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Presence at a distance – Alastair MacLennan performing drawing in lockdown

Manuscript

Abstract

How can the ‘liveness’ of performance be sustained through mediated presence? How can artists engage with audiences at times of enforced physical isolation? These questions have come to the fore during the global pandemic and coincide with the launch of the Alastair MacLennan Archive website at Duncan of Jordanstone School of Art & Design, University of Dundee. This conjunction added urgency to our existing questions of how to create a ‘living archive’ of performative engagement with the body, context and legacy of MacLennan’s historical performance art practice. His ‘actuations’ have defined a way of working within performance art engaged with the durational unfolding of images and actions ‘in-situ’ and responding to various sites and contexts, most often through the co-presence of live encounter at the heart of the work’s aesthetic experience. This article explores MacLennan’s redevelopment of practice within lockdown conditions in response to readjusted curatorial formats of performance art festivals in Poland, China, Hong Kong and England. I will also outline and evaluate the online event *IN AND EASE* and the exhibition *LIM(I)NAL*, which I co-curated with Adam Lockhart between November-December 2020 to rethink curating performance, liveness and engagement in times of pandemic.

Introduction

How can the liveness of performance be sustained through mediated presence? How can artists engage with audiences at times of physical isolation? These questions have come to the fore for performance artists, archivists, curators, and audiences during the global pandemic. They have

been no less impactful for a collaborative curatorial project I initiated around the Alastair MacLennan Archive at Duncan Jordanstone School of Art & Design, University of Dundee. In this project, the experience of ‘presence at a distance’, whether in space or time, was explored to create a ‘living archive’ of performative engagement with the body, context and legacy of MacLennan’s practice. MacLennan’s ‘actuations’ have defined a specific mode of performance art that is engaged with the durational unfolding of images and actions ‘in-situ’ in response to a range of sites and contexts, and most often with a sense of live encounter, or co-presence, at the heart of the work’s aesthetic experience. His live work is typically presented in performance art festivals and so dependent on international mobility, which has ceased due to COVID-19 related restrictions. Conceiving a curatorial project engaging with the artist’s physical archive became increasingly difficult in logistical terms during the pandemic due to restrictions on physical exhibition making and public assembly. We found the eventual solution to this and broader questions of overcoming the gap between performance and its reception in time and space in the artist’s redevelopment of practice within lockdown conditions. Unable to travel and confined to either his home or studio in Belfast, MacLennan’s daily drawing practice became a prolific and multi-faceted approach to performance that enabled him, through working with Jordan Hutchings, to produce new photographic and video-based work. This article explores how this new body of work was made in response to the adjusted curatorial formats of performance art festivals in Poland, England, China, and Hong Kong. I will also outline and evaluate in comparison my role as a companion to this process in co-curating, with Adam Lockhart, the event *IN AND EASE* and exhibition *LIM(I)NAL* to rethink curating performance, liveness and engagement with audiences online in the times of a pandemic.

Alastair MacLennan's actuations

Once described as ‘the most important Scottish artist you’ve never heard of’ (The Scotsman, 2017), Alastair MacLennan needs little, if any, introduction in the world of performance art. He has produced over 600 context-specific and often long-durational ‘actuation’ across the globe for over forty years. Examples include *MAEL* (Glasgow, 1996), a dimly lit installation of burnt-out cars in the midst of which stood MacLennan wearing black clothes, balaclava and holding a pair of child’s white sandals, bearing witness over a continuous duration of 7 hours to the naming of the dead from the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Another is *Days and Nights* (London, 1981), when over a continuous duration of 144 hours, MacLennan repetitively paced an oblong circle of flour marking the Acme Gallery’s interior perimeter. Boris Nieslony, his long-time collaborator in the performance collective Black Market International recalled (Nieslony 2003, p. 49.) experiencing an ‘indefinable feeling’ and being captured by the ‘energy’ and the ‘charged emotion’ of the space while encountering MacLennan’s performance live for the first time in 1989. Nieslony’s attraction to MacLennan’s auratic aesthetic aligned well with Black Market’s operating principle as an ‘open system of BEGEGNUNG (encountering) without fixed spaces or fixed themes’ (Nieslony, 1999.), and so he invited MacLennan to begin working with the group. Black Market International’s work has, in turn, has contributed to an idiomatic form of performance where artists perform alone and together simultaneously, in parallel, as a microcosm of interconnection, similar to contemporary groups such as Bbeyond with whom MacLennan works in Belfast and elsewhere to this day. While well known then for his

influential, signature solo works and group collaborations, MacLennan has also developed a long-term collaboration with Sandra Johnston since 2009, whose work together displays a mutually dialogic and pedagogic quality of relevance to the *IN AND EASE* event I'll discuss later.

