging activity. That is perhaps a reason why for example Liz Clarke hesitated to call herself 'artist'. She says, *"Even saying [I am an artist] gives me a little shiver"* (Clarke 2010). Clarke experienced a bodily reaction to calling herself an artist, a term she has perhaps not yet fully embodied. We can sense the artist's desire to claim a place in a shared history of performance art. If we can draw conclusions from Abramović's example, then Clarke's *becoming* an artist is a matter of continued proliferation in virtual and live environments. The artists' representation in the archive, online or in an art institution, iterates the performances, enters the ephemeral moment into cultural memory, and as a historical record claims a place for the artist among other artists. Existing in the archive allows the artist to exist across time.

Discursive dynamic

I have tried to show that the digital products of live performance constitute the dispersal of the subject: the 'virtual' artist is not embodied in one (live) presence but dispersed in various narrative strands. She does not only exist at one venue but has many online presences. In online presentations the artists have to

⁴⁶ Listed as 'self-proclaimed' grandmother of performance art in countless online articles including Wikipedia, I have not tracked down the source where the artist has said this herself.

particularise their life without the physical fixed vantage point where the body delimitates the individual (Smith and Watson 1996). Perhaps that is why live performance is so important to the artists I collaborated with. Clarke states for example, “*My audience is much more than an audience and I ask them to make those kind of leaps... [They have] as much right and ownership to the work as they’ve been with it for three hour. It’s so valuable to me that they stayed*” (Clarke 2010). For this artist the ‘live’ is a coming back into the body, a co-authoring process taking place through a discursive dynamic with the audience.

The spectator’s act of watching forms part of the discursive dynamic of live art. Discursive identity is, according to linguistic scholar James Paul Gee (2000), an identity that acknowledges the body and is created by the body. He is talking about an identity that is not inborn or conferred but constituted by the body acting in front of witnesses. This form of identity, Gee says, does not have power on its own, but must be recognised (2000: 102).⁴⁷ This implies that the artist can only claim their identity *as* artist by being recognised as an artist by others. Peggy Phelan also states that in the act of self-representation there is always a need for a witness, whether this witness is real or imagined (Phelan 1996:5). According to her, the live viewer’s disruption of the performance, through the process of engaging with it, forms a necessary part of the performance.

This also holds true within digital environments. The online representation of the performance is a new coming together of artist and audience where, Joanna Bucknall (2012) states, “various fragments and traces can be negotiated, through an interactive platform, in order to generate a new performance that attempts to offer insights into the original performance event” (Bucknall 2012).⁴⁸ She further claims that encountering the remains of performance is an interactive and performative experience. In other words, a performative re-enactment of the

⁴⁷ Gee links this to Butler’s notion that gender is an identity that is constituted through performative repeated acts.

⁴⁸ Her full paper is online: <http://tapra.org/news-calls/working-groups/documenting-performance-working-group-2/2012-conference-abstracts-and-biographies-documenting-performance/>

performance takes place by online audiences where the experience of the website stands in place of the live event.

The shift from live to electronic communication networks brings with it altered notions of body, time and space. The online video of the performance allows us to peek at the artist from a distance without exposing our individual body to the artist's life. The online presence is accessed in the 'now' by our act of clicking on links. This way the videos create a temporal link to the artists' work. Hill (1998) has argued convincingly that being online is actually a 'live' situation. You need to be present to turn the pages; browsing the Internet is a performative activity. The artists' websites provide an interactive platform and establish a discursive dynamic between performer and 'virtual' viewer. Smith and Watson (2001) state that the seamless sense of linear cohesion associated with autobiographical texts is disrupted during the dispersal of its documentation. But on the artists' websites it is rebuilt into a new text. The moment someone accesses the artists' documentation they (re)construct the identity of the artist at work, projecting cohesion into the digital texts. Thus websites function as a site for the audience's recognition of the artist.

But in what ways can documentation 'verify' the authenticity and originality of the artists' labour? If the unrepeatable moment of the artist's embodied gesture represents the notion of 'the real' then the documentation of such live moments raises questions of 'virtual' authenticity and originality. The spectator has to 'decode'⁴⁹ the meaning embedded in the digital medium and thus plays a role in constructing meaning of the artists' work and autobiographical presence.⁵⁰ But the online dispersal of information also creates a fragmentation of the person. As Froy points out, "When we meet other users in cyberspace, we still meet individual characters, as people construct particular identities for themselves. However, we are no longer able to fit these characters easily to 'whole persons'" (Froy 2003:

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall (2001) describes a process in which the meaning intended by the creator is embedded in a medium and then decoded by the listener.

⁵⁰ This idea follows Barthes' and Foucault's poststructuralist linguistic theories, in which they reconsider the role of the author and acknowledge the role of the viewer in the construction of meaning.

142). The viewer cannot find the ‘truth’ about the artists’ whole life on their websites but they can see how the artists make connections with the world and with the discourse around being an artist. Viewing the artists’ websites is an act of finding out about “what stories do, not what they are or what they mean” (Tamboukou 2010b: 7). Tamboukou, within her DeleuzoGuattarian framework of analysis, argues that “the real is perceived as a coexistence of the actual and the virtual: what was, what is and what could have been create a continuum that opens up and radicalizes the future” (Tamboukou 2010b: 10). Reading online documentation in light of her argument illuminates the artist’s co-existence with the live audience, the virtual audience, and ultimately with the reader.

To understand how the discursive audience relationship can function, Jens Brockmeier suggests “subjunctivizing strategies” (2009: 228). He believes that to reach for an understanding of the work the audience at a performance must reach beyond the limit of their own life-story and apply the narrative imagination. Denis Donoghue explains the narrative imagination as “the capacity to imagine being different; to enter notionally and experimentally upon experiences we have not had, ways of life other than our own” (Donoghue quoted in Brockmeier 2009: 228). In order to make sense of live art and its dis-coherent narratives, the narrative imagination has to be called upon. The viewers of the documentation, as well as the reader here, need such subjunctivizing approaches in order to open up to “the hypothetical, the possible and the actual” (Brockmeier 2009: 228) of live art and make meaning of the artists’ otherwise often incomprehensible performances.

This imaginative process takes place at the live event and throughout the mediation process where the spectators engage their senses to hear, see and feel something. It is a constant reaching for the performer’s intentionality. The post-performance residue left inside the spectator is often a strong sensation connected to the feelings that the artist shared with them, opposed to knowledge of ‘what it was all about’. The virtual viewers similarly create their own image of the artist, by piecing together the dispersed fragments of information they find online and imagining their interconnections.

In this chapter I have argued that the autobiographical subject is not only in a discursive relationship with the media and audience but is also in constant dialogue with their own processes and archives of memory (Smith and Watson 1996). I looked at auto/biography and the idea of the self-portrait, and at how non-linear narrative structures in performance link to memory processes such as 'experienced' life. In the following two chapters I analyse and theorise the subject of the live artist in relation to recurring themes in their performances, such as the body, belonging, and ritual.

5 PERFORMING THE BODY

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Performing (un)dressed | |
| Performing femininity..... | |
| Performing motherhood..... | |

In the previous chapters I laid the theoretical groundwork for an examination of the artists and their work. In the next two chapters I will examine the performances in detail. Recurring performance themes can reveal aspects of the artists' creative strategies. Along with the artists' own explanations and descriptions I provide photos and links to video clips and invite the reader to re-imagine the performances. The fragmentary representations of the live performances found in verbal descriptions as well as in visual images together act as the artists' re-presentation of themselves 'at work' and will help us reach towards the artists' sense of self (as an artist).

Performance historian RoseLee Goldberg (2001) identifies two important strands of performance art: body-based and autobiographical performances. Liz Clarke takes up elements of the first, Xanthe Gresham exemplifies the second, and Natasha Davis produces a hybrid of both physical and autobiographical work. However the body is central in all forms of live art. I will point out some of the individual strategies these artists have developed in order to disrupt the reading of their body and autobiographical texts.

Across disciplines much has been written about the naked (female) body and in this chapter I will examine how the artists manage to "perceive nudity, not as a transcendence of textuality, but as a disruptive mode of textuality which compels the spectator to 'read' the body in some new way" (Toepfer 1996: 78). My focus will remain on the individual experiences and subjective impact of 'the body' on the artists who I documented and interviewed myself. The themes of dressed/undressed body, of performative femininity and of motherhood provide a framework for understanding how the artists position their embodied autobiographical experience within culture and society. I also wanted to look at how strategies of the body facilitate a belonging to the group *live artist*, which is an

identification all three artists are committed to and which is instrumental in shaping their sense of who they are.

Performing (un)dressed

Clothes worn or taken off during the live performance are part of the important decision of how the artist represents her body. Liz Rideal states, “The choice of clothing in portraiture – particularly self-portraiture – is crucial” (quoted in Tamboukou 2010: 66). Costume, masquerade and make-up employed during the performance express the visual aspects of femininity. For the live artist whose body is at the forefront of their (re)presentation of self, the decision of dressed/undressed is loaded with meaning.

Dressing up is part of the theatrics of performance, a masquerade as exemplified by Cindy Sherman’s photographic work, especially her *Untitled Film Stills* 1977-1980. For Sherman clothes are part of the meaning-making process. The artist conjures up a persona through her dressing up and references cultural artefacts such as representations of women in film. Clothes tell their own narratives and as such can be turned into items of symbolic signification. For example in *Filth Queen* Liz Clarke’s tiara is layered with signification of competitive beauty conventions. In *Suspended* Natasha Davis slips into her father’s military jacket to reference history and geography: without any words the jacket conjures up meanings such as war and loss.

The historical tradition of nudity in performance art perpetuates itself as an elemental focus on the body. As Clare Wallace notes, “The regularity with which ‘nudity’ features in solo performances seems no accident. The literal stripping of the performer may be seen as a means of exposing a ‘true’ self while simultaneously shocking or embarrassing the audience” (Wallace 2006: 6).

Performance scholar Karl Toepfer points to “a lingering effect of the ethnographic bias in much postmodern nude performance” which he claims still leads “to identify nudity with the recovery of ‘primitive’ being” (Toepfer 1996: 78). Being naked is an option to side step the inherent ‘civilisation’ of clothes where the bare

body is seen as a more 'neutral' canvas on which to perform, a 'bare' representation of self, or a 'blank' backdrop on which to hang meaning. But of course being nude is complicated with historic significance and the live artist must invent strategies that acknowledge or subvert such pre-existing readings of the body.

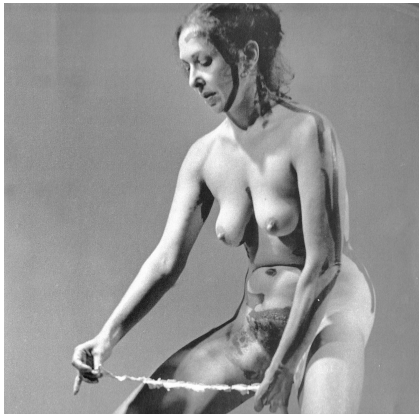


Figure 5 Carolee Schneemann *Interior Scroll* 1975

Historic traces are found in all visual art but none seem as determining as the 'look' of the body in performance. Just as nudity has a strong tradition in painting, nakedness is closely associated with the history of performance art. The performing body often transgresses cultural taboos around naked skin, which can be seen in contemporary dance and theatre performance as well as in Live Art. Historic images such as Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) (figure 5) continue to influence the work of present-day artists. Attention to clothes and nakedness is thus one way that allows us to look at how the artist has assimilated the history of her *art form* into her work. Knowledge of performance history embeds into the art-making process an awareness of "visual models to be emulated" (Jordanova quoted in Tamboukou 2010). With nakedness as an integral identifier of performance *as* Live Art, it is not surprising all three artists are at some point in their work naked, an act that enables them to belong to the group of live artists. This reading frames their body for themselves and for the audience and activates a specific critical interpretation of their live performance.

