



Stages

Simone Hine & Clare Rae

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The Rosina Auditorium is an apt site for new works from Simone Hine and Clare Rae; two artists concerned with various aspects of performance. The 1930's auditorium within Melbourne's Abbotsford convent features as a frame within which the artist's various actions and narratives can take place. The auditorium is a place for gathering and viewing, and likewise a place to perform and to be watched. In this case it is a theatre for fragmentary and isolated narrative, and a stage to test and record gestures and actions. It is also a site to review both the similarities and divergences within the two artist's practices, specifically as artists invested in the tradition of feminist performance and how that performance and action is recorded and represented.

Simone Hine's practice is concerned with notions around cinema, time and the recorded image, along with the representation of women within it. *Staged* is presented on two screens facing each other. Mirroring and doubling their formal presence, they are like small drive-in screens. The structure hints at the more heroic screen size of the cinema but the scale is one which is more human sized whereby the viewer finds themselves between an unfolding scene. Within the videos two women pursue the same space, their presence there and relationship to each other is unclear. The mood and style of the video is reminiscent of several film tropes, and yet does not reference one specifically. There is something somewhat sinister about the work; it is clear these women are in some kind of conflict with each other, but the nature of which is unknown, as are their motives which are never revealed or resolved. This interaction is brief but tense, and leaves us with more questions than answers about the nature of the scene.

As with Clare Rae's photographs, we are not privy to the moments before or after precisely what is presented. Shot in a fixed frame, movement is through the bodies alone and not created or tracked by the apparatus as the artist performs as the two characters. Through various props of make up and costume Hine constructs two different representations of feminine, cinematic characters and disguises herself as the actress/artist. These characters run this ambiguous play endlessly, on loop and without conclusion or climax. Isolated as this scene is, it questions the nature of time and linear narrative. It denies a progression through narrative, whereby a story may unfold to a point of resolution, but instead reminds me of Laura Mulvey's argument that within the tradition of cinema the female protagonist is often there to halt action, and is an object to be looked at in the film, rather than a subject that creates and continues actions.¹ While these characters do create their own action, they are trapped in an endlessly played out interaction, walking in and out of this space eternally.

While Hine's work focuses on the techniques, history and language of the moving image, Clare Rae's is firmly imbedded in the lexicon of photography. She uses her body as the instrument to measure experience, embodiment and reaction to space, and the camera as the instrument to witness and record this. In her photographs Rae is seen thoroughly immersed in the tasks at hand; temporal and physical tests in space. They are small things, requiring only reasonable strength or skill, and appear as a kind of nutting out



that may refer to an interior or psychological process as much as the physical task seen. While in Hine's work clothing is used to construct characters, Rae appears in her daily wear, she is not dressed to perform created fictions outside of the boundaries of her own experience but to stay rooted in it.

The resulting images are testimonies to the gestures made as well as a thoughtful addition to the language of documentary images in the history of performance. This method of recording in still images, rather than videos, highlights the relationship between movement and framing, time and singular moments specific to photography. The use of still images to document Rae's performative actions is an immediate editing process that video and moving image, along with live performance is not privileged to. But it is exactly this freezing of moments and the particularities of that *one* moment represented that give each image both its power and ambiguity.

The camera and photography is present in Rae's work as 'cinema' is present in Hine's. While Rae has previously identified the camera as a collaborator in the work, in this work it literally appears. In fact Rae interacts with it directly as an object, rather than a 'mute witness'.² As the camera enters the frame Rae has also commenced testing the limits of it. In several images here movement is recorded; Rae's usually crisp, well defined actions become blurred and recorded as not just single gestures, but the moving body in an expanded sense of time. Rae's performative actions, isolated by the camera's momentary timeframe, now begin to expand outside themselves, in some cases right over themselves as the images are recorded on film and not digitally. In these works the images become records of movements over time passed, rather than *a* movement captured.

The two practices and the works presented here are compelling as much for their

crossovers as their departures from each other. On the one hand is their shared interest in Feminist informed performance, and the examination and representation of movement and stillness through the particularities of their preferred mediums. Both artists perform exclusively for their camera, which allows them to talk directly to the characteristics of their recording methods of photography and video, and thereby still and moving images. On the other hand is the artist's differing uses of the body, with Hine using hers as a site to build other personas and Rae using her body to generate actions in relation to specific spaces. There is also an opposing use of the performance altogether – one to create fictions, with Hine going to some lengths to disguise herself and create cinematic referenced characters, and the other to create actions to be documented, with Rae's images and use of her body staying within her own experience of spaces. The two works compliment and contrast with each other just enough to highlight the nuances of their performance interests and the mediums that record them.

