

Sighted, an overview

Caroline Broadhead

*Central Saint Martins
England*

Angela Woodhouse

*Middlesex University
England*

Abstract

This article is an examination of audience responses to *Sighted*, two solo dance performances presented individually and simultaneously. The work was presented at venues related to different disciplines. Audience members, who numbered up to 20 and who were free to choose where to stand or move around the space and how to behave, were invited immediately following the performance to write down their responses. This was in order to elicit direct and undigested thoughts before conversation or dialogue has started. These, together with interviews with the dancers, form the basis for this research, which looks at the nature of venues and audiences and to what extent privately felt and communally understood audience commentary can correlate.

Sighted is a double solo dance installation into which the audience is invited and whose presence and action effectively form the work. The two 16-minute solos are performed individually and simultaneously to different audiences of around 20 people in separate, enclosed spaces; the spaces are twinned in certain design and movement elements. The first solo was premiered at The Place Theatre London in April 2009 and the second at The Royal Opera House Deloitte Ignite Festival in September 2009. Since then, *Sighted* has been performed in varied situations and so has drawn on audiences with different concerns and sensibilities. This article considers audience responses over some 100 performances.

The aim of the work is to set spectacular images against intimate dialogues, to heighten the audience's attention to an acute awareness of place and the present moment, a feeling of uncertainty, participation, duality and wonder. There is play and balance between a sense of isolation and a sense of community, sound and silence, movement and stillness. The audience is invited to be sensitive to temperature, touch, breath, physical adjustments, shifting focus and the texture of materials.

In developing this work, several writers provided rich reference points. J. L. Borges (1999) articulates, "... simulating that he was someone so that others would not see his condition as no-one." (p. 284) and Susan Sontag (1983) reveals, "Emptiness must produce

something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence” (p. 187). John Cage (1966) develops ideas about spaces allowing a different dimension to surface, which was also valuable.

Sighted plays creatively with a replicated space and performance whose existence is intimately linked to the first, but appears to act in opposition. One space houses a carpet of mirrors from which light is reflected to create luminous and layered drawings in light on the walls, intensifying a sense of enclosure. The piece is concerned with looking and seeing, with the capacity to see and the urge to be looked at. Dancer Nilsen performs discreet and delicate gestures in extended periods of ‘blindness’, only very occasionally opening her eyes to anchor the viewer(s). The aim is to create a tension between all that is seen and on view and the apparent sightless, closed experience of the performer. The second, a near twin to the first, establishes certain likenesses, but is significantly different; it uses a carpet of black mirrors, the space is enclosed and dark, the only light source being a small torch to carve out the space. In contrast to the other, this space is shadowy, mysterious, heightening a sense of apprehension and caution and, in particular, the audience’s own sense of ‘blindness’.



Figure 1: Sighted (Photograph by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Stine Nilsen)



Figure 2: Sighted (Photograph by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Martina Conti)

Both solos are built on the notion of dialogue, of reciprocal arrangements of giving and receiving. While absorbing all other potentialities of past performances but not allowing them to interfere with the present moment; the dancers are conscious of real time to establish something genuinely felt and made authentic, true to the lived experience.

However, the work is not improvised. There is a set score, and the dancers balance an adherence to this whilst remaining open and responsive to the acts of individuals. Dancer Nilsen (2016) explains, “It is a dialogue with an audience in the moment; the work offers a score that we follow but still there are subtle interactions with the audience. And choices are made, for example the person you choose for the touch—someone who is ok with that.”

There is a strong sense of aesthetic into which the audience enters while also implicitly indicating a sense of freedom or options to be taken. Nilsen underlines that the immediate response from audiences in the work drove the development of nuanced play, as she states, “Needing to be aware of inviting them in, approaching touch with invitation.”

Audience members were invited to write their response immediately after each performance in a visitors' book. These provide a privileged perspective in revealing the effect the work had on those individuals who chose to write. These private thoughts were expressed immediately and intuitively. This research looked at collected responses from approximately 72 performances of the light space and 41 of the dark space as well as the dancers' reflections and comments which had been recorded through several interviews over the years. These resources provided material to address two central questions. How did the audiences in different venues and disciplines respond to the piece? What can responses to a collective experience reveal in terms of a sense of self and a sense of community?

