Nothing Here Yet Speaks, Again

1. Overview (or Oversight)

From Freud to Derrida, via Benjamin and Foucault, it has become clear that the forces that regulate the archive are imbricated in the insidious processes of power and social control. Conversely, the ideological and political dynamics at work in a society affect its bodies of knowledge in ways that impact on ‘lived’ experience.

Conscious of the impossibility of forgetting or overcoming these power relations, this address speaks to the desire to expand the notion of ‘archive’ in affective terms, in order to reimagine not just what knowledge does, but how it feels. In particular, my proposition is to articulate a practice of recovering bodies – bodies of experience, of culture, of discourse – bodies that are intrinsically thematised by their vanishing.

The following pronouncements will evoke a parallel between two lineages of connective narratives – that is, the neurological and ontological tropes attending phantom-limb syndrome – the recurrence of sensation in a missing limb – alongside performance modalities of representation in order to explore the re-emergence of the body in what remains, tangibly, without being seen.

My aim is to advance a theory of documents that gives a vital role to affective sensation. The forces that produce and emanate from the invisible can move us toward an ‘ethics of (dys)appearance’ that grows out of the body’s immediacy and unrepresentability. An ethics of this sort is certainly required in order to sustain and endure, rather than suppress, the disruptive events lived primarily in the flesh. Archive theorists must take seriously this proposition if they wish to make sense of what we see, hear, or feel.
2. **No-thing Here**

Phantom Limb Syndrome is the condition of persistent pain or sensation in a congenitally missing or amputated part of the body. The symptoms vary, from the impression of manipulating objects with the phantom, to the feeling of a protruding appendage there where nothing lies. Generally associated with limbs, phantoms can also be felt in the breast, parts of the face, and internal viscera. There are also known cases of phantom erections, and menstrual cramps after hysterectomy. Physiological and psychophysical factors may contribute to these manifestations but cannot account for their origin and cause; the neurological explanation for phantom limbs remains up in the air!

Beyond scientific and ontological certainty, phantom limbs appear, and reappear, as affective experiences of such (in)corporeal intensity that literally escape grasp. The condition of possibility for an uncanny reconfiguration of vision, memory, thinking, and feeling, phantom syndrome can open a critical gap for looking afresh at the social and cultural body of experience and discourse.

Scholar Vivian Sobchack’s autobiographical essay, ‘Living a ‘Phantom Limb,’ provides an account of this potential. Reflecting on her own experience of phantom phenomena following amputation of her left leg, Sobchack writes:

> During the post-operative period when I was supposedly ‘missing’ a leg […] my consciousness of my lived body’s dynamism and mutability was intensely heightened – as was my usually transparent sense of non-coincidence (if still co-presence) with ‘myself’ as both, and at once, a body subject and a body object. In particular, I became fascinated by the ambiguity not only of the reduction of my body’s boundaries and articulations of itself but also of its surprising and radical expansion.¹

¹ Vivian Sobchack, ‘Living a “Phantom Limb:” On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity,’ *Body & Society* 16 (September 2010): 51-67 (pp.51-2).
Drawing on existential phenomenology, Sobchack articulates the process of reassembling the body as her sense of self is constantly redefined and her corporeal figuration is, ‘at once, both new and renewed.’

Phantom feelings disturb the state of corporeal transparency that was held in place by her habitual sense of integrity opening the possibility for the body to re-emerge from the ‘forgetfulness’ of normalcy. To expose the nature of this reappearance, I shall expand on Sobchack’s own application of the work of phenomenologist Drew Leder.

In *The Absent Body*, Leder makes a distinction between two modalities of corporeal absence that he calls dis-appearance and dys-appearance. The body, he explains, in everyday perception and performance, is for the most part immersed in a state of absorption and ‘disappears’ from our direct experience. However, experiences that interrupt or disturb this habitual mode bring the body into a state of explicit awareness that Leder calls ‘dys-appearance.’

For example, (scream) YOU!!! The auditor, just a moment ago were drawn back into a tacit mode of absorption, distraction, or boredom, mostly oblivious to your body’s presence; disappeared into the acoustic gap of this experience. Yet, as I call out to you and demand an ear, an eye, your body is suddenly hailed into the congress of now, propped up and forward into a state of ‘dys-appearance’ – as it were, subject and subjected to this address. Now you see, and hear, that when the body becomes sensibly altered through change or disruption, it suddenly snaps out of self-forgetfulness coming fully to its senses.

