

The Strange Geometry of Time

The Strange Geometry of Time is the performance outcome of a practice-based investigation into haunting, temporality, and hospitality - the idea of 'opening oneself to ghosts', framed through the lens of Hauntology (Derrida, 1994). These key concepts derived from Derrida's theory are addressed through the process of making performance, as they articulate ways of thinking through and about practice in relation to the development of compositional strategies and dramaturgical processes. This embodied practice situated at the intersection of dance and theatre aims to contribute new knowledge to this field through an interrogation of how these terms that are inherent to the conceptual framework become implicit to the practice. This dramaturgy of haunting is investigated through the methodology of inhabiting abandoned spaces, reinhabiting what has been emptied of the human where the spectral or ghostly haunts as remains or remnants of spectral trace.

Derrida's concept of Hauntology prioritises haunting as an act that occurs in time, through what is defined as a disjuncture of time, which reconfigures our normative understanding and experience of time. Central to Derrida's concept of Hauntology, is what he states as 'time out of joint', which points to the breakdown of successive linear time, that is time as a series of 'now' events that reach back into the past and forward into the future. This temporal disjuncture queers a normative understanding of time delineated of past, present and future, as 'a general temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves.' (Derrida 1994, p. 70) This atemporal notion of time is regarded as a 'necessary condition for the successful act of return, or haunting.' (Shaw, 2020, p.7)

This practice aims to disrupt sequential narrative-time in order to destabilise a present 'now', which is achieved through developing compositional strategies that sought to interrupt, disrupt, repeat, and delay actions in order to create a discontinuous temporality in the performance. Through compositional strategies of 'looping', 'emergence' and 'discontinuity', the performance sought to make implicit the ways in which haunting disrupts temporality. Thus, generating an experiential sense of temporality for the audience as a disjointed fissure, a necessary condition for spectres or ghosts to appear in and through gaps, as Shaw says 'absences in the present.' (2018, p. 2). The following text from *The Strange Geometry of Time* conveys this sense of haunting:

There was a girl, who just seemed to come out of nowhere, she just seemed to come out of nowhere, and then she just, she just... she just seemed to vanish.

This text, as with other visual and verbal texts in the performance, are repeated or looped, for example, the second time this text is spoken it is repeated by both performers as one echoes the other, so the text becomes a trace of what occurred before, and thus, leaves another trace. This is interrupted by the sound of a radio abruptly stopping the flow of action on stage, creating a discontinuity which erases the previous action as if it 'just vanishes' for something else to 'emerge'. Throughout the performance this strategy of disrupting the linear flow of action generates an experience of uncertainty and doubt about what is actual and real, what is stable and solid. To present the idea that existence and time are not so solid and substantial as we might believe them to be, so as to cast doubt on normative and stable understandings of actuality and reality.

Haunting begins with an invitation to summon ghosts in an uninhabited site. What might reinhabit this abandoned site? Derrida poses the question 'What if it were the Thing itself, the cause of the very thing that one is seeking and that makes one seek?' (1994, p. 218) This paradoxical search implies that the Ghost instigates the seeking, the 'Thing' is actually what makes one seek it, the Ghost desires to be sought and seen. These ghosts need

bodies, they need the living to appear, as Derrida asks 'The living body, mine, unique, is but a common place, the space in which thoughts and ideas {...} entities are gathered, is it not the body of ghosts?' (Derrida, 1994, p.161) The body is a haunted body that opens itself to the 'other' as it is responsive to these strangers that have been excluded or chased away. Through this process of incorporating the ghost as the body 'is constituted by spectres of which it becomes host and which it assembles in the haunted community of a single body.' (Derrida, 1994, p. 166) The ghosts are taken in, and it could be said they are already within, they are perhaps strangers to us within us, but they are the most intimate of strangers as Derrida says 'more intimate with one than one is oneself.' (1994, p. 216) These ideas present opportunities for creativity, as an initial communication with ghosts is based on the premise that it is the very thing that we were seeking that makes us seek. (Derrida, 1994)