Clarke describes her own work as "body-based" and believes that being naked allows her to strip back to an authenticity that only comes with exposing a

vulnerability to the public. Clarke says, "*The naked body is just the naked body and I'm working with issues of vulnerability and stripping away and removal of layers*" (Clarke 2010). The metaphor of stripping away layers seems an appropriate visual representation of the complex construction of the self. However I do not believe there is a 'true' core to be found underneath clothes or skin; instead the artist exposes yet another layer of the multiple selves at work. In fact one could argue that being nude 'dresses' the artist in the genre of live art and thus activates specific reading of dis-coherent performance narratives.

Most interesting is what the visual narrative of Clarke's nude body 'does': what does it tell us about Clarke's "embodied experience of narratability" (Tamboukou 2010b: 10)? Lets look at how Clarke describes the dilemma of being dressed or undressed in a performance:

"Often, always, I go through the process 'oh god oh god do I have to be naked in this one? Please don't'. And then I speak to my colleague and we go through this checklist and we say, 'yeah you can't be anything else in this piece'" (Clarke 2010).

Xanthe Gresham describes a surprisingly similar quandary. In *Inanna Banana* (2009) she takes her clothes off during a monologue on the rebirth of the goddess Inanna. In her interview she explains how difficult that decision was:

"There is a strip there which I didn't want to do. I was meditating on the piece and thought, 'oh I think I need to take my clothes off'. 'Oh no I really don't want to'. Then I go back, 'no you really do need to here'. Because it's about a stripping and losing everything. And then you get re-dressed" (Gresham 2010).

It is interesting that in both cases an internal dialogue takes place that resolves in the 'need' to be naked. The naked body is the inevitable outcome of a debate on how to represent a particular moment in a performative narrative. The artists want to reveal both *a process* (stripping away), and a *state* (the vulnerable body). Clarke is acutely aware of the complexity around the naked body, and says, "*As a female it is really hard to do these things without the sexuality*" (Clarke 2010). She is not naked in all of her work (see *KKK* or *Filth Queen* below as examples of dressed performances) and she articulates in her interview that undressing or being

undressed is always linked to the “need” of a particular creative concept, not to a feminist manifesto or performance style. The artists’ “historical” awareness of the particular cultural context of their art form, according to Jordanova (2005: 45), enables them to make use of this structure to manifest a complex portrait of self in dialogue with their contemporaries. It is possible that Clarke’s belonging to the group of live artists directs her towards specific creative solutions of representations of her body.



Figure 6 Clarke *The Last Trick (2)* 2011.

Clarke’s piece *The Last Trick (2)* (2011) sees her ‘dressed’ in balloons, a nod to the burlesque tradition of temporarily covering the body with fans or balloons as part of the strip (figure 6).⁵¹ The cabaret tradition is evident in Clarke’s costuming in high heels and long velvet gloves and her gesturing tropes such as blowing kisses and wiggling her ass at the audience.

To the haunting sound track of *Tainted Love* (by Soft Cell) Clarke pops the balloons with a needle. We then realise the balloons are literally pinned into the artist’s skin. The deflated balloon-skins hang from needles in her flesh, until one by one she pulls them out and is left with only bloody markings (figure 7). This act of undressing unfolds as a very still pose. What might on first glance look like a cabaret act is soon subverted through the artist’s deliberate interventions. There is no sexual pleasure in watching this strip as the spectator is forced to acknowledge the painful process of becoming naked. Clarke’s bruised body covered in needle marks even resists a fetishized reading of the high heels and long gloves. This

⁵¹ The video clip of *The Last Trick (2)* can be seen on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ie9ShJqV88&list=TLXpJKVG8rw-Y>

performance activates the spectator's ethical relation to the spectacle as discussed earlier in chapter three.



Figure 7 Clarke *The Last Trick (2)* 2011

On closer examination of *The Last Trick (2)* Clarke's naked body is actually never completely undressed. In our interview I comment on the strange sadness when her hands rove over her naked body looking for remaining needles. Clarke responds, "*Yes but I am not naked. I am wearing my high heels, a helmet and gloves*" (Clarke 2010). I read her body as undressed at the end of the performance despite the fact she is still wearing shoes and gloves and her head is completely covered by a motorbike helmet: the feet, hands and head are not encoded with the same meaning as the rest of the body. In the documentation I zoom in on her eyes behind the visor, as I was struck by how clearly I could see her false lashes slowly blink: in concentration? In pain? These eyes looking out at the audience while pulling out needles from her skin challenge and mock the opening tease where we clapped delightedly at her blue balloon costume. This is a successful strategic intervention into the traditional strip and infuses the act with deeply shared affect.

Clarke's 'checklist' examines the performative process for when the vulnerable body must become visible in order to expose her personal grief. In *Glitter Hearts* (2010) for example Clarke removes little glitter hearts that have been pinned into the skin of her chest, and drops them and the needles into the mound of soil on which she kneels. Clarke illustrates the symbolism of the heart removed from the body by creating a pseudo-medical observational vantage point. Clarke gives an indication of the extent of her personal tragedy when she says in her interview, "*If they [my parents] saw the glitter heart piece, my mum would never recover from it*" (Clarke 2010). But even when the audience is not aware of the artist's specific

autobiographical background the message of grief is clearly inferred. This is a good illustration of the fluidity of sharing 'life as experienced', where the artist's experience then becomes the audience's, and neither one is able to fully fix the *sense* of it in words.

Xanthe Gresham's approach is very different and she has encountered controversy over being undressed. In *Inanna Banana* (2009) Gresham interweaves narratives of pseudo-scientific theory on femininity, presented in form of an academic lecture with herself as 'professor', with narratives of other 'characters' such as a crazy neighbour in Hackney whom she re-enacts dressed in bin-bags. Dressing as these 'characters' contextualises a multi-layered unfixed representation of her self. Just as Cindy Sherman's masqueraded photographs "may seem to surface more directly the *falseness* of the picture" (Jones 1998: 174), so Gresham's lo-tech costumes highlight the false construction of the goddess and the gap between myth and real life. To stay true to her live construction of a female entity Gresham might don knee-high red boots as in *Aphrodite* but she is also prepared to portray a frail exposed body.

In *Inanna Banana* there is a moment towards the end when Gresham sheds all her clothes to allow the myth of the goddess Inanna to inhabit her body and to 'become' the serpent herself. In her interview she explains why she undresses: "*I hadn't done it to be controversial, but because it occurred to me it was that that was the truthful thing to do. The honest thing. That it was required*" (Gresham 2010).



Figure 8 Gresham *Inanna Banana* 2009

Francis Borzello states, "As with autobiography, the truth that is told, the picture that is presented, is controlled by the artist" (Borzello 2001: 29). Yet exercising

this control is not easy for the artist who wants to represent herself not as one-dimensional *body*, adorned and made-up, but as ambiguous to who she is and represents. The naked body on display signifies a whole range of things to different individuals or groups. Even within a performance frame much of its interpretation is unpredictable and perhaps not intended by the performer.

Gresham reveals in her interview that the audience response to her nakedness in *Inanna Banana* was unexpectedly traumatic for her: *"People's responses were so varied. Most people were quite aggressive. And they didn't want to come near me after the performance. They were really shocked."* Her shock at the shocked reaction is an interesting indication of her stance towards being nude. More detailed feelings came out when she describes a friend's feedback:

"Funnily enough what was a slap in the face was that some women would say, they thought they were being nice, they would say 'nice figure'. And it was like so not about having a nice figure. And someone commented on the amount of pubic hair. And I was so shocked. My friend said, she came to take photos, 'to be honest I think it is distracting. People are so shocked they can't concentrate on the piece, they are thrown by it'. And to add to that, women are so concentrated on their physical shape they fixate on it and start to compare. And I said, 'Well I haven't had children'; and we got into areas that had nothing to do with the show" (Gresham 2010).

Gresham was most upset by other women's comments on her body. She felt they looked at her body not as a performative 'medium' expressing the goddess narrative but more as a commodity they could project their image of femininity onto, something to compare to their own bodies. McLean- Hopkins points out, "The body is read as a visual product whilst the narrative is interpreted as a textual/theatrical product" (2006: 204). Gresham's example illustrates that the reading of the body as a physical component of the performance can become separated from the narrative of the performance.

Gresham feels unease when the audience fails to see her body as a *symbol* for the feminine, the snake, the goddess, and instead sees the performer's flesh, the pubic hair. She states, *"The story is not about nudity, there is a small moment of vulnerability and I wanted people to comment on the Inanna myth and all the other stuff in the show"* (Gresham 2010). While the performance narrative provides

continuity between her autobiographical self, the goddesses and her performance of them, Gresham prefers the undressed body to be purely theatre and symbolic and 'not self'. Gresham sees her body as a *site* of the goddess story and part of the narrative and as such it is a 'place' that cannot be compared to other bodies. Some audience members misread her intent, left the mythical narrative and instead connected the autobiographical narrative to the narrating body.

Feminist body artist Hannah Wilke deliberately played on this dual function of her performing body. She enacts the 'model' posing her body like an advertisement. Toepfer states, "In the work of Hannah Wilke, the artist herself is the model with the aim of exposing culturally-encoded attitudes toward narcissism in relation to female desire for a 'beautiful' body" (Toepfer 1996: 82). Wilke deliberately took on the kind of criticism Gresham felt directed at herself, and she made it part of her creative intention to invoke the gaze. Wilke herself stated, "Exhibiting oneself is difficult for other people who don't feel good about their bodies. I could have been more humble – but if I'd been more humble, I wouldn't have been an artist" (Wilke 1985 cited in Jones 1998: 151). Wilke was not taken serious when she was young and displayed a 'nice body'. It was when she aged and was marked by cancer that her work took on deeper meaning for art critics, who were only retrospectively able to see Wilke's younger work as exploring gendered subjectivity *within* the frame of aesthetic judgement (Jones 1998).

Gresham finds herself defending her 'nice body' to her friend. She tells her she would rather have a "not nice body" and have had children, a regret that silences her friend's assessment with its pathos. I believe the aesthetics of a 'nice' female body is so difficult to circumvent that a great majority of woman live artists working with the body also work with pain and endurance.⁵² Mutilating or hurting the body damages the glossy veneer that 'beauty' seems to conjure. This we saw was Clarke's strategy, in becoming damaged and filthy. Beauty prevents access to any deeper meanings the artist might want to address with such a body. Gresham's positioning of her body as being marked childless is I believe an intuitive response

⁵² Contemporary well-known examples that come to mind are Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, Kira O'Reilly, di Kyrholm, Lucy Hutson, Elena Molinaro.

to a social construct around beauty and the female body. As an alternative strategy to performing external pain Gresham instead frames her body with a great internal pain.⁵³

Gresham's intention is to stage *Inanna Banana* with "the visuality of feminine self-identification" (Chadwick 2001: 12). She is dressed as a Professor of Feminist Mystique and undressed as the snake-goddess Inanna. With this strategy Gresham aims to avoid the fixing of her body as a passive object to instead conjure a shifting image of living artist and mythical goddess. She is aware this did not always work for her: *"Sometimes it looked better than others. Sometimes it looked vulnerable, I suppose pure and right; other times it looked tasteless and gross and sort of ashamed of itself"* (Gresham 2010).

