

# WHEN I AM NOT THERE

## Shelley Lasica

Monash University Museum of Art

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by Josephine Mead



Shelley Lasica, *WHEN I AM NOT THERE*, 2022. Monash University Museum of Art. Performers: Luke Fryer, Timothy Harvey and Megan Payne. Co-commissioned by Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council and the Art Gallery of New South Wales support partner Atelier. © Shelley Lasica. Photo: Jacqui Shelton.

It's been a week since I visited Shelley Lasica's *WHEN I AM NOT THERE* at Monash University Museum of Art. The physical traces of the exhibition would have been removed by now and they have likely begun installing the next show. Even though the work is no longer in the space, I feel that it makes sense to be writing about it now, to be describing the work to others, to be within a state of return. Lasica's practice enables this. She creates performative traces and moments that have a carry-on effect, that lead into other works and that speak to greater artistic moments and movements – past, present and yet-to-come.

The night before seeing *WHEN I AM NOT THERE* I was at an exhibition opening talking about the complexities, meanings and possibilities of framing – as a visual, cultural, emotional and social device. What does it mean to enter and exit a frame? How can framing change our encounter with creative practice? How much of how we “frame” is a result of our social and cultural experiences to date? The most compelling artists possess a courage that allows them to step outside the frame – to endlessly re-work, re-configure and find ideas anew. This methodology for working is an apt summation for Lasica and the many components of her as creative practitioner, and by extension as multifaceted person. Lasica is no stranger to overlapping, dissolving and reconstituting the frame.

Entering the exhibition space I found myself encountering multiple frameworks that are characteristic of the complexities of Lasica's career. Firstly, I met the framework of *institution* in two parts: that of *museum* – imparted through the visual motifs that we associate with this world, such as polished floors, vinyl introductory exhibition text, and astute gallery attendants; and that of *university* – a context which was heightened by a student talk taking place in the museum foyer. This second frame – that of educational space – is particularly pertinent and symbolic of Lasica's collaborative nature, leading her to consistently work with emerging practitioners and within creative community space. The shared nature of her practice is evident through the props, costumes, artworks and performance debris that are scattered throughout the museum – paying homage to past projects and collaborators from Lasica's extensive oeuvre. Several performers were at work within the museum throughout the duration of the exhibition. The objects and effects – the traces of performances past – activated a-new at the hands of the performers.

I witnessed the meeting of *exhibition space* verse *performance venue* – two frameworks that Lasica has literally danced between throughout her forty-year career. This exhibition is the first curated survey of a choreographic practice within Australia – a disappointing fact that infers the gaps existent between the presentation of choreographic practice within or adjacent to visual-arts contexts. Lasica has consistently examined the role of venue and how this can shift the context of the work, presenting projects in a multitude of varied spaces: from conventional theatres, to artist-run-initiatives, commercial galleries and museums, nightclubs, rehearsal rooms and town halls. As Hannah Mathews and Lisa Catt recount in their introductory essay from the extraordinary accompanying monograph, *crisscrossing space, for Shelley, is to crisscross the different value systems, expectations, modes and registers in which art happens*.<sup>1</sup> In a further dismantling of one's expectations of the museum, wall labels have purposefully not been used. I was, however, given a room sheet upon entry. A room sheet can be seen as a framework for one to view an exhibition through, but one that is undoubtably less invasive than the inclusion of text on the gallery wall. It's one of the most beautiful room sheets I have ever received: a four-sided fold-out with a map of the space and a list of works, accompanied by royal blue drawings that indicate the different objects, props and artworks that make up the exhibition. Several oval holes have been cut through the paper – perforations that indicate where the performers may be within the space at any given time.

The list of the artists who have collaborated to produce works for Lasica is a veritable who's-who of rigorous practitioners, which includes Callum Morton, Robyn McKenzie, Belinda Hellier, Shio Otani, Kathy Temin, Fiona

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Mathews and Lisa Catt, "WHEN I AM NOT THERE: An Introduction," in *Shelley Lasica: WHEN I AM NOT THERE* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University Publishing, 2022), p.7.