MacLennan conceives his works according to the Buddhist principles he has studied and practised since being a young artist in the 1970s. These principles reject binary thinking, seek integration (or 'interfusion') of art and life, privilege being present in the 'actual' moment, and engage with our surrounding through 'real' rather than metaphoric actions. His term 'actuation' relates to these principles by connecting the verb 'to actuate', meaning 'to cause, to function', and the word 'actual', which means 'existing in fact as real, distinct from the ideal' (MacLennan, n.d.). MacLennan has also explained (Stewart and MacLennan, 1983) that being present to him means coming to terms with 'aspects of living which are raw and problematic, but also convey means to overcome escapist attitudes and negative forces we allow to infiltrate our lives.' As expressed in Bakhtinian terms by Roddy Hunter (2003, p.184.) MacLennan's actuations ask us to be 'answerable' in our thoughts and deeds in the respective worlds of culture and life 'to realise that each of us can have "no alibi"'. Presence becomes co-presence during the real-time unfolding of an actuation's negotiation of multiple subject-object relations as an indivisible and non-hierarchical entity. An artwork as a flat ontology.

As MacLennan's works are so grounded in a shared situational and relational experience of co-presence, through which liveness is pivotal, engaging with his work at a historical distance

through forms of documentation already presents questions and challenges. His archive reveals a meticulous approach to photographic documentation, however, including through his longstanding relationship with Jordan Hutchings who has photographed his work under direction for many years. Still, the question of how the liveness essential to MacLennan's practice might adapt to pandemic conditions of enforced physical distance and restricted sharing of space with others remains.

Working at a distance during the pandemic

Unable to travel and present his work as 'actual', which is to say live, co-present performance (A MacLennan, 2021, personal communication, 12th February 2021), MacLennan has made work in the surroundings of his home and studio in Belfast. This practice has engaged recording and documentation in different ways, principally as performance-drawing and action-for-camera made for public dissemination through online, hybrid (online/offline) events and physical exhibitions in documentary formats, including video and digital photography. Translating a performance practice grounded in the shared real-time experience of physical situations has not been straightforward. This is not because the artist is against the role of documentation within performance practice. As said, his archive reveals meticulous photographic documentation of years of performance on thousands of slides. But the absence of other documentary formats, such as film or video, suggest less confidence in moving image recording. Perhaps this is because film and video may be more easily substitute the 'actual' performance, or more probably because the moving image lens tolerates the slow, durational unfolding of imagery and actions in MacLennan's work less easily. Gray Watson (2003, p. 12.) outlined the view that performance as

video or film documentation ‘can encourage in the viewer a false sense that they have actually seen what the performance was like when in reality the nature of the experience will be entirely different.’ Given these concerns regarding the recorded moving image, it might seem surprising that during the pandemic MacLennan accepted invitations to submit performance in video form for performance art festivals in Poland, England, China, and Hong Kong. However, as I will argue here, MacLennan’s videos should not be considered as documentation but as artworks that engage audiences differently from live performance and draw on the artist’s ability to make work in response to a new context.

Amongst MacLennan’s recent videos is *VIAL AVAIL (presence of absence)* (2020), a four-part body of video work deriving from his continuous studio-based drawing practice and one ‘actual’ performance in his garden in Greenisland, Belfast on 2nd May. It comprises four versions of a 7:36 minute-long video, shot and edited with Jordan Hutchings’ help. In version ‘a’ MacLennan sits at the metal skeleton entrance of what once might have been a greenhouse, its glass missing and overgrown by wild greenery. His figure is framed centrally and clothed black. He wears a white respiratory mask and a broken pair of sunglasses with white and red tape hanging from his neck to his feet, all signature MacLennan imagery. To his left and behind semi-transparent glass are his drawings. In front of him is a bucket. He picks up the drawings one-by-one, presents them to the camera and then sets them on fire with a lighter before dropping them into the bucket. In version ‘b’, the video footage moves backwards, so it looks like the artist is ‘unburning’ the drawings. Versions ‘c’ and ‘d’ also play the video sequence forward and backwards, but this time the image is cropped, revealing only see the artist’s hands and the drawings in close-up. The soundtrack on all four versions is the same and never reversed, thus not following the same logic

as the visual image sequence. As in many previous performances, the soundtrack is a list of spoken words, this time selected as ‘the result of blinkered thinking and “selected facts” in what constitutes “news”’ (Alastair MacLennan, 2020). MacLennan clarified through later email correspondence (A MacLennan, personal communication, 10th February 2021) that he took verbs from daily newspapers, working from the front pages through to the back pages, which he then brought to the present tense.