Liz Clarke had a similar experience where the reading of one of her performances did not line up with her intent: *"I did one disastrous piece and it turned into exactly what I didn't want it to be. Oh it was awful. It felt the piece was too performance art for cabaret and too cabaret for performance art"* (Clarke 2010). Clearly the siting (venue and type of audience attending) influences the reading of the naked body. At an art venue the body is culturally positioned as more 'neutral', at least according to artist Natasha Davis. She states:

"I mainly show work in the context of performance, performing arts festival or Live Art festival, where you get certain kind of, usually sophisticated audience, who would have seen a lot of that type of work, who would know well how to read work" (Davis 2010).

The artist exempts 'sophisticated' art audiences from a culturally determined reading of the body, and suggests that an art audience *is* more *knowing* (how to read the body as art text). Davis thus feels more understood and 'safe' to express herself through a naked body. As I already suggested, within the context of an art venue, the artist presenting the body as naked delivers on a historic expectation of Live Art and enables in this way for the body to be framed as art, not sex object.

⁵³ I will discuss this more in the last section of this chapter, when I look at Gresham's recent performance that centres on motherhood.

The venue allows the artist to establish a belonging to this discourse, to being bodily recognised as an artist and to be exempt from other sexual readings.

This opens up possibilities of using the body not open to many other public contexts, and allows women artists to experiment with performative embodied strategies within a specific cultural framework. The performance artists, each in their individual way, call upon the tension between identification and otherness. They are makers of meaning whose stage is their own body, as well as critics who use the body as a means to examine its otherness. Dressed and undressed, both as a process (the undressing) and a state (being naked/clothed/costumed), are performative expressions the women artists I collaborated with draw on in order to create meaning for themselves.

Performing femininity

How can we glimpse “the identity that lies behind the social expectation that women represent themselves in public adorned, masked, and made-up” (Chadwick 2001: 12)? Liz Clarke uses a hyper-female personification to play on adorning, masking and ‘making-up’ public presentations of her self. Clarke constructs and subverts the female body in two performances I documented and made into video clips, *Filth Queen* (2011) and *Kustom Kunst Kommandos (KKK)* (2011).



Figure 9 Clarke *Filth Queen* 2011

Clarke described her show *Filth Queen* (2011) on her website:

“The female drag queen bathes in a bathtub of eggs, to a lavish soundtrack of music and text. This piece was first performed as an homage to the ‘Prince of Filth’ filmmaker John Waters but works as well in other contexts.

Suitably cleansed and covered in detritus, the performer takes to the mic and sings a torch song to her disgraceful lover. The piece is messy, decadent and disgusting. Influenced by the veneer and personas of drag queens the piece questions ideals and assumptions of femininity in a gently humorous way” (Clarke 2012).⁵⁴

Clarke describes herself as a “female drag queen”. A drag queen is generally defined as a man who dresses and usually acts like a caricature woman, often for the purpose of entertaining or performing. Michelle Meagher’s (2003) examples of ‘female female impersonators’ are *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (where a woman impersonates Marilyn Monroe in court) and *Spice World* (where each spice girl impersonates another spice girl). However the artist Liz Clarke, whose work is heavily influenced by queer aesthetics and culture, understands the term to describe a woman enacting a (male) drag queen. According to this idea a *female female impersonator* is a woman who enacts the exaggerated characteristics of drag, something also called a *faux queen*. The term *faux queen* is interesting in how it conveys male ‘ownership’ of the drag aesthetic and relegates falseness to women who want to act as a ‘queen’. Clarke purposefully and humorously challenges this concept.

Drag in queer discourse has been seen as a failure to become a woman. *Filth Queen* is subversive in portraying a woman performing a drag queen act and thus performing a (cultural) ‘failing’ at being a woman: Clarke the female female impersonator exposes how her own gendered identity is a ruse, a masquerade, but without denying her female body.



Figure 10 Clarke *Filth Queen* 2011

⁵⁴ See lizclarke.org/content/filth-queen. The video clip of it can also be seen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0hsQFkLDPA&list=TLT6Agv1QrXCw>

Judith Butler (1990, 1993) “reads drag as a performance which demonstrates that there is no fixed attributable gender – that *all* gender is imitative and performative. The thrill of drag is that it shows how any body – male or female – can *do* femininity” (Richardson 2010: 92). Clarke is *doing* femininity as a woman. Unlike male drag acts, in *Filth Queen* we do not sense a parody of women but rather of the ridiculousness of femininity. She performs an excessive femininity that even on her female body creates a rift between who she ‘really’ is and who is being represented - a mimicry of the ultra-female.

Feminist Michelle Meagher draws attention to “the moments between seeing and reading” where the drag performer challenges the ways in which we read bodies. Clarke *performs* her body; it both *is* and *does* female gender. Our perception of gender shifts amid this performance of simultaneous compliance and subversion. Meagher states, “In that moment, the spectator sees a glitch in the sex/gender system: Is it a man? Is it a woman? Is it a monster?” (Meagher 2003: 162). Our uneasiness at this ‘monstrosity’ is Clarke’s appropriation of the subversion of the cross-dresser. She takes from male drag culture a thick ‘unnatural’ theatricality for her own body. Clarke’s creation of this ‘glitch’ provides a brief insight into the ways we construct narratives of sex and gender and in effect makes Butler’s performativity visible (that is exposing the fluidity between sex, gender, the body, and cultural signifiers).

Liz Clarke (LC) talks about this topic in her interview with me (BD):

BD *Regarding femininity. What are your views on that: can a female performer ever get away from issues around femininity; or would you want to?*

LC *I am interested in the artifice of the female. In that hyper female. Which I guess, a lot of my influences are from gay male culture. My husband always remarks that he is married to a gay man [laugh]. So its artifice, the female aspects which have been heightened in that culture, which I love and then bring back to the female body [...] And this picture there [Filth Queen still, see figure 9] is a female body but a dragged female body. A female-to-female impersonator and layering it on.*

BD *What makes it drag? Is it the tiara?*

LC [...] As a female it is really hard to do these things without the sexuality. Especially in the live art scene, which is at present somewhat dominated by male performers. They can play with all that. When a woman plays with all that then hmmm. [...] for example] Tom (Marshman) does pole dancing, using camp in his performance, using an archetypal female sex worker as performance tool. He has a lot of liberty. He realises as a gay man he has a lot more flexibility and license than a female working with those things.

BD By what means can you subvert it? You personally. Is part of it the messiness?

LC It's the juxtaposition I think. In the durational piece I mentioned the female body is presented in a very pretty way and then becomes filthy. With the glitter and water and the earth. Still glitter being a glamorous signifier; but the body becomes more filthy and messed up.

In my documentation clip of *Filth Queen* I hone in on key gestures and expression and slow them down, for example the undoing and taking off her dressing gown, shaking her hair back, and batting her false eye lashes. These slowed down moments encourage closer scrutiny. They allow us to focus on specific details and become aware of their construction by the performer. Time slowed down on film creates time to ponder on the large gestures Clarke performs, to question her reclining pose in the bathtub, and to extract the 'meanings' of filth and of queen that are performed literally.

In *Filth Queen* Clarke takes a bath with 40 raw eggs and a can of beer. We watch with unease as she rubs raw egg all over her skin.⁵⁵ Like some perverse lotion, this act calls on the irony of contemporary 'beauty' products sold to women to make them more feminine or forever youthful – but here leaves her filthy. Eggs are connected to reproduction and fertility yet can be rather abject and repulsive. In a broken egg the inside has come outside, a horrific version of feminine fertility. Clarke explains the meaning of the eggs in a text to me: "*Transgression! Filth! Smashed Fertility!*" (Clarke 2012). Where Davis and Gresham display painful responses to fertility, Clarke in contrast luxuriates in eggs and their stickiness. The only mother amongst the three artists she produces images that mix the maternal and sexual in disturbing ways.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, in *Introduction the Goddesses* Gresham also rubs raw egg over her arms as part of a kitchen worship ritual to introduce Goddess Isis.

Clarke acts as modern commentator on gender and representations of the 'feminine' as a way to make sense of her self as an artist and a woman. Coupled with drinking beer and sucking on cigarettes this display of excess mixes feminine and masculine tropes. Her visually enacted process allows us to move away from the necessity to pin down the subject and instead perceive her work as a form of portraiture, an artistic creation where she transforms herself into an essentialised female version of herself, where we see her as her but "not not her" (Schechner 1985).

Laurie Anderson has described herself as a ventriloquist, a term that might provide a means to interpret what Liz Clarke does in *Filth Queen*. Ventriloquy, projecting the voice and producing it from somewhere other than one's mouth, takes on symbolic meaning when Clarke speaks of femininity through her body but detached as if it was 'the dummy'. Clarke is not creating a new or different gender but perhaps is able to use the practices of femininity, as Elisabeth Grosz suggests, "as modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes" (Grosz 1994: 144).



Figure 11 Clarke *KKK* 2011

Liz Clarke's *Kustom Kunst Kommandos* (*KKK*) (2011) performance also plays with the notion of performing femininity. Clarke described her show on her website:

"Kustom Kunst Kommandos' is a live homage to the Kenneth Anger short film 'Kustom Kar Kommandos'. A female take on the homo erotic short; this performance charts the chrome, the shine & the buff of a motoristic love affair. A short dreamlike piece; it explores questions of re-presentation and the cinematic framing of live performance, playing with conventions, expectations and portrayal of the hyper feminine. (Did I mention I become a

human carwash?) The audience are seated inside a parked car, with a second tier of viewers observing from the sidelines” (Clarke 2012).

A few months later she adds a quote wherein well-known performance artist Ron Athey endorses her work:

“Liz Clarke, equal parts Barracuda Femme and retro-glamour fetishist, often mines the archetypes of Lady Luck. Known for performances that include more than a little sparkle and death tripping, she's going for the driver's wheel in KKK. Mining the 1965 film of Kenneth Anger, the papa of experimental cinema and esoteric cinema. Babylon beckons through the rear view mirror.' Ron Athey.” (Clarke 2012)

Ron Athey's comment placed on Clarke's website acts less as a review of the performance than a construction of Clarke as an artist to be taken serious. This illustrates what I argued in earlier chapters, that the artist cannot exist in isolation of the art world but is constructed by, and constructs herself deliberately through, references to other art and artists.

Clarke devised this performance in reaction to our many discussions on performing for the camera. To incorporate into her work the cinematic framing of live art documentation she responds to Kenneth Anger's 1965 homoerotic film *Kustom Kar Kommando (KKK)*. It depicts a young man lovingly buffing a sporty car with those white fluffy pads. On YouTube there are several imitation videos re-enacting Anger's film: from an almost exact modern replica of the original film to a version where a bike instead of a car is fondly polished.