The venues reflected the interdisciplinary nature of the work, including a design conference, an international contemporary art fair, an open mezzanine space at a dance theatre as part of a mixed bill of sampled works, an art gallery and a craft gallery. We, the artists, expected the demographic of the audience would also reflect the different disciplines and that individuals would come with differing experiences and sensibilities. The responses, however, made apparent that there was no significant difference, though it was noted in the performances that the viewers at the art fair were more still and less playful. At the other extreme, audiences were more physically engaged at the Royal Opera House.

The aim of developing a work that dealt with both spectacle and intimacy set up subtle oppositions. The installation suggests nothing is made explicit; in this respect, the work prompts questions and imaginative responses. The viewers had to consider how to go about navigating the work, how to behave, what to expect. The intention was to strip the audience of the conventional framework to allow another, more immediate, intuitive, physical and authentic communication.



Figure 3: Sighted (Photograph by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Stine Nilsen)

We found the comments reflected what we had anticipated—that the audience would have increased sensitivity to the senses and to their sense of time/of the moment, a feeling of being alert to the surroundings. The viewers’ sense of physicality, often in relation to their own bodies and place within the work, was evident. Often cited were sight, time, skin, breath, movement, another dimension, the effect of the installation, and the skill of the performers. A number of viewers’ comments remarked on an increased sensitivity to emotions and a range of imaginative responses. Often a conflict of reaction was identified (The Place, 2009), “So beautifully hypnotic, calming yet

unsettlingly intimate. A simple but surprisingly moving experience—thank-you”, and (The Place, 2009) “... she held my hand ... loved it and hated it all at once ...”

For *Sighted* each subsequent performance is a variant one, dependent on and in anticipation of how the next group of people will participate. This might be simply a manner of stance or an overt intervention, such as walking continuously around the space, which was the case in a number of the Royal Opera House performances. This opening of possibilities draws attention to the notion of obligation on the part of the viewer. Should or could they respond, and if so, in an empathetic way to an atmosphere they encounter, or do they have agency to change it or divert attention? This elevates the precarious nature of decision making for the viewers, which in effect becomes a significant part of the experience. The design of the performance accents a shifting relationship between performer and viewer. Many artistic choices were made in order that viewers might have space for experiencing thoughts and fantasies. All elements were finely reduced and minimal: silence, sense of time, small and intimate gestures emerging from the body. In addition, due to the intensity of gathering alongside strangers, there was a note of unpredictability, where everything was ‘on show’, thus prompting notions of empathy. For example, some expressed a desire to join in, to do something, but refrained, as they didn’t want to spoil the performance for others.

On one occasion, a woman became very upset and tearful. She felt the need to leave the room and this impacted on the atmosphere of that particular performance. For Dancer Nilsen, it was as if she was holding the emotion of the leaver, and for the author, as witness, it felt as though all present were sharing in that responsibility. It was as if that performance was created by the woman and completed by those who were left. It is also worth noting that the atmosphere offered by the audience influenced Nilsen (2013) in her performance modulation: “Time is always a question if I need to slow down even more to bring them in, or if I need to also find the moments to change time for them.”

The piece is intended as an open invitation, not forced, offering space for those reactions. Some viewers’ comments were very insightful and revealed an awareness of the impact of the other viewers’ actions. Some were aware of the viewers’ essential role in forming the work (The Place, 2009): “I really liked the double presence of viewer and performer, performance and installation ... sometimes the exchange of gaze almost merged us, so that I took the place of the performer somehow ...”

Choreographic methods drew attention to minute detail, to the extension of time and the minimal or very slight change in dynamics with the purpose of aiding the viewers’ self-awareness and contemplation, and potentially to highlight the presence and action of others. For example, we considered the resistance of revealing action, as if an object becoming visible in water, a slow emergence. Action starts in the core of the body, and is transformative. Conti (2016) explains,

I feel the power of my presence and I try to make the room mine, as if it was truly my space. Or again, as if I was so big to fill the room ... At the same time I don't want to reveal everything of myself. I like the idea that the darkness eats some aspects of me.

And Nilsen (2016) connects this to time: “remember always taking time to start the exploration, time to feel what wanted to come out next, what wanted to reveal itself, so that it was a body experience of time.”

While there is geography in the positioning of the mirrors and a quiet atmosphere is indicated through little movement and no sound, the constancy of this atmosphere is not controlled by the makers but by the audience. The negotiation of all these elements establishes each performance as distinct from the others. Attention is drawn to the individual in tension with the community, whether one follows another's lead or acts independently. Choices or responses are reflected in those that both dancers make—they choose a member of the audience very carefully. The dancers did not approach anyone who looked uncomfortable or unwilling.