These four videos emerge from MacLennan’s daily drawing practice, the performative aspects of which has become more pronounced as part of his studio work since March 2020. One process has been to draw with both hands simultaneously, using his peripheral vision while focusing on an object – such as a soaked and scrunched up paper tissue – placed between two A2 size sheets of paper. Regarding the ‘blank page as a metaphor of infinity, out of which everything manifests, and into which all recedes, endlessly’ he draws with materials that ‘normally’ don’t mix, like oil, charcoal and ink, to experiment with their material ‘interbeing’ (A MacLennan, personal communication, 6th October 2020). Each drawing, considered by the artist as both a singular ‘entity’ and ‘as part of a continuous “flow”’, are laid out on the studio floor for days to dry he continues to produce other drawings. Once dried, he balances the compositions with added texts, marks and other materials. The making of drawings is sometimes guided by particular rules using the I Ching as a reference point. Jordan Hutchings continuously documents the action of drawing and its outcomes as artworks as digital photographic images. The drawings seen being burnt in the *VIAL AVAIL (presence of absence)* videos were those that MacLennan was not satisfied with as works in themselves from the hundreds he produced so far. Those drawings otherwise selected for the numbered edition, *A WAIVE*, have been gifted by MacLennan to each

curator of the *VIAL AVAIL (presence of absence)* video performance with the suggestion of a parallel physical exhibition of unique works on paper. The remainder of the drawings, both physical and digitally photographed, are retained for later addition to his archive held at Duncan of Jordanstone School of Art and Design, Dundee, once the lockdown is over.

Online, offline, hybrid curatorial formats

Curators of performance art worldwide needed to quickly rethink their approach to planned events and festivals in light of the pandemic. Adaptation of online, offline or hybrid formats of display seemed the immediate alternative to cancellation. Working curatorially through these formats resulted in the exploration of synchronous and asynchronous liveness experienced by audiences, one way or another, at a physical distance. In response, artists like MacLennan also needed to decide whether to present work live and online, seemingly the closest to what MacLennan termed ‘actual’ performance, or as pre-recorded action for the camera. One privileges the importance of being ‘live’ together through co-presence in time, while the other strikes a balance between the mediated nature of live presence and the ability to retain greater control over the work’s composition while allowing it to be transmitted and displayed more flexibly.

MacLennan made *VIAL AVAIL (presence of absence)* in response to invitations from Poland, England, China and Hong Kong to participate at a distance. The curatorial contexts and formats of these programmes were varied. In Poland, the performance programme of the 2020 edition of

CONTEXTS Festival of Ephemeral Art (Sokołowsko, 23-26 July) was curated by Marta Czyż and Malgorzata Sady in two sections titled ‘local choreographies’ and ‘loneliness’. ‘Local choreographies’ consisted of exhibitions and performances on-site, which were also streamed online to engage with a potentially global audience. In contrast, ‘loneliness’ comprised only of pre-recorded works (documentation of performance or performance-for-camera), which were projected in a cinema for local audiences during the festival and later streamed (but not archived) on the festival’s website (konteksty.live), and Facebook page. MacLennan’s *VIAL AVAIL ‘a’ (presence of absence)* was shown as part of the ‘loneliness’ programme on the 26th July. As explained to me by the curator (M Sady, personal communication, 13th February 2021), the artist also posted a selection of ‘actual’ drawings of *A WAIVE* to be exhibited on-site. These however did not arrive in time for the festival and was instead streamed as a 4-minute slideshow on the 23rd July, using Jordan Hutchings digital photographs of the works. *VIAL AVAIL ‘b’ (Presence of Absence)* was presented in England on the 1st June – a month before version ‘a’ in Poland – by the artist-led group,]performance space[, at the launch of their *]ps[screens* project on www.performancespace.org, and through the window of their physical space as part of *Last Fridays Lockdown* programme of the Folkstone Fringe. Here MacLennan’s work was paired with *17*, a 10-minute video piece by Alicia Radage (2020) which explored ‘queer ecologies and intuitive scribing’. *VIAL AVAIL ‘c’ (presence of absence)* was shown in China on a flat-screen monitor as part of the artist’s solo exhibition curated for the *8th GUYU Action Contemporary Performance Art Festival* at Xi’an Xishi Center for Contemporary Art, China, between 10-23 September 2020. As seen on the photographic documentation on GUYU ACTION Facebook page (10th September 2020), this physical exhibition also included nos. 65-86 of MacLennan’s *A WAIVE* drawings, displayed framed on a wall, as well as a selection of other objects, such as an