Like most of Anger's films *KKK* is set entirely to the soundtrack of a single song, in this case *Dream Lover* (by Bobby Daring 1959). Clarke's own *KKK* is a performative re-enactment of a cinematic performance, bringing a deliberate consciousness of the cinematic, of the camera, into the live. On Facebook I notice Liz asking to borrow a car for the night of the show. I am intrigued and ask her who she is going to be, the person doing the polishing or the car being polished? She responds she is going to be the white fluffy thing. Of course! Clarke decides to embody the white fluffy cleaning tool (her body simultaneously also the agent moving the tool) and

introduces a subtle sense of humour underlying the whole notion of enacting a 'human carwash'.

It is significant that Clarke chooses to be not the car, a passive object that gets fondled, but the active tool that fondles; the thing that moves, touches, caresses. She is aware of being located in her culturally specific body, and it is the role of the white fluffy thing that she hopes will enable her to enact the fetish with some form of agency (and ironic humour). As such we cannot see her (solely) as a passive female object.

Three levels of mediation take us from Anger's original film, Clarke's live performance and the documentation, to my edited clip. Each iteration is another intervention and interpretation. But, applying Schechner's argument, there is no hierarchy of original and copy, not one 'better' or truer than the other. Schechner insists that the argument for an original stems from considerations of literature but "not so with performances, where the closest one can get to the original is the 'most recent performance of...'" (Schechner 1985: 50). This implies each version of *KKK* is its own performance, including the video.⁵⁶

The short clip I edited is highly cinematic and follows Clarke's circular movement around the car. It shows both the view from the outside and from within the car. It highlights the framing of the car and its windows as a filming device. The performance is very much about the gaze. I mentioned before that audience members inside the car photographed the artist and mediated the live at the very moment of its creation. It is a looking at the performer and those looking at her, everyone framed through car windows, rear mirrors and viewfinders.

In the original Anger film repetition and iteration of movement is key. Clarke also performs a ritualistic pacing around the car. My documentation clip at times slows down the dream-like quality of Clarke's stroking movements across the car bonnet: the clip shows in close-up where the body of the performer meets the body of the

⁵⁶ See also Auslander's comparison of performance to photography, where no 'authentic' print exists (after Benjamin), as I discuss on p.62.

car. The almost trancelike worship of the car is juxtaposed with the longing of the song. Kenneth Anger loved men and men love their cars: the film depicts the displacement of desire, creates an analogy for the *other* desire alluded to. Liz Clarke, having displaced her role from passive subject to active object, opens the possibility that the narrative of her song to dream lover is not directed at the (male) gaze of the audience but that she might have *other* longings. She creates a glitch in our reading of what role the performer enacts and who she is actually performing for. During the performance and on the video the beauty of the image and the vulnerability of her unsteady voice singing along to the car stereo lends the performance a complex meditation on performativity of femininity and longing.

Clarke is parodying femininity, which references (Kenneth Anger's) homoerotic camp aesthetic - camp as a yearning for and parody of femininity. But she is also *parading* femininity. As she encircles the car Clarke continuously strikes *a pose*. Craig Owens develops the notion of the "rhetoric of the pose" in a 1984 article. Amelia Jones applied his theory to Hannah Wilke and I find its application relevant in examining Liz Clarke's performance.

Drawing on the work of Lacan, Owens provocatively suggests, "To strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilized – that is, *already a picture*" (quoted in Jones 1998: 154 original italics). As Jones points out, a feminist application of the deliberate pose is to read it as a strategy for re-appropriating one's own body as both object and subject of artistic practice. Owens states, "For Lacan, then, pose has a strategic value: mimicking the immobility induced by the gaze, reflecting its power back on itself, pose forces it to surrender. Confronted with a pose, the gaze itself is immobilized, brought to a standstill" (Owens quoted in Jones 1998: 154). The cinematic framing of live performance enables Clarke to pose as an object "*in order to be a subject*" (Owens 1985: 215 original italics). The documentation, by turning the live into a series of pictures (as is the nature of the moving image) re-enforces Clarke's deliberate staging of her body to be frozen one frame at a time into a sequence of poses.

Hannah Wilkes' strategy of the pose "makes nudity function as an 'ultimate' critique of the relation between the body and the gaze of the Other, for whom the body is a 'model' of his or her desire to see or be seen" (Toepfer 1996: 82). Like Wilke's exaggeratedly erotic 'feminine' poses Clarke presents herself already as a picture, ready to be captured by the numerous cameras present at the performance. Clarke especially creates a viewfinder perspective through the placement of the audience within the car. From this enclosed position, the performance outside the car windows unfolds like a film, with her body projected on the car. It is a method that allows Clarke to mediatise the very act of performing live: the visual narrative of this performance is both, cinematic and live. This strategy of self-representation "could be said both to succumb to the 'gaze' (reiterating the normative tropes of femininity) and, through such 'submission', to immobilise it (like Medusa), forcing it to 'surrender'" (Jones 1998: 154). Clarke strikes a pose and both enacts feminine tropes and freezes the gaze into an act of awareness.

French film director Agnes Varda's film *Jane B par Agnes V* (1988) addresses some of these ideas. This documentary on the actress Jane Birkin grapples with the difficulty of documenting a female performer (already categorised as 'Serge Gainsbourg's muse') without (re)producing a stereotypical iteration of a public female self. As a strategy the filmmaker asks Birkin to act out her dream roles, instigating re-enacted and re-imagined storylines that represent 'other' women through the ages: Joan of Arc, Calamity Jane, and female figures in classical paintings. This way Birkin enacts an inner fantasy of who and what she would like to be and performs herself within a particular interpretation of her desire – as well as providing a mirror for those who look at her to project their own desires.

Varda claims that the 'female' and the 'private' can best be constructed (or re-constructed) through 'technical' means: applying cinematic language and techniques, such as a hyper-slow camera pan or an unnaturally disorientating close-up (Smith 1998: 14, Hurd 2007: 131). For example Varda applies a specific cinematic technique of very long and still frames holding the actress suspended in time. The filmmaker essentially engages the act of *posing* and the construct of the

immobile muse as a method of self-reflection. I incorporate some of this into my documentation clips (for example I freeze Clarke's pose in *Filth Queen*) but am of course more limited by the fact that live documentation has a different function than a documentary film (i.e. documentation is a contract with the artist to capture a representation of liveness, not her life). In post-production I try to create with KKK what Varda calls *cinepeinture*⁵⁷, a dramatically lit, luscious and painterly treatment of the artist. The cinematic visual image thus infuses the body's *pose* with new layers of meaning that go beyond an exact replication of the performance and enter new imaginary realms.

Clarke states that her performance is "*always addressing the audience-performer relationship and the voyeuristic gaze, and throwing that back and looking at issues of coercion and implication within the gaze*" (Clarke 2010). Her performances therefore deliver a critique of what Jones terms "the dualistic, simplistic logic of these scenarios of gender difference by which women are consigned to a pose that is understood to be un-self-reflexive, passively pinioned at the centre of a 'male gaze'" (Jones 1998: 155). My aim was to reflect within the documentation clip the artist's deliberate exploration of the pose, in order to complicate any dualistic reading of the artist as passive, and to capture in the spotlight her body *doing* a reflexive performance of femininity.

Performing motherhood

Motherhood, fertility and the female body are strong themes in Xanthe Gresham's performance *Baba Yaga and the Virgin of Guadalupe* (2011). Xanthe Gresham describes the performance on her website:

"Has your pilot light pattered? Your credit crunched?
Never fear, help is here to re-ignite the spark. On a road trip through Mexico (via haunted hotel rooms, day of the dead celebrations, visions and peculiar folklore) two deities dangle like dice from the rear view mirror. One is Baba Yaga - once a goddess of fire and fertility, now just a witch in Russian folkology. With her iron teeth and cannibalistic tendencies, she scuttles through the forest in a hut balanced on a pair of hairy chicken legs. The other is The Virgin of Guadalupe - Latin America's iconic Mother, who

⁵⁷ Varda defines *cinepeinture* as applying the film medium's disorientating painterly effects "to turn the projection screen into a painterly canvas" (Aude 1981).

launches Mexican waves of tea towels, plastic bracelets and prayer cards across the country. Famous and beloved she holds us all in the folds of her mantle.”⁵⁸

This summary illustrates Gresham’s distinctive lyrical style, where we detect humour not unlike Clarke’s descriptions but quite different to Davis’ gravitas. I documented *Baba Yaga and the Virgin of Guadalupe* at Soho Theatre but when it unexpectedly lasted over two hours I ran out of memory space and could not capture the last fifteen minutes of the performance. We re-filmed the last monologue at her auntie’s house in front of her grandfather’s clock. Here the artist turns the literal running out of time on the memory card into the metaphor of running out of time to have children, “*That’s life; always running out of memory, running out of eggs*” (Gresham 2011).



Figure 12 Gresham *Baba Yaga* 2011

Gresham’s *Baba Yaga* deals with motherhood on many levels. During the entire performance Gresham looks pregnant: she gently strokes her bump or mindfully protects it when strapping on the accordion. The people next to me in the audience speculated on her due date. The performance narrative itself revolves around having children and being childless. Gresham tells the story about a very ancient goddess of fertility who transmuted over time into the child-eating pagan goddess (witch) Baba Yaga, also called Mokosch. Gresham also recounts her own trip to Mexico and falling under the spell of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is endowed with purity as a woman without children. A rendition of Mary Poppins, probably the most famous childless woman in British popular culture who is not a witch, frames the performance with a communal song at beginning and end.

⁵⁸ <http://www.xanthegresham.co.uk/baba.html>

During Gresham's interview I (BD) first learn about her being childless, and how Gresham (XG) seems to define herself in terms of *lack* of motherhood:

XG *I think it is a bit sad that my art has driven me to such a point that I've forgotten to do the ordinary things. Well, I haven't done relationships particularly well. And I haven't had children. I wanted them but I got distracted.*

BD *With other people's children? [She was a teacher]*

XG *Maybe it was with other people's children. Well I think the teaching was traumatic, because I failed with children and it forced me to face my own childhood issues. Because it was a parenting role and I felt I failed till I discovered the stories and gradually grew up through the stories in a deep way.*

BD *Can you live on your work?*

XG *Only because I don't have children. Well I suppose I could've if I had children.*

BD *What's the difference?*

XG *I'm quite irresponsible where I might not be if children were around. I think, 'I have enough for this month I should be fine'. If I was thinking of someone else I might be more responsible. When the work's not been there I've done something creative for myself, done research, wandered off to other countries [...] My ambition has led me away from family but you can't have everything. Children would have enhanced my work. [...] I'm very sad I've not had children. It's a rite of passage I've not participated in. That's the most creative thing you can ever do.*

In a complex interweaving of ideas Gresham considers living as an 'irresponsible' artist, to be creative and successful for herself, as linked to the fact she doesn't have children. But at the same time her role as artist ("my ambition") was the very reason she forgot to have children; art was the 'distraction' that led her away from having a family. Gresham links having children with doing "the ordinary things" in life and indirectly contrasts it to making art – being an artist is then extraordinary and distracted her from leading a normal family life.

Gresham's complicated and contradictory stance to motherhood is perhaps a product of her religious upbringing, which she talks about at length in her

interview.⁵⁹ It is also a manifestation of a wider cultural idea of the artist. Mark Freeman in his study of artists found these same tropes, representing “the unabashed desire for exceptionality in what frequently seems an all too unexceptional world, and the terrible high prices that are paid for them, both figuratively and literally” (1993: 306). As I described earlier this mythical artist is selfish and full of ambition, not fit to be a mother. And at the same time being a mother would not allow the artist to be ‘selfish’ enough to become successful.