Although dys-appearance is generally associated with malfunction or illness, it is not necessarily detractive, as Sobchack notes:

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Looking at the place from which the ‘thing’ that was my objective leg was absent, ‘no-thing’ was there. And, yet, the ‘dys-appearance’ of my leg, however vague its boundaries, was subjectively experienced as a sense of self-presence now and here. Together, however, this objective absence and subjective ‘dys-appearance’ did not make, to paraphrase Leder, a simple negativity; rather, in their conjunction, doubling and reversals, they constituted a strange positivity: the presence of an absence.

For Sobchack bodily harmony is found in a positive absence that dis-appears as a lack at the moment it dys-appears in the expansion of her newly found corporeal dimensions. Even when her phantom pain gradually disperses, some-thing still lingers: ‘[h]aving lost the “phantom,” having “no thing” there at all, nothing here yet speaks again. I feel it.’

A residual sense, an archival trace of embodied processes remains, and remains in question as its feeling summons the forgotten memory that both the physical body and the psychic fantasy of it are always shifting, from one moment to the next, in a transformative arc through which the ‘real’ body ‘appears’ as, at the very least, uncertain.

4 Vivian Sobchack, ‘Living a “Phantom Limb:” On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity,’ Body & Society 16 (September 2010): 51-67 (p.58), original emphasis.
5 Vivian Sobchack, ‘Living a “Phantom Limb:”’ On the Phenomenology of Bodily Integrity,’ Body & Society 16 (September 2010): 51-67 (p.65), my emphasis.
3. **No-thing Here Yet Speaks**

Phantoms speak of a traumatic crisis bound to an experience of loss of material presence that re-emerges as an affective trace that won’t leave us alone. Confronted with the fundamental alterity of a past presence, we feel the incontrollable compulsion to come to grips with it. The attempts to reconnect with the touching feeling of bodies that the mind cannot apprehend and the gaze cannot fix sends us searching for new echoes, resonances, and rhythms that might capture the truth of experiences lived primarily in the flesh.

In her seminal work on trauma, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth links the dynamics of traumatic haunting to the idea of an uncanny return. Her volume opens with a passage from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where the concept of the repetition compulsion is addressed through the reading of a scene from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*:

Tancred unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.

In her analysis of the belated temporality of trauma, Caruth poignantly re-turns to this haunting scenario:

Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.

As it ‘appears’, Tancred unwittingly experiences the sound of his beloved's voice as a 'phantasmatic’ return that addresses the ungraspable reality of a loss he cannot fully apprehend.

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8 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.3-4, original emphasis.
The disembodied voice evokes the notion of phantom-limb; the affective residue that bears witness to a fundamental absence, which cannot be fully relayed.

Furthermore, for Caruth, what Tancred hears is his own internal cry that utters, again, the impact of loss. Thus, the ‘ghost address’ takes on a double figure as the ‘inner voice’ that speaks for the other within the self; and as the call that hails the subject to witness the plight of an-other, for the voice demands its auditor to be in the place of/with the other.

This spectral voice re-presents and preserves the ‘wound of experience’ as a performed repetition that *dys-*appears the impact of the event bringing forth each time something different; a new witnessing. Archival research and practice should indeed pay attention to this address in all its ambiguity, allowing the possibility to connect tangible data with what lies beyond: the perceptual and sensible qualities of embodied narratives.
4. Nothing Here Yet Speaks, Again

Performance, as cultural field, theatrical framework and artistic strategy, might be described as a quest for a dilated intersubjective experience. Much of its energy and inspiration in the 1970s derived from an attempt to dissolve the materiality of the art object and expose the not-seen in the frame of experience. Its technologies convergence at the point where the physical matter of bodies meet with the psychic experience of what it is to be embodied.

Within the experiential framework of a (mainly) live event, like this one, the body can shift between dis-appearance and dys-appearance as one can either become lost to awareness of space and time, absorbed in self-thought and ruminations, or conversely, can be hailed back into the present, suddenly alert by the coming in touch with or being touched by the fabric of representation.

Creating an anatomy that re-presents lived experience but whose frame, scale and intensity exceed the ordinary, the everyday, Performance not merely uncovers a different and extraordinary time-scape, but also reflects the haunting and belated dimensions of trauma into the cultural and social.

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an event ‘experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known [...] not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.’9 Similarly, the event of performance impresses experience upon the body generating invisible receptacles of images and sense memories. These supplements that appear ‘too soon’, long before the mind can process them, are incorporated and absorbed into the practice of everyday life.

