

OUT OF SIGHT

Adrian Heathfield

Forced Entertainment and the Limits of Vision

Void Spaces, the latest exhibition emerging from the Sheffield-based ensemble Forced Entertainment and photographer Hugo Glendinning, brings together a series of their recent works for the screen and underlines the unique and vital position the company's work occupies within the current British art scene. Over the last five years Forced Entertainment's unusually long and distinguished history in experimental theatre has increasingly turned towards other media: most notably durational performance, installation, works for video and for CD-rom. These latter projects have been founded on the creative collaboration between director Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning, whose photographs have accompanied much of the theatrical work. Whilst the individual pieces for CD-rom and video seen in projection as part of *Void Spaces* reflect a powerful engagement with the properties of their discrete forms, it is interesting to think between the work for theatre spaces and the pieces made for the screen. At first these works may seem formally distinct. After all, performance is a live synthesis of sound, light, text, and bodies in real space, generating unrepeatable moments. As an expressive form it is based on the living presence of the performer's body and the communication that arises between that body and the body of the spectator. CD-rom and video however, are essentially reproductive forms: when played the visual object remains the same guaranteeing a certain repeatability. Here expression is delivered through a flat, pixelated medium, and although the image may fuse sound, light, text and bodies, these will be rigidly held in representation and delivered to the spectator programmatically. However, in a culture saturated by simulation, these kind of distinctions between the live event and the recorded representation are never as stable as they seem and Forced Entertainment's work proves a poor case for anyone interested in firmly resurrecting the boundary between the two. For if Forced Entertainment's live work has been motivated by one impulse, it is to see what understandings of contemporary experience emerge when the art work dissolves the divide between the original and the secondary. In this deliberate confusion the lines between the spontaneous and the pre-scripted, reality and fiction, the immediate and the distant, bodies and texts, eventhood and representation, and the live and the recorded are often made to fade away. The insights, emotional architecture and tonality of the theatre work come from the company's persistent inhabitation of the space between binary realms like these. This concern for the ambiguity and ambivalence of liminal worlds is continued in the various works for the screen that comprise *Void Spaces*.

In theatrical performances that announce themselves as mediated, as forms of quotation, Forced Entertainment have been concerned with exploring the pre-structured nature of experience in contemporary culture. This has involved a tireless re-circulation and appropriation of familiar fictions, axioms and ideologies as a kind of testing of the cultural imaginary. All elements within a Forced Entertainment performance piece, from the performer's body to the scenery and spoken texts, are



Marina & Lee
(1991)



Cardboard Signs
(1992)

shown as part of a circular economy of cultural representation for which there is no outside. The generic slides from pantomime to opera, the appropriations from film and TV, the cardboard signs, jumble clothes, fake characters, microphone voices and second-hand language of their major works for the stage like *Marina and Lee* (1991) and *Club of No Regrets*, come to remind the spectator that although they may hold the aspiration of a pure, unfabricated life, this is a real and painful impossibility. In such circumstances they ask, what might this mean for the individual's ability to break free of the binds of culture and of representation, to find the solace of an uncorrupted truth, love and identity. If this seems a little bleak, it should be said that what Forced Entertainment value through performance is the human need and ethical necessity of this ever-failing attempt to press representation towards its 'outside'.¹ The trash works and broken rituals are part of an aesthetics of failure in which all representation misses the reality it seeks to capture. Performance stands both as the medium of this failure and the agency for the hope of restitution. In the moments of representational crash performance opens meaning and sends the spectator elsewhere. Etchells has frequently spoken of their work as art which requires the spectator to become a witness.² What separates witnessing an event from watching one is the experience of the event's excessive power. Here performance is aligned with trauma as 'the thing seen' exceeds the understanding of its witness and consequently returns to haunt her. It is possible to speak of this witnessing as having an ethical dynamic because in the moment when performance asserts representation's failure to capture reality, the art work calls into question its own values, enters a density that grips the spectator and reaches towards what cannot be said. In such moments the spectator encounters a new experience or an unthought thought; something other arises that has previously been kept out of mind or out of sight.³