Gresham link between artistic success and childlessness is similar to Davis’ hint that not having children facilitated her financial survival as an artist: *“I think what helps is in general I’m not a person who worries much about money. I kind of somehow think, well, and I don’t have children, I don’t have that kind of dependence responsibility so I suppose that makes it easier”* (Davis 2010). The performances offer evidence of these artists’ preoccupation and externalisation of an inner anxiety: Davis exhibits the jar with her uterus taken out of her body, and Gresham displays a fake pregnancy with a removable ‘womb’.

The Virgin and Mary Poppins are both childless and through these two women Gresham weaves a narrative around her own childless-ness.



Figure 13 Gresham *Baba Yaga* 2011 (as Mary Poppins)

The narrative structure of *Baba Yaga* mimics a Mexican ‘altar for the dead’ by building a physical ‘story-altar’ on stage. At the centre of it Gresham slowly dresses

⁵⁹ Gresham: *“I come from a very religious upbringing. It was almost fundamentalist and it was a lot of religion being packed in there, a lot of biblical stories. And it was quite an emphasis on a memorizing actually so I memorized all of the book of the Bible by the age of three”* (2010).

a stump of wood, adding a prop from each story she tells, such as a hat, bouncing eyeballs, and knitting needles. Slowly the stump of wood takes on the shape of a metaphorical child. At the end of the performance Gresham removes the pregnancy-bump from under her dress and 'gives birth' to an imaginative baby, embodied by the dressed-up stump of wood, which she wraps in silk and cradles in her arms.

Gresham's performance is a ritualistic personal transformation, not far removed from the fertility and healing rituals anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) describes: as replacements for a real birth the stories are ritualistically transformed into a symbolic baby. She tells the camera in front of her grandfather's clock that in 'real' life she has not given birth but that her stories are her children and her performances are a giving birth. Gresham asks us to challenge the notion of motherhood and to value alternative acts of creation, as for example the Virgin of Guadalupe is valued for her healing gift and not for procreation. Gresham's performance both challenges notions of female empowerment and reiterates the venerated role of motherhood. Her performance in the end is hopeful: it is about running out of time and out of chances to have children, but never running out of stories.

In contrast to Gresham's troubled narrative Liz Clarke's 'maternal' experience is a joyful one. Her story surprised and moved me, as it was counter to my expectation. I realised in retrospect that my surprise was due to my own inner binary construction of art and motherhood. When I had my son I expected my creative and working life to become more limited. In contrast, for Clarke having a child was not the end but the very beginning of life as an artist. She says:

"If we cut straight to the chase of the motherhood thing ... I see his birth giving me the power to be me... I became pregnant and had my maternity leave and decided not to go back [to my job], to embark on my own performance. Because he is there, I don't know, when he came along the priorities in life fell in line: him, my immediate family, and having to make my work" (Clarke 2010).

Motherhood was for Clarke *"a really seminal point"* to dedicate her self to an artistic pursuit full time. Having a child *"has been the impetus to make me do*

performance.” She adds, “*It’s been two years where I decided to make that break for myself. I guess I was born as an artist at that point*” (Clarke 2010). The birth of her son was also the birth of Clarke as an artist. This shows the connection between her personal life and her identity as artist, as well as the embodiment of being an artist within motherhood.

The experience of motherhood for Clarke has so far been an internal (private) motivation but her performances are not *about* motherhood. Quite in contrast, they are usually a display of sexuality seemingly free from such consequences. This will be interesting to observe further: as I write Clarke is expecting a second child and has just altered her ‘white fluffy dress’ to fit her pregnant shape for a performance of *KKK* at IBT13. I am curious how an altered body shape might alter the reading of the performance and how it might subvert the notion of the ‘pose’. I believe it will encourage an even more complex form of looking and challenge the conventions of the gaze in an exciting new way.

What it does display is Clarke’s dedication to her art and an indication that motherhood is not a hindrance to her identity as artist. She admits, “*I thought it would be a restricting and isolating thing and sometimes it is*” but the importance is “*I couldn’t be **not** making work. And when I wanted to work and wasn’t making work it was making me so miserable*” (Clarke 2010). Clarke’s performances might not (so far at least) speak about motherhood but her productivity as a live artist who is also mother to two children negates some of the myths the other two artists seem to harbour around their role as artist and (lack of) children.

Motherhood might impact Clarke’s career in financial ways, or impose new time constraints, but whether she will discontinue her more overt work (as for example extreme feminist performer Karen Finley did when she grew older and had her daughter) remains to be seen. Additionally, Clarke’s endurance work dealing with loss and pain is undergoing other transformations. She told me in a conversation we had while documenting her performance *Big Inflatable Me* (2012) at the Arnolfini Gallery, that she feels she has just broken through her grief and is feeling new peace with her past. She is looking forward to making more ‘fun’ work, such

as the piece we were documenting there.⁶⁰ This illustrates how autobiographical stories active in her life influence the type of work she makes; it shows a strong link between narratives of personal emotion and narratives in her public art.

In this chapter I looked at the representations of the body in mainly Clarke and Gresham's performances. For these artists the body links to issues around gender, femininity and motherhood. In the next chapter I continue my exploration of dominant performance themes, this time in narratives of ritual, belonging and mythology.

⁶⁰ *Big Inflatable Me* includes blowing bubble gum, inflatable boobs, and changing costume inside a giant balloon that Clarke inflates with an industrial leaf-blower. You can see a clip of it on my YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/BarbaraElektraDroth

6 PERFORMING RITUAL

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| Performing belonginging | |
| Performing mythology | |

In this chapter I look at the idea of ritual as a way to examine performative strategies found in mainly Davis' and Gresham's work. I wanted to find out what it might mean for artists to create their own ritual activities within their performances, and what it means for the audience to participate. For example Davis calls some of her performance sequences 'rituals'; and Gresham asks the audience to participate in ritualistic incantations.

Richard Schechner developed the idea of ritual practices in the context of performance studies. Like Victor Turner, he merged ideas of institutionalised performances, such as rituals and ceremonies, with Goffman's concept of the performative enactment of self in everyday life (Turner 1985: xi). He looked at non-Western (often religious) ceremonies as theatrical performance but also examined secular types of Western cultural performance (such as theatre) as ritualised practices. His thinking points towards an understanding of how ritual and theatrical traditions become enfolded in performance and can thus act as "reflexive metacommentary on the life of their times, feeding on it and assigning meaning to its decisive public and cumulative private events" (Turner 1985: xii). Schechner's approach is a focus on the 'how' of performance and on the "sometimes utterly memorable relationships that develop unpredictably among actors, audience, text" (Turner 1985: xii). I propose to apply this expansive understanding of ritual to my discussion in this chapter as a means to understand the performances better.

Performing belonging

In her interview Davis mentions the performing of rituals several times. For example she describes her performance *Rapture*:

"In the last ten minutes I perform a silent ritual with the dissected uterus I have. The story I have around that is the infertile body and infertile land and what happened to the place I came from" (Davis 2010).

Using the term 'ritual' she refers to specific episodes of repetitive movement, such as the one she mentions above, where she gently strokes the pieces of her uterus with her rubber-gloved fingers (figure 15); or in *Asphyxia* where she says, "*I perform a ritualistic dance with the gasmask*" (Davis 2010) (figure 17).⁶¹

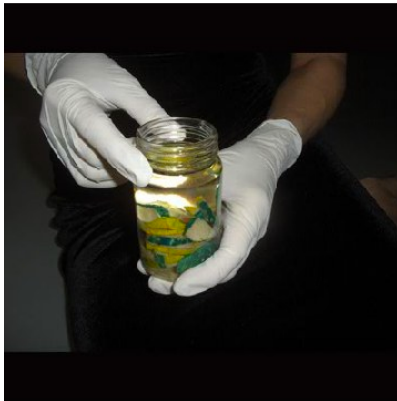


Figure 14 Davis uterus jar 2011

Such personally created rituals express the artist's unique life experiences but also tap into a broader cultural memory: Davis' gasmask dance is not unlike other tribal dances; the transferal of the uterus into a jar is not unlike medical or funeral rituals. The artist's rituals can be seen to expose the performance of memory through a visualisation of "bodily social memory" (Connerton 2002: 71). Davis uses her lost body-part to perform the memory of her lost country, the 'infertile land'. She constructs a private-public ceremony that ties these two traumas together. Her body's cancer narratively represents the social memory of the cancer of war.

Natasha Davis comes from former Yugoslavia, "a country that no longer exists" (Davis 2010), and in her interview and performances she often addresses her migration. Her performance *Suspended* (2010) is a non-linear narrative of images and soundscapes that combine to give us a *sense* of her memory of the past and her life as experienced (as discussed in chapter 4). The artist moves through the

⁶¹ She puts on an old gasmask that, in contrast to its original function, does not deliver but deprives her of oxygen. She then jumps up and down in an abstract dance to a percussion soundtrack until she can no longer breathe properly and must take the mask off and lie down. You can see this dance on her website <http://www.natashaproductions.com>.

performance space to inhabit individual installations for brief moments of interaction. The lighting sequentially illuminates these scenes, like memories that are vivid during their telling and then fade away as life moves on. The movement of the audience, following the artist from one display to the next, mimics the artist's journey (of life and of migration).

This performance ends with Davis taking off her black dress and then wrapping her naked body in blue velvet fabric (figure 16). Lying on her back she inches herself across the floor in small movements, dragging the blue material with her so it fans out across the room. This image of looking backwards seemed to me like a metaphor for the artist's life journey: she cannot see the shore she is heading towards but instead gazes upon her past and cumulative memories. Davis' re-creation of the past within her performance is about *former* belonging; a belonging to a country that no longer exists. I believe that she is reaching out to new forms of belonging through the ritual of British citizenship and by constructing (narratives of) her self as an artist.

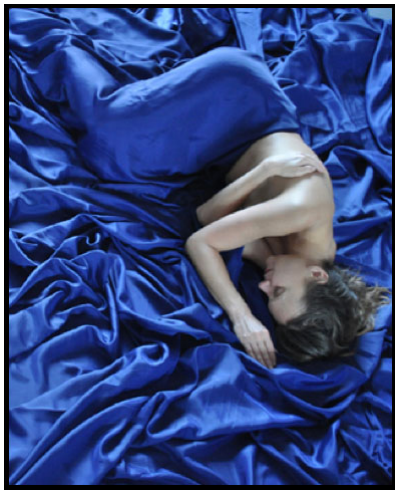


Figure 15 Davis *Suspended* 2010

In *Rapture* (2009) Davis projects a video of her oath affirmation ceremony of becoming a British citizen. Simultaneously to the screening of this video she repeats the act to the live audience. The video document of accepting British citizenship is staged as an autobiographical display and as a mimicking of a social ritual, in this way blurring the 'real' off-stage person with the performer on stage. Historically, the role of the document is seen as an object that serves as proof of

facts, an 18th century juridical concept based on a culture of writing. Davis' video footage becomes a document that stands testimony to the autobiographical acts in her live performance. Davis' video draws on the codes of 'authenticity' that are key to the ethnographic display. By projecting footage of a past life event during her performance she is *staging* the document. Here Davis' belonging is no longer a national matter but a creative one. Her performance narrative iterates the *process* of belonging through re-staging the ritual of 'becoming' citizen. In this way she emphasises more her identity of being an artist than of a national subject.