Catherine Connolly
March 2014

¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 1975): 6

² Clare Rae's website: <http://www.clarerae.com/about>





A Conversation Between Clare Rae and Simone Hine

Clare Rae: I've been thinking a lot about time with this project, and how in my work the camera acts to still time, or freeze a moment, however in your work the camera expands a moment or gesture, often looped or repeated. I think this will be a nice counterpoint in the show. Can you tell me about your thoughts on time in this work (very broad, I know).

We're both interested in gesture, so perhaps you could tell me about the gesture that takes place in your video, and the ramifications for the narrative?

Simone Hine: Yes. Time is very important to the methodology of my work. The relationship between still and moving images is central to the conceptualization of any work that I create. As you say, my works often take a small moment or gesture and expand that through time. I would suggest that it is both the isolation and repetition of a moment or gesture that creates this effect of expansion. This is of course a paradoxical effect, because the work appears to expand a moment by limiting the components of that moment, allowing attention to be focused on the small details. Such a close focus on the details can work to expand what is essentially a fleeting moment.

In many of my works this expansion of the moment occurs not just through time, but through spatial fragmentation, be that across screens or mediums. Temporal and Spatial components are in this sense intertwined as each medium brings with it its own material conditions that define the gesture. In quite the opposite way to the act of isolating a gesture, this spatial fragmentation creates a proliferation of the gesture across multiple platforms.

Likewise, I have always considered your work to be an exploration of the conditions of photography and more specifically the way time is constructed through photography: a fascination with photography's ability to suspend time and reveal moments that lie hidden within movement. In this way, I have always felt that your work evokes early writing on photography that is concerned with specific moments that are only possible through the conditions of photography; Henri Cartier-Bresson's *decisive moment* and Walter Benjamin's *optical unconscious* are key concepts here. In your previous works this has been suggested through the combination of very particular actions that evoke motion and the stillness that photography brings to these actions. In both cases the extra-diegetic presence of the camera drives this exploration of time. It is for this reason that I found it really interesting that in your new series of photographs the camera is actually visible within the work. Could you expand a little on your reasons for visually depicting the camera in the work and whether it is related to your current interest in time?

CR: I like that you speak of this paradoxical effect in your work, and it makes me think of the tension that arises in this state, when harnessing the limitations of the camera. With this new body of work I'm particularly interested in photography's inherent ability to compress a moment or scene, and I'm trying to work within those limitations to bring about an understanding (at least for me, if not the viewer) of the failure of photography to

fully render subjectivity. For this reason I felt like I wanted that dialogue and relationship with the camera to be really overt in the work. It's about photography. One of my favorite images in art school was Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*, in which the camera is at the centre of the frame reflected in a mirror, which enacts a dialogue between Wall, as he's reflected in the mirror, his subject, and the viewer. When I first saw this picture I was so excited about the conversation he was engaging with, placing the camera's lens and eye directly in our field of view so we feel like we're simultaneously behind and in front of the camera thus becoming active participants in the image. In this exploration of the Rosina Auditorium I'm attempting to bring the viewer into the dialogue through the device of the camera.

Depicting the camera in the work acts as a signifier of the moment captured, evoking a specific instance rather than an ambiguous representation of any moment. Does that make sense? I think it highlights the activity of taking the photograph, and ties the camera to its ontological function. In this sense I'm traversing the areas that Philip Auslander terms the Documentary and Theatrical, and trying to find some slippage in between. Have you read Auslander? Anne Marsh told me to ask you about Garrett Stewart, who I've not read yet (but have a book waiting on the shelf!).

SH: Yes, Auslander's work in this area is producing some interesting discussion. I actually made reference to his article "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" in a catalogue essay for an exhibition I curated at Level ARI titled *Framed*. In this context I was interested in the way contemporary performance art is increasingly performed for the camera, rather than for live audiences. The work that I spoke about in this exhibition was quite different to your work, because it functioned much more as documentation of a performance, thus fitting neatly into Auslander's definition of Documentation. In contrast, your work, as you say, transverses these distinctions. It is my feeling that this is because the actions that you perform appear motionless, held suspended in photographic time. Made for the camera, there is no access to the before or after. In this way, both your photographic and video works reference the type of moment created by the still camera, rather than using the camera to document an action.