Scanlan and Tony Clark. The list contains details of the works, including titles, collaborator's names, mediums etc., but has no didactic text. As Mathews/Catt note, *Shelley is interested in written language and its structures as much as she is in choreographic language [...] Shelley's adoption of the room sheet allows for a deferred mediation and a focus on meaning rather than understanding.*<sup>2</sup> We are encouraged to encounter the work (inclusive of object and performers) with our bodies as first point of entry, before we wrap ourselves up in other's words. The performers work in unison, but also with a sense of autonomy that is synonymous with Lasica's work. This comes as a result of trust between choreographer and performer, and between performer and performer – relationships that Lasica intuitively cultivates. There was a sense of play between the performers, with the performance often punctuated by a smile or laugh, what appears to be an un-orchestrated exchange. They moved with repetition and the charged, kinaesthetic quality that is characteristic of Lasica. Every so often one of the performers would call "Room", signalling for the group of move to another area of the museum. Artworks as props were picked up, put down and shifted around. One is encouraged to consider what is performing and what is not. As I moved through the space, sometimes unsure of where to stand and every now and again moving out of the way of a performer, I began to wonder to what extent I was an active performing agent within the museum.

Resonating through the space is François Tétaz's sound-score – a multichannel audio soundscape created with scores produced by Tétaz and Milo Kossowski for Lasica's previous projects. The score shifts emotional registers changing the effects of performer and space. It moves from mesmerising, to meditative, to ambient, to unnerving, and back again. It is the ability of sound to change the emotional register of a space, to literally shift the resonant framework of feeling within architecture, that most interest me. Over the past week my mind has been recycling snippets of the score. I wonder to what extent I am remembering it correctly? The score has moved through the framework of the museum, passing into the frame of my memory, with traces getting re-constituted, lost and found through the process.

It is multiple collaborative frameworks and a fostering of community through Lasica's oeuvre and wider life-experiences that resonated throughout the exhibition and room sheet, and will continue to reverberate through the monograph post-exhibition. Lasica *refers to families, relatives and clusters when discussing her works and the materials that shape them.*<sup>3</sup> Lasica's mother, Margaret Lasica (1926 – 1993) was a driving force of modern dance within Australia. These

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Mathews and Lisa Catt, "WHEN I AM NOT THERE: An Introduction," in *Shelley Lasica: WHEN I AM NOT THERE* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University Publishing, 2022), p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Mathews and Lisa Catt, "WHEN I AM NOT THERE: An Introduction," in *Shelley Lasica: WHEN I AM NOT THERE* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University Publishing, 2022), p.13.

women shared a *basic approach to the use of the body. It was a conception of dance as a movement language, based on the body's given attributes or allowances.*<sup>4</sup> All movements that Lasica and her fellow performers utilize are relational. We are watching a social project as much as a dance performance, when engaging with this work. We are reminded that everyone and everything is connected and there are many moments that are generative, with moments of return that link the performers and aspects of the exhibition. This interconnectedness is exemplified astutely in Zoe Theodore's fantastic essay *Choreographing the Archive: Shelley Lasica's WHEN I AM NOT THERE*. Following from correspondence with Lisa Radford, Theodore reflects through *Gestalt psychology* [on] *the concept of figure-ground perception, describ[ing] the way in which the mind perceives images and distinguishes an object or figure from its background. Reflecting on this conversation, [Theodore] began to think about the notion of the Gestalt, that the whole of anything is greater than its individual parts [...] Our perception of the work is further complicated by the presence of both performing and audience subjects, as well as objects in transition via the agency of such subjects. Thus, the whole of the work also encompasses a process of subjectification by the audience subject, where they recognise themselves as a domain for possible knowledge and apprehension.*<sup>5</sup>

The title of the exhibition – *WHEN I AM NOT THERE* – calls to question the value of performance documentation and acknowledges the longevity of a practice like Lasica's. Throughout history much performance work, particularly that which enters visual-art contexts, lives on as documentation and is remembered through this guise, particularly when only a limited number of people at a certain time are able to experience a performance. Documentation can simultaneously be a place of possibility, complexity, disadvantage and meaning-making. It allows for an encounter with the work, but one that can be very different to the experience of seeing the work in-situ at the time of making. The monograph, filled with documentation from years of Lasica's practice will carry traces into the future, while allowing for gaps that inspire new meaning-making—an act replicated through the memories of those that were able to physically experience the exhibition, both as audience and performers.

*WHEN I AM NOT THERE* is a testament to shared practice, creative openness and deep consideration – qualities that are nodded at through the subtle see-through-ness of the monographs pages, allowing projects and thoughts to bleed into one another. These qualities are further

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<sup>4</sup> Robyn McKenzie, "Body of Work," in *Shelley Lasica: WHEN I AM NOT THERE* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University Publishing, 2022), p.63.

<sup>5</sup> Zoe Theodore, "Choreographing the Archive: Shelley Lasica's WHEN I AM NOT THERE," in *Shelley Lasica: WHEN I AM NOT THERE* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University Publishing, 2022), p.113-115.

echoed through the multiple small gestures of curatorial care that would have been necessary to realise an exhibition of this calibre.