The ceremony is a good illustration of J. L. Austin's speech act, where the saying of something also performs its action. While in the actual ceremony Davis becomes a British citizen, neither Davis' staged repetition nor the screening of the past enforces the legality of the ceremony.⁶² Indeed such mediated repetitions test the original ritual's core meaning. During a live performance I attended, Davis' act of repeating words of allegiance to the queen provoked uneasy laughter from the audience: the re-enactment of this ritual opens up a space for the audience to reflect on the multiplicity of these words and what institutionalised belonging means to them.

Official rituals of belonging, like such citizenship oaths, aim to integrate disparate social groups to make up a larger national hegemony. Schechner states, "rituals are collective memories encoded into actions" (Schechner 2003: 52). However Davis' ritual of taking on British citizenship only highlights her *not* belonging: despite now being a British 'subject' she is internally colonised by her past, as seen in her work. Davis might have officially 'settled' in the UK but throughout her performances she displays a permanent state of restlessness. Her performance exhibits "autobiography's doubled mode of experiencing oneself simultaneously from the outside, as a character in a social drama, and from the inside, in solitary self-experience" (Watson 2002: 352). Davis' outward ritual of belonging exposes a contrary inner experience. She speaks the words of allegiance as 'other' and they do not seem to transform her into becoming part of 'us'. She lingers on her inner

⁶² Austin calls utterances repeated on stage 'infelicitous': they do not perform what they describe but pretend to do so. Davis uses the narrative of the video not to pretend she is a citizen (she is) but to illustrate she is still going through the process of 'becoming' and reaching for 'belonging'.

foreignness and attachment to past memories, and in her role of being an artist underlines the performance of a cultural outsider.

Davis' long path of migration has meant she could take little with her and lost many things along the way. For her, objects function as a way to 'check' memory⁶³ and are indications of her journey. I will argue here that her sense of belonging is externalised through the collection and use of objects and that her performance re-narrative re-activates these objects.

Archivist Julian Warren and performance scholar Paul Clarke comment on objects used during performances: "After the event these (objects) can serve a mnemonic function, triggering memories to be imagined, or act as 'utopian traces', demanding multiple re-uses, both actual and virtual" (Clarke and Warren 2009: 55). Davis' objects represent a link from the past to the present: the uterus that was removed from her body is now stored in a jar, triggering memories of a whole body. Her fingernails, hair and teeth collected in jars were once part of Davis' body and now represent the past Davis (younger, living in Serbia, etc.).



Figure 16 Davis *Asphyxia* 2009

My video documentary *100 Objects* exemplifies the archival aspect of Davis' work.⁶⁴ In my film we see the props neatly stored in various boxes. The performer Davis unpacks her 'archive' of what represents lived experiences as she takes out

⁶³ In her video interview she speaks of the trauma of belonging to a bombed country, where you can no longer check if for example your memory of your school is correct, because the building no longer exists.

⁶⁴ The video *100 Objects* is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q562BikN8pM>

the objects and presents them to camera. She frames the objects in terms of her *life* and her *live* (performance) interaction with them: her stories are partly about the history of the object itself and partly about its role in the performance. For example she presents a fencing mask from her journey to South America where she went to research “high up places with little oxygen” for *Asphyxia* (Davis 2010). The mask is used in the show as an object to demonstrate oxygen deficiency: she fills it with earth and presses it against her face until she can no longer hold her breath. Another example is the long narrative about her only visit to the paternal village that accompanies her grandmother’s necklace, which is followed by a story of how the necklace is hung on a branch during the performance.

This shows that the objects embody dual identification, one to remember an autobiographical moment, and one to remember a performative moment. My documentation of these stories is an archive of the object’s physical history and its performance history, both merged with the artist’s narrative framing of her personal/professional life history. Presented to camera by the artist herself, the objects establish Davis’ autobiography as totally inseparable from the performances. It was during the performance that the body, as the archive of lived experience, inscribed its experience into these objects: the identity of being an artist is now embedded in the object’s history.

Davis’ performances are based around installations of objects, such as a hanging curtain of surgical instruments in *Rupture*, a meat mincer on a plinth in *Suspended*, or a table cluttered with photographs in *Asphixia*. Some of Davis’ objects are from a past when she belonged to a different country; these things tell family histories. Some objects are from more recent journeys, such as old masks from South America; these tell us of symbolic meanings they have for the artist, such as signifying asphyxiation. Other objects such as jam jars were found in the garbage, scrubbed clean and are now lit up beautifully on a shelf; they represent something discarded finding a new home (figure 18).

Davis’ life journey is symbolically illustrated with those jam jars: a “worthless” (Davis 2010) vessel is redeemed by becoming an art object, just as her former life

of restless migration finds new purpose within the narrative of being a live artist. Diane Taylor (2003) argues the repertoire of embodied memory, conveyed in gestures, the spoken word, movement, dance, song, and other performances, offers alternative perspectives to those derived from the written archive. This idea of the repertoire is useful in linking Davis' personified objects with her memory of transnational narratives.



Figure 17 Davis *100 Objects* 2011

In her interview Davis talks about the history of migration of her objects. For example she said of the meat mincer, *"It has its own migratory journey. It comes from France"*; or of the shelf for the glass jars, *"That piece came from Rajasthan, quite a big journey for a piece of furniture"* (Davis 2010). Objects she acquired during her travels have in a sense themselves been displaced: they journey with the artist back to her home in order to take on a new identity within her performances. For example the jam jars not only become beautifully displayed objects but take on the important function of containing relics of the past, such as baby teeth her mother collected, the artist's nails and hair, and photos of her Serbo-Croatian family.



Figure 18 Davis *100 Objects* 2011 (snow globe)

One interesting episode in *The Life of an Artist in 100 Objects* is when I ask Davis about a snow globe of Belgrade (figure 19). This is one of the objects that stand on the glass shelf in *Suspended*. I remember seeing it as part of the installation in the performance at Chelsea Theatre. There it is an inactive object, is not interacted with, and thus does not have a performance history. In fact it has no rehearsed (hi)story at all, and Davis dismisses it as “This is just a kitsch object” (Davis 2011). When I ask about the buildings in the globe, miniature replicas representing Belgrade, she is suddenly not sure if they existed before the war or are newly built. Her experiences of Belgrade before the war and since her migration are no longer absolute binary memories. Her self-narration is no longer a reliable archive of personal and political histories. The snow globe lacks gravitas because it is not part of her performance history and thus also not part of her migration narrative. This moment makes visible the link between Davis’ memory and performance. When the object has no performed story Davis’ internal narrative becomes unsure.

The fluidity of documentary as a medium, as I described previously, enables a *performative* presentation of self. Davis’ performance with the objects to camera introduces a ‘self-portraiture’ process and *100 Objects*, as a video mediation, further offers “a key physical connection to long-gone performances like a relic to a saint” (Manzella and Watkins 2011: 29). Both Davis’ live performance and her performance to my camera iterate a very specific narrative of her past, and we can see from the snow globe example that she finds it problematic to deviate from this version of her life story. We witness in this scene that for Davis memory is an interpretation of an unstable past closely linked to the performing self. The video narrative illustrates a moment where the artist constructs her life as an artist away from the vicinity of the stage. *100 Objects* thus captures the artist’s autobiographical narrative slipping and presents, in this unstable moment, her performative enactment of self and artist, present and past.

Performing mythology

Gresham’s performances contain less objects and more words. They rework existing stories, myths and imagery found in literature, film and religion. According

to Paul Connerton myth is not a fixed narrative but rather “constitutes something more like a *reservoir of meanings* which is available for possible use again in other structures.” (Connerton 2002: 56 original italics). Gresham’s seven goddesses draw on this reservoir of meanings by adapting symbolic content of old tales, which already resonate with the audience, as a form of self-invention.⁶⁵ The goddesses are re-assembled during Gresham’s live performance in often surprising interpretations and intriguing combination. Helen Nicholson states, “Fictionalised narratives found in myth and legend are integral to narratives of selfhood and community” (Nicholson 2005: 66). This describes Gresham’s method of integrating self and story, as well as her ability to draw her audience into a performative community.

Gresham’s style draws on the biopic genre by creating a visual story that “cannibalises existing forms of biography and folklore of individual agency” (Landy 1996: 152), with more or less fictional autobiographical additions, with realistic ‘casting’ of the protagonists as herself, and with creative relocation of the plot into present day settings. Gresham’s goddesses have migrated from ancient Greece through Baroque and contemporary operas to mediate a new personified representation as Gresham herself.



Figure 19 Gresham *Aphrodite and the Real Red Shoes* 2009

⁶⁵ Gresham’s performance septet is about the goddesses Aphrodite, Isis, Inanna, Hecate, Baba Yaga, a composite goddess (in *Goddess to Go*), and Concertina (the water goddess in *Pussy’s in the Well*).

Gresham's performances each embody the life of a goddess and modernise it. We see this for example in *Aphrodite* wearing red-hot thigh-high boots from a Soho fetish store (figure 20). As Gresham describes *Aphrodite and the Real Red Shoes* on her website:

*"Ransacking literature and mythology from the Stone Age to Hans Christian Anderson, from Ancient Greece to Soho, Aphrodite is summoned; six foot, perfumed with ambrosial oil, a perfect snake tattooed between her shoulder blades; her gift – The Real Red Shoes."*⁶⁶

The red shoes signify the connection between the goddess Aphrodite's extramarital sensual affairs and Gresham's own prowling of streets and taverns searching for sexual adventure. She ends the performance stating emphatically, "Everyone can wear the real red shoes" (Gresham 2008), and in this way projects the power of the goddess onto the audience. Through re-enactments of iconic or historic images such as Aphrodite Gresham provides a modern interpretation of a woman performer's multiple positions. She expresses this woman-centred point of view on her blog: *"I use Goddess myths because they short circuit the masculine view point in a matter of minutes and provide endless parallels to my own, complicated life as a woman in the metropolis."*⁶⁷



Figure 20 Gresham *Goddess to Go* 2011

This contemporary integration of the goddess into her life becomes public and political in her performance *Goddess to Go* (2011).⁶⁸ Here Gresham explores the

⁶⁶ <http://www.xanthegresham.co.uk/aphrodite.html>

⁶⁷ On Gresham's blog www.xanthegresham.com: entry 16th August 2010 "Storytelling for actresses over 40" (accessed 14/04/2012).

⁶⁸ The video clip of *Goddess to Go* is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dM15WLptaw&list=TLnLJa9VCM9q0>

concept of a composite goddess on the steps of St. Paul's cathedral, where she turns the crowd of Occupy London into her outdoor audience (figure 21). "The composite, collapsible, readily recyclable, multitasking, multi-ethnic, multilingual goddess to go" (Gresham 2011) is packaged in a neat shopping bag for all occasions. Gresham challenges the audience to combine and appropriate paper symbols taken from multiple goddesses, such as the sun of Isis, the eggs of Artemis and Aphrodite's breastplate, in order to invoke change. The performative interaction transmutes symbols from ancient myths into contemporary signs of consumerism and personal empowerment. My video documentation of the event illustrates the participatory construction of a composite goddess for 'every day' occasions.