Eleanor Antin's work *Caught in the Act* from 1973 comes to mind here. This work consists of a moving image that documents her attempts to appear like a professional ballet dancer after only three months of training. When seen in motion her movements are awkward and at times comical, but in the still photographs, which have been shown alongside the video, she appears caught in a series of graceful and effortless movements. This work explicitly highlights the way still cameras construct moments for the viewer that may or may not have taken place. In Antin's work we know that the moments suggested by the Theatrical photographs did not take place, because we are given access to the moving Documentation of the actions through the video. Your photographs, on the other hand, doesn't usually reveal the moments on either side of the photograph, in this sense they are Theatrical in spirit, but technically Documentary as they depict a moment you performed. It is your willingness to only show the Theatrical moment caught by the camera that, I think, separates your works from these earlier experiments. It is also this willingness to leave the moment in its Theatrical state that finds resonance with my work.



You mentioned that your works bring about an understanding of the failure of the camera to record your subjectivity, which absolutely relates to this idea of Theatricality. I have always thought of your works as strange self-portraits. I think this is because you wear the clothes that you happen to be wearing that day, sometimes minus a layer or two. So, if we are to understand your photographs as self-portraits, then the actions performed might be representations of an inner logic that the viewer is unable to read, which creates a disjuncture between what is documented and what can be gleaned by the viewer.

Many of my works, on the other hand, completely surrender themselves to costume and the readable language of cinema. The clothes and layers of makeup hide traces of the self and work in conjunction with rudimentary acting skills to create an image that conveys a moment reminiscent of all films and no film in particular. This has, at least, been my thinking when making these works.

In this work, for the first time, I have used CGI to create two characters, both performed by me, both existing within the same frame. In one sense it might be expected that by bringing my constant character-changing into focus within the same frame, the work would highlight this disjuncture between the self and the image presented. However because this work is about the process of making a theatrical production and I have inserted myself as two characters, a director and an actor, I have inadvertently turned the focus back toward myself as playing both roles, off-screen and now on-screen. Such a gesture points towards the impossibility of fully turning myself into an image of someone else. In this sense, I think, we perform at either end of a sliding scale. You attempting to record your subjectivity and failing, and I am attempting to hide my subjectivity and failing. But it is of course, this failure that suggests the impossibility of each task.

It is interesting that Wall's *Picture for Women* was a key work in your early development as an artist. For me it was Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. I think this is quite telling because both works present the artist as subject and voyeur. But Sherman's presence as voyeur is only suggested, whereas Wall, alongside his camera, is actually visualized. It seems our early influences continue to inform the way we position ourselves within our work.

You mentioned Garrett Stewart, his research might be the subject of another lengthier discussion, but what I think is worth touching on here is his idea that stillness is always a para-narrative of the moving image. Stewart suggests that the stillness of photography at the base of cinema lies dormant waiting to disrupt the illusion of motion created by moving images. This idea is forever linked to film, as opposed to digital imagery, as the technology of moving image film and film photography is essentially the same. Likewise, I mentioned that early writing on photography is important to my understanding of your work, which is of course concerned with film. I think it is interesting that you have chosen to use film, rather than digital processes with this series of photographs, where these ideas are addressed more specifically. Was that part of your thinking in choosing film as the medium for this work? Also, I have spoken a lot about my ideas with regards to your work, which remains a tricky position to be in (even post *Death of the Author*) so I was wondering if you might like to respond to any ideas that you might have a different view

on, or alternately that you find particular resonance with.

CR: It's clear that I really need to read Garrett Stewart! His idea of the still image lying dormant underneath the moving image (if my interpretation is correct) has a lot of resonance with me in terms of my video practice, which is concerned with the space between the still and moving image by using a stop motion technique with photographic stills. I often think of Eadweard Muybridge and his experiments to capture movement that the eye cannot see. This has greatly impacted the way I relate to photography, and how I utilise it within my practice. As you say, Benjamin's ideas of the optical unconscious are relevant here when thinking of photography's ability to "reveal the secret".¹ I'm particularly drawn to the photographic medium because of this magical (for lack of a better word) ability to extrapolate the possibilities for imaging subjectivity.