In the works for video and for CD-rom the spectator's experiencing of the limits of understanding is purposefully framed within the technologies of sight. In fact it is possible to read these works as a heartfelt attack on the capacity of imaging technologies, if not vision itself, to deliver to us our lived realities. The works actively disassociate what can be seen with what can be known. Facing the screens of *Frozen Palaces* and *Nightwalks* you are placed in the position of the active seeker. Perhaps you are an intruder pacing the rooms of an unfamiliar house or a sleepwalker wandering the streets of the darkened city. However you perceive it, something needs to be found, and the spectator's work of sight is to pursue this goal by exploring places, making connections and deciphering the signs. Unless you manipulate them these works will give you nothing. The open resonance of the images and the absence of narrative structure clearly signal that as a spectator you carry a responsibility to make the work, by transforming its fragments with your associations, sense and logic. However, you move by a simulation of animation within a dead landscape: the fictional worlds are suspended in a frozen photographic moment. What's important about the role of the spectator here and the use of space is that the freedom to roam that you are ostensibly given is shown to be prescribed, to be an illusion. Again the spectator meets the limits of representation, or here the limits of what can be seen. In these works the 'aesthetics of failure' is rendered through the camera's eye. Far from the rhetoric of new technology's 'interactivity', Forced Entertainment make apparent the enclosed and restricted nature of the viewer's travels. Of course the spectator does not actually or virtually walk the rooms of the house or the streets at night: her sight moves outwards or around from a fixed point. Here the aspiration and failure of photography to fully render the real is made evident in the enclosure of flat images stitched into a fixed 360-degree turn. CD-rom seems to offer itself as a utopian cinema with you in charge of the camera's sight and then breaks its promise by rooting you to the spot. This is neither walking nor tracking, its filmic equivalent, but something more like being in the fold of an image. The spectator, placed

¹ For a discussion of the failure of representation in Forced Entertainment's theatre work see Andrew Quirk, *Searching for Redemption with Cardboard Wings*, *Forced Entertainment and the Sublime*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol 2, No 2, 1994, pp 22-35.

² See Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: New Performance & Forced Entertainment*, Routledge, 1999.

³ For a discussion of the ethics of witnessing and the force of death see Peggy Phelan, *The Space of Performance*, *Forced Entertainment's Frozen Palaces*, *artifact* 5, ed Astrid Sommer, Carz Verlag, 1999, pp 64-70.



Nightwalks
(Wormhole)
(1998)

within these densely evocative worlds, is asked to 'inhabit' the panorama, to imagine its unseen pasts and futures, to produce the stories that the screen won't tell. Caught in this visual envelope your search will forever bump against the edges of a particular sight, the final resolution of the still shot. The windows into different worlds generate complex and changing associations, but they also prove to be part of the general photographic mise-en-abyme.

Forced Entertainment have long been concerned with reusing the city as a means to unearth the traces and messages of its hidden 'alien' lives. In their earlier installation *Ground Plans for Paradise* they constructed an elaborate model metropolis crudely carved out of balsa wood, re-naming every street and every building according to their own pedestrian and elegiac logic. With their uncanny combination of stasis and movement, the liminal worlds that these CD-roms conjure are the 'natural' context for lovers of the altered state. Instantly recognisable to clubbers and insomniacs, the urban space found in *Nightwalks* is typically eerie, an 'unseen' world of littered alleys and chained doors, strange patinas of orange light, empty streets and deserted car parks. This is a city found after almost all the humanness has gone, remaining only in the stilled figures that haunt the space and the material residues of long forgotten actions. And so it goes in the maze of *Frozen Palaces*' rooms which are always held in the aftermath of some transformative act. The bullet has been shot, the corpse has bled, the party has long finished, the levitation performed, the sex is done. This is a world of belatedness, a world the spectator, like all witnesses, finds and re-lives after the event. Just as the inhabitants of these places seem strangely displaced, the experience of the spectator moving 'through' these images is one of restlessness and non-belonging. The journey never ends and the object of the search is not found. This structure of disappointment is perhaps less surprising if you think of the CD-roms more as broken love stories than as detective fictions. For as much as these works are about the search for knowledge (within worlds of crime), they also plot trajectories of desire. The nightscapes of the city and the rooms of the house are the scene for spent passions, vanished pleasures and unfulfilled longings. The wasted, sleeping, exhausted and stalled figures of *Frozen Palaces* and *Nightwalks* are held in the after-states of love or in the emptiness of being saluted, but they seem to offer a window into another state, since they look like they have known intensity and self-loss. Perhaps this is the principal search in which the spectator is engaged in the works that comprise *Void Spaces*: to crack the belatedness of the scene and its figures and to return to a lost temporality of love. In this respect *Frozen Palaces* and *Nightwalks*, bind the question of the limits of vision into the dynamics of desire. For in these works the object of the spectator's search, that 'something that needs to be found', lies forever beyond the limits of what is visible. The cursor's caress of the screen falls and falls like your hand on another's body; its pleasures are constituted by a continuous state of deferral. Your eye seeks out that thing which would make it full but it remains always out of reach.