On her website Gresham explains her ritual, "*Capitalism is at a crossroad. According to myth, at the centre of very crossroads there is a keyhole and when you step on it and turn, you become a human key, invoking the Goddess of Change*" (Gresham 2011). Gresham is re-enacting this myth on the crossroads of St Paul's. The composite goddess narratives are superimposed onto Gresham's own interpretation of life and politics. The performance makes visible the artist's construction of the present time, in this case the Occupy London movement with its own symbolic construction of advocating change. In the video clip we see Gresham invoking the power of the goddess surrounded by masked protestors. It is a powerful moment: when the artist's myth is made relevant in a contemporary setting the myths embedded into the protest (symbolised by the Vendetta masks) take on new signification. The trendy shopping bag in which the goddess symbols are kept and the 'take-away', throw away and non-permanent Velcro application, critique consumerist society, among protestors here for the same reason albeit with different tools and narratives.

Gresham expands this concept further on an interactive website where the viewer can "put their own spin on a symbol".⁶⁹ This performative participation encourages the audience to combine functions (mother, power, sex, etc.) with symbols (sword, balance, key, etc.) and to participate in the artist's attempt to create new rituals

⁶⁹ <http://www.xanthegresham.co.uk/godto.html>

towards new social understanding. In effect the artist draws on myth and ritual to propose a dialog about current affairs. The goddess-to-go is the ideal escape body for our time, resonant with multiple histories and radiant with propositions for possible futures.

In the performance *Baba Yaga and the Virgin of Guadalupe* (2012) we see the recurring re-presentation of *known* female characters.⁷⁰ Gresham here focuses on Mary Poppins, the Virgin Mary, and fairy tale stepmothers and witches (figure 21). These characters are articulated in new combinations and thus are given multiple unfixed meanings. This process of ‘quoting’ the various historic constructions of female roles highlights the artist’s construction of symbolic meaning. It expands conventional narrative order by introducing new modes of organizing past stories. Taken from the *Antique* (Beaujour 1991), Gresham’s stories universalise her life history and insert her individual small lifespan into a wider social and cultural context. The goddess narratives enable Gresham to find a place in cultural history.



Figure 21 Gresham *Baba Yaga* 2011

Gresham creates textual layers, including ‘utterances’ that are “part of a social dialogue” (Bakhtin 1981): she engages cultural and historic ‘knowledge’ through verbal associations in her performance. For example Gresham invokes memories of her grandmother and asks us to reconstruct our past with the help of a branching leaf. As we trace the veins on a leaf with closed eyes, we go back generations and visualise the history of our ancestry. Through our communal

⁷⁰ The video clip of *Baba Yaga* is on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMTY6zYjghk&list=TLPhD8_agAgE

participation Gresham also asks us to belong to a moment of *shared* history. We are performing belonging by sharing time and space with the artist in a moment of invoked narrative imagination. It is within this kind of 'transportation' of the audience into a potentially transformative realm of experience that Schechner (1985) finds comparison between theatrical and religious rituals.

Depicting herself in various forms of 'the goddess' is more than a cloning act. It reveals Gresham's identity construction using narrative forms that provide a text – not written but aural and visual textuality – that enables representations of the self through the representation of historicized figures. Greek Aphrodite is a well-known mythical figure, as is Egyptian goddess Isis: they come with preconceived notion but, because they are mythical figures, they are also open to new interpretations and projections of Gresham's own version of their histories.

Gresham describes her process: *"I was looking for a frame story to compliment the big myth of Isis and was doing my usual mix of mythology and 'flexible' (part true and part imagined) biography"*.⁷¹ Mixing myth and fairy tale with personal memories and anecdotes creates a complex self-portrait. It brings to mind French artist Orlan's composite face that Linda S. Kauffman reads as a "new psychological self-portrait" (1996: 43). Gresham is constructing a similar psychological portrait but with words. She does not re-tell an entire myth but 'picks and chooses' elements from various narratives. She wordsmiths them together to create a 'whole' new entity.

Orlan re-constructs her face through cosmetic surgeries based on various painted icons, and like Gresham in theme but not in method, Orlan's postmodern and technologically driven approach looks to classical archetypes. Orlan explains: "I constructed my self-portrait by mixing representations of goddesses from Greek mythology: chosen not for the canons of beauty they are supposed to represent, but for their histories" (Orlan 1996: 88-89). Artist Jill O'Bryan notes that Orlan "warps their (art-historical) image of the perfect woman, of the Greek goddess" (1997: 56) so that, similarly to Xanthe Gresham, her self-portraiture works to

⁷¹ Gresham website: blog entry 16th August 2010

undermine the original yet creates in the process a mapping of the self on top of the 'original' image. With body for Orlan and words for Gresham, this morphing process illustrates that "the origin is not historical, but in the process of coming about at all times" (O'Bryan 1997: 56). The very personal meaning of the goddess resurfaces in Gresham's narrative constructions, just as this process re-constructs Orlan's face.⁷² What then is Gresham authoring? Gresham references goddesses for their ideal strength and combines them with her autobiographical narrative of imperfections, yearning and loss. Gresham's oral reincarnations enact a potential future: she is playing in the gap between words and the unspeakable (i.e. ever-changing life); between representation and the un-representable.

The title of Gresham's *Pussy's in the Well: The Goddess Under the Pavement* (2012) demonstrates the hybridity of her approach.⁷³ "Ding, dong, bell, Pussy's in the well" is part of a Mother Goose rhyme warning children of the cruelty of drowning a cat. Additionally there is the obvious sexual connotation of pussy, and Gresham's excavation of a lost British water goddess, Coventina, found in a well or under the pavement. Gresham describes the show as, "*This is metaphorical archaeology of the soul*".⁷⁴

In preparation for this performance Gresham brings a bottle of *Boy Ahoy*, 'the bubble bath for sensitive skin' that she remembers her mother giving her as a child, to my place. As the new performance is about water, we want to film an idea she had based on the image of a goddess emerging from the sea. Gresham plans to emerge from a sea of bubbles chanting 'ururu', the phrase Gresham calls "*the summation of all incantations*" (Gresham 2010). That she is comfortable to film a sequence in the nude in my bathtub shows our collaboration developed into a creative friendship. We pour the whole bottle of *Boy Ahoy* into the tub to get a huge

⁷² Orlan's writing on the importance of mythical images echoes Gresham's deep connection to the goddesses. Orlan states, "These representations of feminine personages have served as an inspiration to me and are there deep beneath my work in a symbolic manner" (Orlan 1996: 89).

⁷³ The video clip of *Pussy's in the Well* is on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKupbe3KFFk&list=TLrhhUWBukv04>

⁷⁴ <http://sohotheatre.com/whats-on/pussyandrsquo-s-in-the-well-the-goddess-under-the-/>

layer of foam and discover that the 'sensitive' bubble bath burns her eyes and is nothing like Gresham's childhood memory.⁷⁵



Figure 22 Gresham *Ururu* 2012

Some of this will later become part of the performance narrative of *Pussy's in the Well* at the Soho Theatre (figure 23). Similar to Davis with her citizenship video, Gresham mimics a screened performance of the bubble bath scene. She asks the audience to chant 'ururu' along to the image of herself performing the sound in the bathtub projected next to her standing on stage. Through this layered repetition Gresham exposes the cycles of iteration taking place in her narrative; just as reinterpretations of myths unfix their meaning, she hereby destabilises any single interpretation of her life, and blurs the boundary between life and live performances.

There are many instances in Gresham's performances where the audience participates in communal chanting, such as the chant 'ururu' in the bubble bath scene. For example in the beginning of *Baba Yaga* Gresham (wearing a Mary Poppins' coat and hat and carrying an umbrella) draws the audience into singing *Supercalifragelistic*, then breaks off abruptly to make us sheepishly aware of our eager participation. In another example in *Pussy's in the Well* the audience accompanies Gresham's narration with a deep resonating 'humbaba humbaba humbaba' rhythmic chant. This chant is directed by Gresham to increase or decrease in volume in sync with her storyline but this is more than pure entertainment. Schechner writes, "Play gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive, and risky. [...] Thus, ritual and play transform

⁷⁵ This bath, a re-enactment of an innocent childhood memory, stands quite in contrast to Liz Clarke's bath with forty eggs that I discussed in the previous chapter.

people" (2003: 52). Gresham's use of culturally familiar stories and rhymes, such as *supercalifragilistic*, allow a temporary participation in 'play'. The members of the audience become accomplices in the telling. During ritualistic vocal participatory episodes Gresham becomes less a character in a story and more a divining tool used to locate emotive frictions between release and containment.

According to Joseph Jordania (2011) human ability to follow a rhythm in big groups, to sing together in harmony, or dance for many hours and enter the ecstatic state, were all developed as ritual practices in order to reach the state of collective identity. Through invoking an emotional collective response from the audience, Gresham's autobiographical content, submerged into the performative narrative, becomes part of a transformative process. Gresham's call for audience participation is then a technique that allows the viewers to lose themselves in a group dynamic. In contrast to endurance art, where the gruesome nature of the performance separates the viewer from the performer and isolates us into our individual experience, I believe that Gresham's performance style creates a temporary social bond amongst the audience similar as the one described by ethnographers of distant tribes (see Jankowski, Lambert). The participation in Gresham's sound-performance establishes a moment of "expressing, fixing and reinforcing shared values" (Connerton 2002: 71). Her rituals are immersive where audience and artist alike become part of the performance and take part in some form of collective making and being. The diverse audience, made up of metropolitan art fans, friends and critics, experience the *affect* of Gresham's performance as binding them together. As we chant together in unison the audience member is no longer an individual; we become part of a chorus.

Bobby Baker, a well-established performer with similar narrative performance style, creates, according to Heddon, "a mode of address that acknowledges the spectator's presence, alongside the theatrical context" (Heddon 2006: 171). This is true of Xanthe Gresham as she directly engages her audience with questions ("*Is anyone here a sex addict? You, Madam? Hands up*" - in *Hecate Tango*), interactions ("*Sir, take off my shoe please. Chop, chop!*" - in *Inanna Banana*), and teaching refrain verses to cite along with her ("*In and round, up and down, in and round, knitting the*

hat that Mags made" – in *Baba Yaga*). During such acts the delineation between the performance and the artist being herself is blurred. An illustration of this this takes place when the video projector does not work properly right in the middle of *Pussy's in the Well* and Xanthe Gresham negotiates with the technician. The performer is "suspended between 'my' behaviour and that which I am citing or imitating" (Loxley 2007: 158). At this moment we experience a shifting back and forth between the performance text and Gresham being 'herself'.⁷⁶ Gresham further links her art-making with the act of identifying her personal 'truth':

"I suppose art is about...truth. Well, truth is a strange being. The personal truth, where all you can do is your best, to create your own truth. And that's really hard and people do it in various ways. I don't know how people do it without art frankly; maybe they do it with religion. But art is about purification of the truth, and that could be something dirty, or dark, but it is the pure truth of what's inside you" (Gresham 2010).

Gresham portrays art as a purification process that brings out 'what's inside you'. She seems to see art as a necessary vehicle to being 'truthful': firstly to herself and as an extension to her audience. This supports poststructuralist ideas on how subjectivity is created through the narrative form. Gresham creates a form of collaborative practice, a participation in and sharing of narrative creation. Gresham's performances demand active participation and closer listening: the audience leaves Gresham's performance sweaty and exhausted from a marathon of intense listening and 'doing' for more than two hours. The audience enters the artist's performance ritual and participates in some form of oral inscription. A new kind of linguistic construct is created live and put into temporary practice.