What is the spectre/ghost that instigates the seeking? What is calling? Through a process of recycling material, reconfiguring early images and vocal texts spectres begin to reveal themselves. This process of communing with ghosts through the idea of a haunted body, as if and the performer's bodies become hosts (as distinct from possessed) to the guests/Geist's - as Derrida says 'one must possess it without losing oneself, without being possessed of it.' (1994, p. 162) This was an invitation to the imagination to suspend our disbelief and to open ourselves to the possibility of ghosts. Through these processes the ghosts are 'taken in' through this act of 'hosting', as if we are living with them in this space which is a community of ghosts and they live within us. This approach is not one where we know what ghosts will make themselves present, but one which is entered into unconditionally, to be open to what presents itself, as Shaw says 'such unconditional welcoming is key.' (Shaw, 2018, p. 10) The processes undertaken in the rehearsals are framed through this dialogic approach to engaging with ghosts, as if the site and the bodies of the performer's 'host' the other, and are an invitation to the spectral effect through which we encounter the other in ourselves. The ghost haunts these liminal sites, the subject is haunted by ghosts that belong 'not to us or it', as it is in this interstitial opening to the other where haunting occurs.

At the beginning is a haunting, an invitation to the ghost through a portal - an entrance, a door through which the guest/Geist/ghost will enter. *The Strange Geometry of Time* begins with an entrance to a spectral house that invites ghost/s, and through the duration of the performance will increasingly become a haunted site - unheimlich - unhomely. The house as the site of haunting is also its own ghostly presence or absence, as it is both there and not there as it is represented through projected windows that fade in and out (See image below). It is as if these fleeting portals open and close to ghosts. This ephemeral quality created through use of the lights conveyed a virtual space, as Jameson states 'hauntology encourages us to recognise that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be, that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.' (Jameson quoted in Shaw 2018, p. 2) The lights and use of floating objects aim to break down the 'density and solidity' of space, as if the material reality of the space was not so 'self-sufficient', as if other kinds of existences were present in the space that might be constituted differently.

The suspension of clothes, and use of wire suspended to float the clothes through space, the fans to make objects such as paper patterns dance of their own accord, all suggested that the space was not dense and solid, more porous and fleeting a space within which hover. Shaw suggests that 'Haunting its own ontology, hauntology draws attention to the ephemeral nature of the present, and offers the spectre as neither being nor non-being, alive or dead.' (2018, p. 2) The idea of an in-between liminal site within which figures could appear and disappear, sought to express this idea of a state of existence that neither this or that, alive or dead but suggests existences that hover in between.



The Strange Geometry of Time conveys a sense that the dead refuse to settle. This is the call from the 'unsettled dead' as Shildrick (2020) refers to them. They are not only voices from the past but also voices from the future, the not yet born as Derrida says 'The passage of time of the present comes from the future to go towards the past, towards the going of the gone.' (1994, p. 28). Going to what is 'gone', to something wronged that needs to be responded to? How do we respond and not turn away from the yearnings and longing of the unburied dead? This embodied practice takes-in, takes within 'others' that have been 'lost' and are 'gone' and realises these 'others within'.

This unsettling of the 'unsettled' is further enhanced by a continual questioning process, where questions of existence are foregrounded, for example: 'Who's is this?' and 'Does anyone know who this belongs to?' and 'What's that?', through this process questions of existence were highlighted to address the concept of 'haunted existence'. It was foreseen that normative binaries of absence/presence were destabilised and made indistinct, as if the stage is a liminal site of insubstantial figures appearing and disappearing. These figures were conceived of as the ghostly yearnings and longings of 'Others', those who have been unheard, unseen, unrecognised; spectral presences. *The Strange Geometry of Time* conceives of the spectral not as 'remembered human beings but as remnants and remainders.' (Shildrick, 2020, p. 170) The tropes of the clothes that recur throughout the performance signify these remainders and remnants of lives, and it became apparent through the process that these 'Others' were as Shildrick says 'institutionalised and othered groups who have failed to meet normative standards.' (2020, p170) The dramaturgy was constructed around the idea of opening oneself to the 'Other', as ghostly remainder or remnant that speaks to the present haunting the living from within.