old copy of the I CHING (Book of Changes), and a handless, legless, headless torso sculpture. The objects, arranged in the space by the curator in the absence of the artist, included those that MacLennan left there during a previous visit (A MacLennan, personal communication, 20th February 2021). Finally, *VIAL AVAIL 'd' (presence of absence)* was streamed by The Originals, an artist's group in Hong Kong, on their Facebook page (The Originals, 8th May 2020). This was the only out of four curatorial contexts that used an online platform rather than presented the work in analogue format, or one-off streamed event.

Like these other curators of MacLennan's works, Adam Lockhart and I had to devise an online curatorial strategy to present the Alastair MacLennan Archive as a performatively engaged 'living archive' during the pandemic. To this end, we conceived the exhibition *LIM(I)NAL*, and event *IN AND EASE* was the first curatorial project developed with the artist since the arrival of his archive in Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design – his 1960s alma mater – in 2019. Our strategy combined Lockhart's ongoing digitisation of the archive with a new multi-modal research project, 'What is a Living Archive? Curating the Unruly Archives of Contemporary Art?' I have initiated to explore new performative, collaborative and participatory approaches to curatorial research and interaction with time-based art archives. The unfolding dynamics, problems, and questions raised by the different approaches to presenting *VIAL AVAIL (presence of absence)* above outlined some of the research territory the 'Living Archives' project is designed to explore.

LIM(I)NAL and IN AND EASE

The online exhibition component, *LIM(I)NAL*, emerged from conversations between MacLennan, Lockhart and I about how to make the artist's already described drawing-as-performance work publicly available as a living art archive. The exhibition presents digital photographic documentation of drawings from the *A WAIVE* series side by side with others received through an open call for drawings responding to the artist's instructions, as follows:

1. Choose one of the following scores:

A: Draw your breathing process

B: Do a drawing in which 'looking' transitions to 'seeing'.

C: Draw your sense of actual (not conceptual) 'interfusion' between the primary elements (earth, water, fire, air)

2. Make a portrait format drawing on paper with your chosen implement(s)

These instructions provide an insight into the artist's working process and encourage an understanding of the performative dimensions of mark-making, of drawing-as-performance. The growing time-based sequence of drawings displayed on the website as a continuous loop expressed a state of 'becoming' exhibited and archived in the same instance. The exhibition evolved 'live' over two months during November-December 2020 and is now accessible as 'archived' on the project website (*LIM(I)NAL*, 2020) for future access.

An online event *IN AND EASE* (2020), as titled by MacLennan, accompanied the exhibition. Conceived as a colloquium of practitioners exploring the subject of MacLennan's approach to drawing-as-performance, the event took place via Zoom on 26th November between 6-8 pm. The event's centrepiece was a live, synchronous drawing workshop led by MacLennan which enabled participants to work/perform alone but together at a time of physical and social isolation, on the 'drawing breath' score to produce drawings for the online exhibition, *LIM(I)NAL*. The

workshop was framed by contributions from Sandra Johnston, Roddy Hunter and Tania Kovats as artists whose practice intersects with MacLennan's in different ways.

Roddy Hunter, who has known MacLennan's work since the late 1980s and written about his practice more than once, created a video work, *Drawing Remains, Drawings Remain* (Hunter, 2020), comprised a performed reading of a text he wrote for MacLennan's exhibition catalogue *LIE TO LAY* (Hunter, 2017). The video work drew performatively on writing as a textual and visual editing process to align particular images of MacLennan's drawings between 1976-2020 with a spoken word soundtrack. It offered a reading of the symbiotic 'both/and' relationship between performance and drawing as 'two sides of the same coin as action and reflection' and of 'the images imagined to become actions, to be later embodied, to score and be scored as an inscription on the surface.' (Hunter 2017, p. 41.) The video – now archived on the Alastair MacLennan Archive – expands on the earlier written piece by rendering its visual poetry on the page performative through moving image and speech.

