***Space, Ritual, Absence***

**Opening comments by Jane Taylor**

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When I was originally invited to open this exhibition, I was immediately filled with anticipation, for several reasons, one of which was the interest of seeing what this exhibition space would do with such a show – it is always interesting to see what a physical environment does with a strong idea. Then there was the inherent interest of seeing Leora Farber and James Sey in a public conversation. The subject of the show, liminality, is so very intriguing in this world-historical moment of collapsing regimes, faltering orthodoxies. What are the modellings of being that the new landscapes will bring forth, as communities hold onto and let go of prior selves, of prior ways of being? This evening as I write there are early rumours that Gaddafi is trying to negotiate his way out of a date at the world court.

Because of distances I have had to contemplate this project based upon the working proposal, and a list of contributing artists. How to find a way in to exploring the volatility and exhilaration of this idea?

As luck would have it, at the moment I am working on liminality myself: examining two archival documents about uncanny encounters along the seam separating life from death. Of course, at some level this is what the liminal calls up. All thresholds are figures for, and metaphors of, this ultimate horizon. Let me tell you about them, in brief. The one is an odd text, allegedly by Daniel Defoe, called *A relation of the apparition of mistress veal*. Published in 1705, the piece describes how Mistress Bargraves, one evening as she is settling down to her sewing, is roused by a knock at the door, and upon answering it, she finds her dear friend, Mistress Veal, who had long been in another town. They spend some hours together and at the height of their mutual care, discuss Mistress Bargrave’s miserable marriage and the consolations that they had shared as young women through Charles Drelincourt’s *Book of death*, which was a religious text used to prepare one’s fearful soul for the inevitable last encounter. After some time, finally, Mistress Veal must depart leaving Mistress Bargrave wondering at the depth of friendship that she still felt. The next day, on asking abroad after Mistress Veal’s current situation, Mistress Bargraves is advised that her friend had died the day before the visit. Much is made, in the essay, of the reliability of the witnesses in the case, and the integrity of the evidence.

The second piece, perhaps even more striking, arises out of a project that I am engaged in for Stephen Greenblatt, the Renaissance scholar. I have been commissioned to write a so-called ‘missing’ Shakespeare play. That play is based on a story of seduction, power and domination, and I began to wander around the archive to see what I could discover in court records and so on, that might give me some insight into this set of ideas in the seventeenth-century. There I discovered an astonishing broadsheet, about one Anne Green, who is executed for having murdered her infant. Because the poor girl lives in Oxford, when her body is cut down from the gibbet, it is handed over for an anatomy at the medical school. So far, the story is sad but not remarkable. However on the table as the anatomy lesson begins, Anne Green ‘comes back to life’ – she was not, after all, dead, and she returns to testify that she had not murdered her child, but that the infant had fallen still-born from her while she was working in her master’s house. The father of the child was, one is told, ‘a gentleman’. So the archive retains the name of poor Anne Green, and her accomplice in the act of making the child, if not in the losing of it, is unnamed. The archive is filled with such gendered asymmetries of culpability and of ‘authorship’.

The early modern era is rife with stories of the threshold between life and death – think, for example, of Claudius in prayer on his knees, when Hamlet is about the slay him. The Danish Prince, however, holds back, because the prayerful Claudius is already so proximate to piety that to kill him in that state would be to send him straight to heaven.

There is obviously something very uneasy about the porousness of that meniscus that separates the living from the dead. I have recently written about the remarkable situation of Denise Darvall, the first heart donor, who in 1967, was surrendered by her father to the surgeon Chris Barnard. I try to imagine just what that threshold must have been like. No such surgery had been suggested before: it was the first. Mr Darvall, who had just lost his wife in the same car accident that had left his daughter apparently ‘brain dead’ in the room next door, was asked to imagine taking her living beating heart from her chest in order to stitch it inside the chest of a dying man twice her age. No wonder he found that unimaginable.

This boundary of all boundaries, between life and death, tells of journeys travelled only in one direction; and the apparent longing to travel back. The dead envy the living, and the living envy the dead.

Mary Douglas’s celebrated study on purity and danger posits a pair of antagonistic terms that have a sublime power over the human imagination: it is unbearable to have categories merge; it is unseemly, impure somehow, if discreet ideas contaminate one another. So boundaries are set up, one of which is structured by the ways in which consciousness and the unconscious store information between past and present. Figures rise up from out of a domain repressed or lost; and very often they are disembodied, loosened in ways that make them threatening and unsettling. Am I seeing what is there, or what I anticipate, or what I remember?

I was struck recently by a brilliantly clear assertion by Thomas Hobbes, who preceded even Locke in thinking about mind and matter, and memory: his comment is: “[n]o [d]iscourse whatsoever, can [e]nd in absolute knowledge of Fact, past, or to come. For, as for the knowledge of Fact, it is originally, Sense; and ever after, Memory”. Having had the opportunity to walk through the exhibition and to explore some of the dimensions around which the idea of ‘liminality’ is explored here (through the idioms of digital film, print-making, installation, and painting) I am struck by the complex ways in which the curators of this show have conjured with the idea. The exhibition shows how rich liminality is as a conceptual field for artmaking, viewed either from the perspective of form or of content.

It occurred to me that the great achievement of the work of art is that it inverts that irreversible sequence that nails one upon the cross of absolute mortality. What happens through the artistic process is that it moves not from the Sense to Memory, but rather, that it proceeds from Memory to the Senses; perhaps that is it’s uncanny. It moves in the opposite direction to that laid down by the laws of being. In this sense then, perhaps the work of art is that most liminal thing, precisely because it walks back across the threshold, from death back into life, and like a great vortex, the work of art drags the entire world through that vacuum into its own revitalised presence.