Derrida's analysis of the ghost as a conceptual metaphor disturbs the notion of the singular existence of an autonomous self-referential 'I', as the subject is viewed through a hauntological perspective. This destabilises a sense of autonomy of self and 'encourages an 'existential orientation' in the haunted subject, making the living consider the precarious boundary between being and nonbeing.' (Shaw, 2018, p. 1) Throughout *The Strange Geometry of Time* the singularity of the self is continually put into doubt as the subject/s is conceived of as haunted by 'Others'. This understanding of a multiplicity and mutability of a

nonself-referential 'I' was central to the development a haunted subject, within which the 'other' is experienced as haunting. This can be seen in the scene represented in the image below, in the performance this scene stages two figures in a suspended state, as if in limbo, their bodies transform from a singular existence to become multiple mutable existences. The following text is spoken in unison as if it doesn't belong to either of them or both of them, as it suggests that they are becoming another state through transforming from one form to another; becoming mutable as different forms are embodied in one body:

There are two...one hears a voice get rid of one, and one says...don't move... I'm counting. I'm counting on you.

There are two, one leaves and one stays, one just can't get away. One runs, two run, one remains...she's on the bed she's in the kitchen, she's spinning down the hall, she's out of the door and she's up on the road....and she's wondering who and what and where....she is....she's changing, she keeps changing...

...are you here or not here? (pause) Am I here or not here? (pause)

She'd like to change her mind...she'd like to change her dress, this one or this one? (pause) She changes... her body. She changes her shape. Is she a ghost (pause), a dead body, an animal, a vegetable? Or just this?

Her, sitting here? (pause)

One hears two, who is calling? Laughing? crying?

A voice says...if you want to leave... just breathe....(both breathe)

She's hoping, I'm calling, She's longing, I'm laughing, She's aching, I'm running, She's chasing, We're falling, She's flying, up the wall and she's onto the ceiling, floating upwards, I'm dissolving, She's disappearing, I'm dividing....myself in two... one...find me.



The performance interweaves a story of the 'Young Girl', full of hope and passion who finds a vibrant dress and dances with abandon, with other stories that emerge and then discontinue, picked up again in fragments, as remnants of fractured moments that count for a life. There is a suggestion of her being too 'wild' for the world she exists in, her yearning to 'escape' and run to the mountains contrast with the claustrophobic nature of the other stories and the lives they have to offer her. This figures in *The Strange Geometry of Time* convey

unmarked lives that pass in front of us like impressions, but don't perhaps 'touch' us. These are the spectres of the 'ungrieved' (Butler, 2006) is presented in *The Strange Geometry of Time*, as Butler states:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be

grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively

human: what counts as a liveable life and a grievable death? (Butler, 2006, p. xiv)

Thus, the practice contributes to knowledge in the field of performance as it addresses how we rethink binaries of life/death through staging spectral presence; as figures that emerge and are understood beyond normative life/death binaries. The practice's methods and processes stage haunting not as a narrative of haunting but makes haunting implicit in the performance's fragmented and fractured forms, drawing on compositional strategies that 'queer time' (Shildrick, 2020), to rethink our debt and responsibility to the spectral presences of the 'no-longer'. This deconstructive dramaturgy of haunting prises open an interstitial space, where the past returns or arrives through these 'fissures, gaps and points of crossover.' (Shaw, 2018, p. 2) These outcomes of the research has led to findings that concur with, and contribute to an understanding of Shildrick's concept of 'a hauntological ethics, {...} rather than perpetuating the brute binary of living and non/living {...} indicates a state not of inertness or of the inorganic but of, at very least Spectral Presence.' (Shildrick, 2020, p. 171)

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