Phelan has argued this is itself a form of documentation, part of the old tradition of oral transmission. The audience learns a verse and keeps the story alive in memory or passes it on in the re-telling of it. Theatre director Eugenio Barba (1992) argued performance is not really about what was happening on stage, but what is happening in the minds and subsequently the living memories of the audience. Memory (not unlike video documents) does not preserve a 'complete' recollection of the performance but allows for story variations to be told for

⁷⁶ The video clip of *Pussy's in the Well* is on the enclosed DVD, on my thesis website and on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKupbe3KFfk&list=TLrhhUWBukv04>

different occasions. Xanthe Gresham's re-performance method illustrates that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990: 2).

But memory, like performance, is a "body-based practice" and thus the recollections of those who were present are seen as unreliable and impermanent (Schneider 2001). To document the performance, and thus be able to retell it, the artist turns to other types of evidence, such as my videos. In this sense documentation fulfils the very function of memory. Phelan states, "The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present" (Phelan 1996: 146). In other words, documentation creates "the conditions of possibility to speak about past performances at all" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 75). My documentation acts as a description of the disappeared event ("adds to, defers, and displaces", as Phelan puts it) and although watching the documentation does not reproduce the participatory experience of Gresham's live performance, it is similar in structure to the iterative storytelling process of her work.

As I have argued previously, representation is always culturally inscribed and shaped by our perception of experience (Hall 2001). But Heddon points out, "There are many possible cultural locations and readings. There are always any number of discourses available from which we are able – indeed compelled – to make something mean, or to make it meaningful" (2006: 165). Within her performances, Gresham takes on different roles and positions – from childless Virgin to child-eating witch Baba Yaga. She shifts time frames and constantly alters the position from which she speaks: from a modern present to a mythical past to a wishful future. Gresham *maps* previous versions of stories onto her own life, not unlike Davis maps an official citizen ritual onto her individual sense of belonging, or as we saw in the previous chapter, Liz Clarke maps stereotypes of femininity onto her own body. This mapping process is a form of autobiographical writing and expresses the artists' (be)longing. It illustrates the very notion of 'self' the artists present to their audiences is being culturally located and shaped. Following

this idea, my documentation potentially illuminates social and cultural frameworks that go beyond those of the individual artists I filmed.

In this chapter I described how Davis uses objects and repetition as ritualistic activities to perform loss and belonging. I proposed that Gresham uses oral forms of ritual, such as participatory recitations, in order to re-imagine her autobiographical self and transform her audience. The next chapter is my conclusion where I summarise my thesis and point towards new directions in my research.

7 CONCLUSION

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Summary and conclusions | |
| Contributions | |
| Further research | |

Three years ago I nervously met the three artists for the first time to interview them. Since then I have seen most of their current performances and often travelled far to document them. I have become implicated in constructing a narrative around them and their work, exploring the problems and potential of live art and its documents, as well as the challenges and rewards of a collaborative research approach. The discourse between the opportunities and constraints that our individual collaborative process presented formed my grasp of the artists' identities as fluid, on going and incomplete-able.

My research became a personal journey that intersected with these wonderful, interesting and challenging individuals. I established a personal friendship with Gresham and Clarke and continue to document their work when possible. Our on-going dialogue invites me to new ideas on different performance strategies, how artists develop their identity as 'an artist', and how live performances can be best presented in virtual environments.

When I set out to do this research, my aim was to develop my documentary practice in relation to live events, and the process indeed improved my insights in both practice and academic disciplines. I learned much from each individual artist, and acquired new skills by the act of filming in unique performance situations. Working with performance artists and new ideas at times caused uncertainty how to take my work into new directions and intersect it with other disciplines. Grimshaw states, "working across established boundaries is always a risky enterprise" (Grimshaw 2005: 5). But such experimentation also sharpened my research sensibilities. Finding myself in a cross-disciplinary position of filmmaker and researcher, my task was to find ways of combining academic and artistic perspectives, visuals and writing, the artists' needs and my desire for outcomes. I reminded myself that in this project I engaged artistic practice not with the aim to

make a better film but to do better research. I believe this helped me develop useful ideas around translations – from live performance to mediating document, and from visual material to academic contexts. Such translations are especially present in the interactive format of my thesis website.

Summary and conclusions

This thesis consists of two parts, a website and seven written chapters. The website models the artists' own online presentation of their live art documentation and exemplifies an embodied method of gathering, dispersing, and reading research material. I propose that my online practice submission presents video as a sensory and interactive form of 'writing' that stays close to the text being studied.

The written part of this thesis introduced, in chapter one, my methodology of combined observational video-practice and narrative theories, as a means to understand subjectivities as they relate to life experiences and performative narratives. This approach proposed that visual methods are especially relevant as a means to study contemporary forms of culture such as Live Art. I believe that a lens-based and visually presented dispersion of ideas reflects closer the subject matter than a text-based analysis.

Chapter two investigated the myth of the artist and found this concept actively shaping the (self)representation of the collaborating live artists. It concluded that the artists are in the constant iterative process of 'becoming' (an artist), firstly to make sense of a non-linear life history and secondly to balance their sense of outsider-ness by finding belonging in the art community.

Chapter three outlined how I place my own specific videography and research methods within the unresolved debate over the value of 'live', but the ever more central place of 'mediated', and critically challenge the binary meanings of live versus document in their relation to authenticity. Instead of privileging the videos themselves I followed their journey onto the artists' websites, and found that these virtual sites frame the video in the context of an ongoing live art process, not as an

individual or isolated event. My research concluded that the videos are a performative extension of the live performances and are able to present evolving and shifting narratives about the artists' work.

Chapter four examined the live and the online performance-narratives in relation to 'self-portraiture' and 'life as experienced' to illustrate that narrative is not a system but a process of constituting the self. The research concluded that the artists' websites are places where the three individuals recognise and affirm themselves as individuals and as members of the art community, and where the audience's 'live' online presence interacts performatively with the artist's various forms of self-representation.

Lastly, chapters five and six investigated the three artists' strategies in presenting the body to compel a disruptive reading of gender, femininity and motherhood. Moving between visual and written texts it became evident that these artists are deeply involved with bodily life. Their performative strategies showed different ways to make sense of their fragmented life history. The research addressed the on-going centrality of questions of belonging and showed that the artists use ritual, iterative practices and participatory incantations as strategies to construct non-linear readings of their autobiographical experiences.

This research project has looked at the recording, interpreting and sharing of the artists' work as an interactive process, where the viewer/reader participates in the 'creation' of the artist through their own narrative construction. The practice required the reader to approach the visual material as essential contribution to the research topic and to construct a *sense* of the constantly shifting artist through a participatory 'filling in' of the gaps in 'knowing' their work.

Contributions

There are two main contributions this thesis offers. The first is the analytical method discussed in these pages: a hybrid visual and narrative form of observing and knowing that draws from collaborative inquiry. In this way the thesis

advances narrative theory beyond its literary framework. It encourages an expanded view of narrative towards an experiential process of both gathering and dispersing information. The project highlights the value of visual knowledge and the importance of establishing a relation between visual knowing and written analysis. This research project encourages by example experimentation in incorporating visual, embodied, and online textualities into academic texts. This might be of use to researchers of life history, contemporary art history, and of performance, faced with the inevitable need to become engaged in the process of mediatisation in an increasingly virtual world.

The second contribution is a developed understanding of contemporary performance art practice through examples of three artists' autobiographical performativity in live and online environments. The research introduced, explored and enjoyed three emerging artists who are pushing the boundaries of live art, as they have pushed mine in the context of academic experimentation. The thesis contributes to ideas on the digital dispersion of the live artists' identity as not a fracturing of the unified body experienced in live performance but instead as a place for the artists to exercise agency through virtual performativity. The project contributes to a shift in thinking of documentation of live art as a representation of the performance artwork and instead proposes to see it as representative of the artists sense of self as an artist. I propose that the videos are not end products but function as a continuation of the live and the artist's ongoing performativity in online environments. The websites undermine the authoritarian narrative of the video and emphasise the artists' own agency in exercising authority over a linked and multiple form of representation.

Further research

In the future I will continue to investigate social worlds and observational and narrative ways of getting to know them in a visually orientated way. I will also continue to develop ideas on the presentation of visual material within narrative research contexts.

I aim to further pursue practice-led research illuminated by narrative theory, which could be applied to different subjects and fields. Here I have a special interest in representations of mental health, as demonstrated by my on-going collaboration with the Southwark-based service-user group *4 in 10*. Drawing on verbal as well as non-verbal, visual and aural experimentation in video media, the members of the group aim to explore their narratives around mental health and LGBT issues, and collaborate with me to find ways of telling the 'unspeakable' and share experiences and feelings by evoking non-binary readings of them (healthy/ill, gay/straight, normal/weird). I think such visual performative 'writing' could develop thinking of oral history and narrative research beyond its traditional associations with temporally ordered forms (following Tamboukou, Smith and Watson) and develop new intersections of ethnographic, narrative and performance theories.

I also aim to continue developing ideas around the representation of the live artist. In particular, I would consider it useful to work on the live artists' digital reinvention and how the inevitability of mediatisation impacts the artists' and the audience's expectations of and participation in performative rituals. In this respect I am especially interested in questions on the cultural work of the performance of physical pain, and how this debate might be extended post-performance to online rituals. My focus would be on extending theoretical debates on the synergy of storying and selves in regards to such performative narratives, especially in relation to memory of trauma and pain and non-chronological use of time. In fact the idea of human time conveyed and interpreted through performative time is very interesting to me, particularly how photographic media incorporated into performance can shift narratives into the past and destabilise the present. Such research would also enable me to experience more of UK's exciting and challenging Live Art community, find new collaborators, and expand my video practice.

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Appendix

Image Sources

Figure 1. Jackson Pollock image:

blanchardmodernart.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/abstract-expressionism.html

Figure 2. HBO production still of *The Artist Is Present*:

www.imdb.com/media/rm4251955200/tt2073029

Figure 3. St. Peter's Square source: AP/NBC News/Instagram

Figure 4. Image captions of the artists' websites:

www.lizclarke.org, www.natashaproductions.com, www.xanthegresham.co.uk

Figure 5. Carolee Schneemann photo: Original photo by Anthony Mccall,

www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/view_interior_scroll.php

Figure 6. Liz Clarke *The Last Trick* at The Cube: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 7. Liz Clarke *The Last Trick* at The Cube: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 8. Xanthe Gresham image: Xanthe Gresham

Figure 9. Liz Clarke *Filth Queen* at Bristol May Fest: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 10. Liz Clarke *Filth Queen* at Bristol May Fest: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 11. Liz Clarke *KKK* at The Cube: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 12. Liz Clarke *KKK* at The Cube: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 13. Xanthe Gresham *Baba Yaga* at Soho Theatre: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 14. Xanthe Gresham *Baba Yaga* at Soho Theatre: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 15. Natasha Davis image: Natasha Davis

Figure 16. Natasha Davis image: Natasha Davis

Figure 17. Natasha Davis image: Natasha Davis

Figure 18. Natasha Davis *100 Objects*: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 20. Xanthe Gresham image: Xanthe Gresham

Figure 21. Xanthe Gresham *Goddess to Go*: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 22. Xanthe Gresham *Baba Yaga* at Soho Theatre: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 23. Xanthe Gresham image: Xanthe Gresham

Figure 24. Xanthe Gresham *Ururu*: Barbara Droth video still

Figure 25. Xanthe Gresham *Baba Yaga* at Soho Theatre: Barbara Droth video still