Sandra Johnston, a longtime collaborator of MacLennan's, had observed before the colloquium that drawing had become 'the practice of choice for many artists working through covid from the blank page forward' (S Johnson, 2020, Facebook, 6th November). In her presentation for *IN AND EASE* (Johnson, 2020), she discussed her interest in the discipline and described her relationship to drawing breathing as a kind of 'nervous attunement', an uneasy process of finding a rhythm in making a mark on paper through following the changing inner energy of the body. She likened 'drawing breath' to jumping into cold water, where the first minutes are about

fighting the substance, the material, to the point when the body finds a way to align breathing with movement and ‘the discipline of drawing evaporates’ allowing ‘something else to intervene’. She shared images of two drawings, each one square meter in dimension, that she made in response to MacLennan’s ‘drawing breath’ score. One was made by drawing continuously for two hours with both hands simultaneously while moving around a table with her eyes closed. The other was made by working on one side of the paper for the first hour before switching to the other side of the table. She read a text about the bodily experience of breathing while making these drawings, describing it as ‘being alert to the climate inside oneself’ allowing ‘the hands to do a complicated dance on the page’ to chart the sensation that defines the drawing outside on paper. Johnson’s practice of responding to the score at a distance built on her memory of years of collaboration with MacLennan – of being co-present in an actual performance – as her guiding principle. The artist compared the process of finding a rhythm in drawing breathing to finding moments of ‘equilibrium’ in the lived experience of drawing together with MacLennan over the six-day duration of their collaborative performance *Aligning* at Customs House Gallery in South Shields (2015). As she concluded, the moment of equilibrium in both drawing and live performance is ‘the perfect point of connection’ where materials, bodies and actions – often with different characteristics – ‘interfuse’.

The third contributor, Tania Kovats has a longstanding practice of exploratory drawing that holds parallels with MacLennan’s interests and which the colloquium presented an opportunity to draw together, so to speak, in dialogue. Trained in sculpture, Kovats’ explores drawing through an expanded field, and appropriately for the colloquium, has a particular interest in the relationship between drawing and meditation. In her presentation, she distinguished between drawing as a

process of material exploration rather than of creating representations of a preconceived mental image or space. Kovats revealed a performative approach to making a body of drawing work by bringing experiences of drawing water and drawing breath, quite uncannily recalling Johnston's earlier discussion. She shared a process of flooding paper with ink and seawater and then letting the drawing emerge as the salt crystallises on the surface, sharing an interest with MacLennan in enabling material agency to determine the work while questioning the importance of the artist's intentionality. In her response to MacLennan's score, Kovats' material sensibility extended to drawing *with* the body. She described drawing breath as 'emptying her lungs on the paper' while breathing into a small puddle of ink which rises into a bubble filled with exhalation and allowing it to burst as her response to MacLennan's score.

Conclusion: Liveness, digitisation and distance

In this article, I explored a body of video work and related drawings by Alastair MacLennan to look at how the artist adapted his live performance work to new conditions enforced by the global pandemic. I looked at how he sustained 'liveness' as a mediated presence in the context of online and hybrid exhibitions during the pandemic. In deciding to send different versions of his action-for-camera video work to various festivals, MacLennan has made a judgment that distance in time and space, in other words being 'less live', might not undermine the quality of the work's aesthetic encounter as might be thought. In the four video versions of one 'actual' performance, the artist used editing as a cinematic tool to control the aesthetic experience aligned with the principles of 'interfusion' (both/and). He not only included zooming in and out to allow both full-frame and close-up view but also created a reverse imagery of burning and 'unburning'

of drawings, an action which could not have been experienced in an ‘actual’ performance. Thus, the four videos exemplify Philip Auslander’s argument (2014) about the ‘performativity of performance documentation’ where constitute, rather than illustrate, a performance. Furthermore, by sending different versions of the video to varying festivals under the same title, MacLennan’s performance has been emerging in time over the last year. As a body of work, the four videos will be accessible on the archive website from May 2021 to coincide with this essay’s publication.

In analysing the curatorial contexts of MacLennan’s works over the last year, we might also ask how curatorial practice around performance art has adjusted to performance at a distance? In most cases, the curators’ approach remained ‘analogue’ as they only used online platforms to show pre-recorded documentation or performance-for-camera. From this perspective, *IN AND EASE* and *LIM(I)NAL* was very different as it engaged with the archiving, afterlives, and future engagement with the work as part of the online display. The online exhibition and the colloquium at once presented and archived the performance, thus opening up a way to develop Alastair MacLennan’s archive as an active, performative curatorial project. Curating living archives was initially concerned with performatively engaging the historical distance between the work as documentation and the present moment of engagement. MacLennan’s work has compounded and compelled this distance by the need for ‘co-presence’ across geographical and historical sites, which was best achieved through *IN AND EASE*. At the same time, *LIM(I)NAL* launched the archive website as an accumulative depository of digitised documentation and as the basis of a living, breathing archive generating new work and insights.

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