



Tessa Jackson *STAGED – REAL and IMAGINED*

Tessa Jackson OBE is an independent curator, writer and cultural advisor.



Holly Davey *The Conversation* 2017
installation view at g39, Cardiff

Scenography

In the earliest surviving work of dramatic theory *Poetics*, written in c.335 BC., Aristotle employed the term ‘skēnographia’, with ‘skēnē’ meaning stage or scene building and ‘grapho’ to describe. The word scenography now refers to the artistic practice that is concerned with the visual, the experiential and the spatial composition of performance. In recent years it has also been used in museography and linked to the curation and presentation of museum objects.

Holly Davey could be said to be a scenographer in both the established European use of the word, as well as in its more recent application; along with performance it acts as a central thread within her work as a visual artist. Her exhibition *A Script for an Archive* at the Danielle Arnaud Gallery offers irrefutable evidence. With script, half-made set including props and costumes, we are invited backstage. It only requires an audience for the performance to commence.

Davey has grown slowly and thoughtfully into this role of scene builder, or more eloquently, spatial and experiential creator. As a teenager she set out to be a dancer but injury forced her to change course. In retrospect choreography would have harnessed her interests, yet at the time it didn’t seem feasible. Through fine art however, she grew into performing her own work. Photography and short film enabled Davey to place herself within carefully selected and composed contexts, often every-day urban environments, in order to question her own physical presence, her reality and unreality, what is seen and thus what remains unseen. The added exploration of viewpoint and camera frame combined to expand ways of seeing further.

A decade or so of commissions followed, where the artist placed herself within a range of physical and historical contexts. In *The Nameless Grace* for the Holburne Museum (2014), she chose to revisit the life of Mary Ann Barbara Holburne (1802-82), a little known sister to Sir William Holburne of Bath. Davey set out ‘to find out and meet what was left’ of Mary, ‘to amplify her voice’ through the objects she had left behind and to explore what position and possibilities women had at that time. In *There is No There There*, at A La Ronde (2016), she recreated the partially lost history of the Parminter cousins, two women who in 1784 had embarked on a Grand Tour of Europe. With a section of their diary destroyed in the Blitz, Davey made ‘a series of photographs using similar landmarks, locations and viewpoints to tell an imagined pictorial version of the lost journal.’

Both projects focused upon independent women whose lives, with their aspirations and achievements, were governed by what rights they had and obscured by the vicissitudes of history. (The Parminter cousins are said to be the first women to climb Mont Blanc.) Nonetheless, Holly Davey is interested in

the gaps, what has been lost, what is no longer known. During both commissions she decided to write short texts to distil her thinking; in trying to reveal Mary Holburne she admitted: 'I stare into the emptiness that fills the frame and marvel at its potential.'

Archives

From researching, tracing and sometimes witnessing, (the artist has often formed personal bonds with her subjects), Davey has imagined others' realities and inner landscapes. This was particularly so with *The Conversation*, an exhibition and immersive environment for g39, Cardiff (2017). On finding a manila folder when sorting out her grandfather's home after he died, the artist discovered the left-over trace of a journey he made from Los Angeles to Sacramento in 1972. Polaroids, hand bills, postcards, several photographs taken while on a Universal Studios tour. Once again, she became fascinated 'with finding the faint outline in the archive'. By re-connecting to a grandfather she realised she hardly knew, the artist reflected that in fact she had conducted a conversation with herself rather than him, as '... We hope to form a sense of ourselves.' Intellectually creating and constructing *The Conversation* has preoccupied her for over four years and continues to do so. During this period she has established a territory - the blurring of boundaries between archives and absence, fact and fiction, reality and imagination.

Holly Davey, curious about people's lives and the heritage of locations, has been intrigued by society's fascination with the archiving of human existence; archiving that is often self-initiated, accidental, even serendipitous. She has immersed herself in the lost or largely forgotten aspects of social history. She has found that archives offer threads of existence, narrating lives and performing stories. They also require activation, a process of re-connection and re-presentation, to achieve reinvention.

In her application to be a Creative Wales Fellow and spend time with the British School at Rome, Davey outlined her interest to investigate the Bulwer Collection (1890-1930?), which contains albums of original prints as well as glass and nitrate negatives. Rome, with its accumulation of art and architecture dating from the Etruscan and Roman periods, is perhaps one of the most archival of cities. Little is known, however, of the Bulwer sisters Agnes and Dora (the latter born in 1864); they lived in the city, photographed their travels across Europe and kept company with key archaeologists of the day. For Davey it offered an opportunity to study another personal archive and continue her long-held interest in the relationship between photography and sculpture.

The Fellowship (September-December 2019) has proved highly productive. The Bulwer photographs emphasised the sisters'

relationship to the camera; it was a conversation, thus rekindling the artist's own earlier preoccupation with the lens. Often their images contain a lone woman in a landscape, positioned not in the foreground but in the middle distance, making her less detailed, remote. She appears almost as a silhouette. For Davey this figure (it is hard to detect whether it is always the same sister) came to signify their lost story, a cut out of life.