Yet, the lingering sense of something lost but still felt sometimes returns as an ‘after-affect’. These spectres of experience obstinately re-emerge only to reveal their persistence, continuation and effect, thus re-constituting the event itself. The embodied temporalities of the event of performance do away with a ‘view’ that rationally disappears its bodies after the experience, but reconnect to a ‘sense’ that relationally dys-appears its affects, languages and images into the concrete relations that emerge between bodies.

Thus performance re-surfaces as a fertile terrain to rehearse the proposition that the experience of epistemological rupture ‘feels’ like something that holds the force to generate affective registers, intra-corporeal imageries, and archival knowledge.
5. **I Feel It**

Phantoms fill our episteme through a language of affects that are not the mark of a pathology that overrides the body but a ‘repeated attention’ that brings an ear, a hand, a body to bear witness to the changing histories of the flesh. These reparative gestures can only be performed by an incorporeal archive, or what Ann Cvetkovich calls: ‘an archive of feelings.’

Like phantom feeling, the affective archive is a remainder of an event reanimated through embodied knowledge and intra-corporeal memory. Such sensory repository can find space at the chiasmic point of intersection between the visceral (im)materiality of the past and the fleshy substance of the present.

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Drew Leder expands on the ontological understanding of ‘flesh’ as the ‘primal element’ that refers to the body’s ‘Visibility’, he writes: ‘the “flesh” is a kind of circuit, a “coiling over of the visible upon the visible” […] which traverses me, but of which I am not the origin.’

Furthermore, Leder introduces the term ‘blood’ to supplement the notion of ‘Viscerality,’ constituted by the: ‘circuitry of vibrant, pulsing life which precedes the perceptual in fetal life, outruns it in sleep, sustains it from beneath at all moments.’ The visible world rests upon a visceral invisibility; they are two folds of the same sensible structure.

Now, if we think the present to be the temporal flesh; the visible dimension of actuality, the pervasive atmosphere of sexuality, the expressiveness of language, similarly, we can imagine the past to be the blood of the temporal frame of history, the sensible structure behind

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the body, the visceral depths of vibrant, pulsing life.

Then, the archive can materialise in our minds and bodies as the point of encounter that sustains the life of the conscious flesh of the present whilst extending into the visceral past. The archive of affective resonances and active forces is not merely born out of a consciousness past, or the surface of life; it is a phantom of flesh-and-blood.

Such expression cannot be conceptualised as a monumental structure, but it can only make sense as a field of impacts and resonances, routed and reclaimed in the encounters with other bodies, of memory. This sensibility can be figured as a kind of archival vigor (and not rigor): not a compulsive drive for accumulating bodies of evidence but a ‘folding back and into’ their interiorities, intimacies and relationships. Not a pathological fever that clings to the traces of meaning, but the sensuous desire to near the abyss of signification. Not dust but the air holding its particles.

This is a work that those whose lives are encroached with the ‘matter’ of embodiment – its representation, its scene and its documents – need to attend to, for, to understand a body (of knowledge) one must come in contact with the pains, desires, pleasures and surprises that arise from it. Only then there will be the possibility for new epistemic bodies to emerge in experiment with life at the margin of visibility and at the edge of signification.

The encounter with the body of/in performance consigns to knowledge rapturous moments that can only be re-imagined into existence by and through the affects ‘passing’ between bodies. Tracing the affective force of this vital knowledge, documentary theory and practice can re-connect to the ‘broken’ narratives that witness the failure of ontological security, the violence of power, the ecstasy of being with, the chance of doing without.

It would be opportune to try to recognise and experience these missing moments, these
‘voices’ often unheard, disregarded, or forgotten by the official records before our scholarly protocols send us rummaging through the dust of the institutional archives in the longing for a tangible piece of the past or a gem of knowledge hidden under the weight of labour, only to find that we frantically send our arms up in the air for ‘no-thing’ at all that yet speaks, again. I feel it… … … Do you?

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References


Biography

Born and raised in Naples, Southern Italy, Annalaura Alifuoco now lives and works in London. Annalaura is currently undertaking an AHRC funded PhD at Roehampton University, researching the un-dead forces that remain, vital, in the affective archives of embodied events. Her artistic practice takes place and time as part re-enactment, part ritual and/or parody, always set in dialectic conversation with other bodies and texts in a compulsive journey of re-working and re-imagining.