My decision to use analogue processes with this work came out of experimentation; I was interested in the aesthetic of 1960s and 70s performance documentation, and wanted to attempt to make some work that suggested a performance without an audience. I've attempted this a few times in various locations, and upon seeing the Rosina Auditorium I felt that this project, with its theatrical tendencies, could lend itself well to the idea. Even though I predominantly use digital technologies in my practice, my thinking around both processes is fairly similar. The still photograph remains the product of light hitting a sensitive surface for a fraction of a second. Digital technologies (at least in still photography) merely alter the way we treat those images after this event. Of course new technologies open up new ways of interpreting and disseminating the image, however my use of, and relationship to, the still photograph across both processes remains relatively the same.

To take up your thoughts on Auslander's categories, I would argue that my work can be both documentary and theatrical at once. Whilst it is staged for the camera, and theatrical in this sense, to achieve many of my poses I am enacting movements or actions which the camera records. In the work for *Stages* some of my images show the blur of motion as my body is captured mid-movement. The resulting images are documents of actions that happened in real time, which I have come to think of as performances for the camera. Auslander's idea that the very act of recording performances renders the documentation performative has a lot of resonance with my practice, as I've come to view my practice as sitting at the junction between performance and photography. So whilst the viewer does not see the "before and after" of each frame, for me the resulting pictures are records of my time spent in these rooms, and the physical interactions I've had within them.

SH: It is funny, at the beginning of this discussion you sent me a few images that you thought might be included in the exhibition. I imagined what the whole series might be from these few photographs combined with my knowledge of your previous work. As time passed and you returned to the Rosina Auditorium and re-photographed the space, and yourself in the space, and, as could be expected, the work evolved. The second series of images (which are not, at this stage, the final work) looked very different from what I had imagined. The thing that struck me about how this series progressed, which

I like very much, is that the mirror in many of the photographs is covered with hand marks. In some of the photographs where the mirrored image dominates the frame, the handprints cover the entire image, reminding the viewer that what we are looking at is not a single moment, but a series of moments condensed into the single frame of the photograph. These handprints suggest other gestures that took place. So while we do not see the "before and after" of the images, we are given hints as to what those movements might have been through the traces of your hand left on the glass. I think this adds another layer to the ways in which your photographs are both performances and documentation.

I wanted to mention these handprints because when I first saw them, my heart sank a little, as I remembered diligently removing quite a few hand marks from the mirror when I came to film my work. When I saw them in your works, part of me wished that I had left them as a gentle reminder of the process that we shared in making our respective works: a trace of the actual space and the people that inhabit it. Part of me knows, however, that I was always going to wipe the hand marks off the mirror, and sweep the leaves from the floor, and tuck the torn stage curtain back out of sight, because I was not creating a record of the space and my response to it. I was preparing the *mise-en-scène* to support a fictional scene. I wanted to create an ambiguity as to the context of the scene. Likewise, I wanted the space to look as though it could have been anywhere and everywhere. To have shown too many of the particulars of the space would have been to cement the space in its own reality. It would have undermined the tenuous reality that I hope to create, while also limiting the potential narratives that could be created. This is not to say that the goal of my work is to create a seamless narrative, I am after all "facing off" with myself, but to test the limits of our "willing suspension of disbelief" and to generate narratives that flesh out the "before and after" of the truncated scene, which is drawn from a combination of cinema, literature and lived experience. I think this disjuncture points to one of the major differences in our work, where your work is, as you say, a record of your time within a space, my work is about using a space to evoke those memories and experiences, real or fictional, that remain with us and permeate life. In this way, your work engages the particular elements of the space and mine engages the general.

What interested me about the opportunity to collaborate with you on this project when we first discussed it, and now as we draw to the end of the process, is that we both seem to tread similar areas, time and medium specificity being only one of these aspects. However, the results of our endeavors are quite different. I wonder if this is because we both make work that engages the "grand narratives" of art in a way that acknowledges the shifting ground on which they are founded and we aim to gently test that ground. In particular, our discussion here has been dominated by foundational writing on photography as a medium. Likewise, we use our own body to explore these ideas, which has a clear lineage from foundational performance art practices. Each of these traditions bring our work into alignment, however, while we engage the history of previous practices, the methods of our own practices remain idiosyncratic and it is from here that we generate individual responses to the spaces that we occupy, in this case the Rosina Auditorium.

¹ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso Books, 1997) p 243



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Stages

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All images of works courtesy of the artists

Black and White Images:
Clare Rae (2014) Untitled Action (for Stages), photographs (details).

Colour Images:
Simone Hine (2014) Staged, Video Installation (video details).

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