It is this obsession with the deferral of desire and its marking at the limits of sight and language which forms a key to the video piece *Filthy Words & Phrases* also exhibited here. A document of Cathy Naden's seven hour durational performance staged especially for camera in an empty school, the piece consists of Naden chalking on a blackboard a seemingly endless list of 'obscene' terms, punctuated only by her still and contemplative outward gaze. In common with their earlier durational performance pieces such as *Speak Bitterness* and *12am: Awake & Looking Down* the aesthetic is still elemental; the work is simply composed with lists of text and repeated actions, but the frenetic acts of communal self-definition that characterised the earlier work are gone. Here the spectator is left in a bare relation with a solitary and silent figure. The phrases that Naden chalks are by turns blunt, euphemistic, innovative, juvenile, colloquial, obscure and commonplace. It would be easy to read this piece as a somewhat literal comment on the infinite capacity of human



Frozen Palaces
(1997)

invention in relation to sex (and indeed to language in general), but the performance invokes something altogether more complex and elusive. Through Naden's repeated writing and erasure of words the viewer is once again in the grip of an 'aesthetics of failure', he is made aware of the inability of language to capture the thing it describes. However, the chalked phrases fall, not simply because of the 'poverty' of language, but because they refer to the obscene, which is by definition always beyond the limit of what 'should' be seen and 'can' be said. Naden's persistent attempt to push language closer to that which evades expression becomes a play on the relation between language and desire. For as much as Naden looks outwards she also looks inwards, towards herself, in a blank self-questioning that calls on the spectator to project onto and into her psychic space, to provide her with motivations and responses. Given her alluring nonchalance the truth of these projections is never confirmed and the spectator is left to contemplate their own investment in relation to Naden's presence, the words she writes, and the idea of the obscene invoked between the two. It's a little reflexive game of dare, arising between her body and the chalk, played between her eyes and yours, and lost in the interval of her intentions and your desires.

If, as a spectator, you dare to enter the space of sexual imagination that arises here, you will doubtless find a myriad of nuances, inflections and particularities in the thought of the obscene; all of which are then swiftly passed over in Naden's acts of erasure and her cool disregard. There is a powerful breach of the cultural restriction which urges us to unthink these thoughts or to make them base and simple. Yet this is also delivered with a conscious play on the masculine ideologies inherent in the language: Naden's chalked phrases evidently come from elsewhere and her 'silence' is a register of feminine appropriation and resistance. The work's invitation and refusal, its bad gaming with the spectator's sexual imagination, its overwhelming blankness, comes as a reminder that desire is always constituted by deferral, and that consequently pleasure is never pure but is intimately bound to pain, its supposed opposite. To watch *Filthy Words & Phrases* is to enter the zone of sexual ambivalence, where the performer and spectator are both hirtively engaged and heavily alienated, a landscape of pleasure simultaneously charged and empty. As with most durational art, the long extension of the time of the work marks human aspirations with a limit: performers tire and the goals of their performance are never reached. In *Filthy Words & Phrases* this exhaustion comes in time to qualify all sexual urgencies. Naden's slow and achingly poignant rendition of the final phrases, 'BURY THE BONE, NIGHT WORKER, GO DOWN ON', takes on a deathly air. This dirty video is not without its pleasures, but they are based on an erotics of loss. Seen alongside Forced Entertainment's most recent performance projects, *Void Spaces* underlines the development in their aesthetic towards simplicity and stillness, but the exhibition also brings into a sharper and strikingly visual focus the melancholy romance that has long given the company's work its cultural address and philosophical bite. For Forced Entertainment, whether what you long for is another's body or the truth, whether you are waiting for it, with it, or thinking back on it, there will be no having what you want. The technologies of vision which animate these works will not make visible the thing you seek: it stays forever out of sight. ■



Filthy Words
& Phrases
(1998)

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