The artist had employed cut-outs in her work for *The Conversation*. Using found images from her grandfather's archive she had cut round skylines, trees, individual buildings and in enlarging these outlines, had produced sizeable sculptures like theatre flats, to establish a setting for her immersive environment. Made of plywood and coloured Perspex, their linearity was often re-orientated, positioned on its side or upside down, generating displacement and inviting fresh readings of the legible and the familiar. Davey's interest in re-interpreting through fragments, has made her ask 'What are you trying to show me through these images?', 'Are you wanting me to notice the unintentional viewpoint. The moment that we miss, forget, don't even notice'. Even with objects and memories, once again, there were silences in this inherited archive, so Davey created an imagined reality, a physical landscape where she and the audience could enact a relationship to a person, (her grandfather), whose life was in part invented and provisional. By working with 'flats', overhead projectors, film-set lighting and coloured gels, the gallery became a theatrical space where the visitor could animate their immediate environment. Light, shadow, scale all became mutable. The private contents of the manila folder had been abstracted into scenes of public memory, experience and possibility; in both mind and body, the nature of reality was being questioned.

Script Writing

The artist's other motivation for the residency in Rome was to research the architecture of film sets, to learn and understand production processes and the material used to make them. She was keen to visit Cinecittà, Europe's largest film studio on the edge of the city, along with the studio of the Oscar-winning set designer Dante Ferretti. She wanted to understand how stage actuality replicates life and what our relationship is to the constructed reality of the film set.

Her visit to Ferretti's studio left a number of impressions. The stacks of old sets and the racks of half-made plaster props at the back of the warehouse formed a different type of archive; slowly disintegrating, Davey saw them as ruins of imagined lives. But a statement made by a member of staff on her first visit particularly resonated: 'It all begins with the page, without the script there is nothing.' This simple statement became a framework for her thinking and provided new impetus to her studio process.

Since 2014 she had begun to write and produce short texts as an integral part of making work. (Many of the quotations used in this essay are derived from these.) The title of her forthcoming exhibition, *A Script for an Archive*, acknowledges the centrality of text, but in Rome it was the first time the artist had written a script with dialogue and directions, as if for a film production. This script (2019), bearing the same title as the exhibition, is based on two female protagonists Archive (mature) and Process (young) and their exchange in a basement room, seated facing each other across a table. Davey's personification of Archive and Process, complete with behavioural traits and human emotions, connects to a long-established storytelling device and enables the artist to share something of her own approach and conclusions in animating archives and their original owners... 'I can see new ways of being. I can understand time, history, the past, in relation to self. I can feel alive.'... 'Fragments of memories like ruins prove existence and fight absence, death.' In this short drama the artist appears to take on the voice of Process.

It would act as a spoiler to describe the script any further - half of it is available to read on the Gallery's ground floor, with the concluding half upstairs. On entering the exhibition audiences will feel they have walked onto the scenery of a film set, with its mix of re-purposed flats, dysfunctional props, abandoned pieces of costume and small models of possible scenarios, as if devising is still underway. Appropriately the lighting adds to the sense of drama and expectation. Soon this fictional reality collapses the space between audience and performer; roles transmutate, with audiences finding they have become performers. As they move constructed viewpoints change, space alters and how they interact with each other has to be re-considered. When new audiences arrive, fresh narratives begin.

Process

In *A Script for an Archive* Holly Davey has brought together her two Roman research threads; she has abstracted the visual language of film production and combined it with that of the photographic Bulwer archive. Playing with scale, the flats are reminiscent of the outlines of landscape, the red fabric strips recreate silhouetted female figures and the half-made costumes reimagine the sisters' clothing. The maquettes and models repeat similar outlines and offer scenes of provisionality. All is fragmented, partly suggested, partly imagined. We are taken behind the scenes of process and the audience then adds and reanimates.

For Holly Davey, the dancer's mirror has been replaced by the camera. The artist now acts as audience too. She has substituted herself as performer by inviting audiences to reflect on how

they act out their lives and how they situate themselves in the world. By placing ourselves in the midst of imagined reality, we can consider, perhaps more seriously, how we construct our sense of belonging and the fragmented trace we leave behind.



Holly Davey *Set Model 4, A Script for an Archive* 2020 paper, plaster, wood

Throughout Davey's developmental trajectory, she has remained faithful to working with the same interests and components: the body in space, fragmented memories, inadvertent objects, imagined reality. Yet in her desire to push some of her working habits, she has returned to materials and making, and extended an open invitation to audiences. She acknowledges that she will not always witness the audience's performance but is keen to share control. Her use of scenography, archive and script provides structure, after that individual interconnection and interpretation take over. But by becoming the director, she is free to 'reflect on the present and create a series of possible futures.'

Cover: **Holly Davey** *Scene no.7, A Script for an Archive* 2020 original photograph from the Bulwer collection at the British School at Rome, red lighting gel, bulldog clip

Holly Davey *A Script for an Archive*
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