The dancers work on the notion of movement having a deep internal root. The more overt material in rehearsal has layers of visibility that work from the central core outwards. As artists, we talk about the moment before the moment and the imaginative journey of molecular structures opening up. The final structuring is judged on how the emergent motion behaves over time. The process of revealing was a task re-lived in each performance, and this becomes a real and fresh experience for the viewers and the dancers as Nilsen and Conti work through this process anew each time, even though the overall structure is set.



Figure 4: Sighted (Photograph by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Stine Nilsen)

The intention in the work is to effectively absorb the viewers, to take them inside a performative action and to give them time to consider it, its synergy with the environment, and their own physicality. Each viewer's thinking is hopefully heightened to consider how they are and what they may do or not do, whether they are free and how

they would exercise choice. The skill and imagination of the dancers are of key importance. As Nilsen (2013) says, “I also feel like I have to grow roots and connect to the ground to be larger than myself in quiet energy, to have a live wire running through me even in the complete calmness and stillness, in order to emanate something that will reach every audience member”. Conti (2013) observes, in preparation for the solo in the dark that, “transformation during rehearsal can lead you to a new, unexpected path. Transformation from state to state in front of the audience is deepening into oneself. It touches some very intimate part of oneself”.



Figure 5: Sighted (Photograph by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Stine Nilsen)

The laying of the mirrors has shifted from the initial careful composition of the pieces to the later knowing and obeying the principles of the design. The scale is adapted to the space and the layout is sensitive to the need of the performers. We as artists are aware of the metaphoric nature of the image akin in our own imaginings of rivulets or logs in the river. The laying down of the mirrors has become quicker but aims to preserve the inherent dynamic quality of movement created by the spatial relationship of the mirror pieces and is most pronounced when completed by Broadhead. The viewers freely exercised their imaginations as to what the mirror might represent, and the comments assure us that the image can be read in different ways. Perhaps what is more surprising is how little the viewers comment on what is in front of them but more comment on what is inwardly felt (Collect, 2015): “I have never been so aware of my own body, stunning.” Another (Burton Taylor Theatre, 2009) wrote, “Loved it—it had a very meditative effect on me. Affected all my senses I think!”

As mentioned, the work was adapted to a number of different environments from the small dark space in Burton Taylor Theatre, Oxford, the open thoroughfare of Sadler’s

Wells mezzanine, or the typical white walled gallery of The Quad, Derby or Saatchi Gallery. The Deloitte Ignite Festival was a very busy event with a sense of occasion at ROH; at Saatchi (Collect, 2015), the atmosphere of looking to buy and sell contrasted with our call to the attention of looking in a contemplative sense. Did these different spaces impact on the intensity of the work as understood from the viewers' comments? It would seem rather that the tone of the performer as a constant always created a powerful connection to the viewers where the intensity of the experience was individualised.

In general, the comments from viewers confirmed that our aims were predominately met. There was no real distinction between comments from the different venues. There were measured physical interactions by the public, framed by the atmosphere in which one was to be alert to the minutiae of change. The general feeling was that the viewers were taking care not to spoil it for others, not to interrupt the flow. However, in the shared comments, people expressed desires to do things, but had decided not to. This led us as makers to consider what conditions were needed for that to happen: Nilsen's and Conti's presence; the surrounding white light; the darkness; recognising boundaries had been crossed allowing a sense of transformation or release and, finally, allowing time and space, and concentration for viewers to reflect upon themselves and their experiences.

Comments revealed something of the individual. They also illustrated that there were more layers to the experience for the viewers than were initially expected. The books were sufficiently used (about one third of visitors on average) to indicate the responses might be representative for most visitors. However, for the performers, the experience of addressing the audience in this work is itself quite exposing. At times, it was hard for the performer to disentangle the work from her own self as a fellow presence in the room: the need to care and be cared for became intrinsic to the work.

As with any live performance re-staging over a number of years brings with it an accumulated history in the memory of what the audience gave, what the performers gained and how the work was to be adjusted to different spaces. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the subtleties and dynamics of the piece and this knowledge has extended to new works. With regard to the analysis of audience's documented comments, it became apparent that a more formal documentation of the voice of the performers, both as agents of the work and as participants in the room, would reveal the intensity and subtlety of movement that cultivated the quality of audience commentary. The interviews were conducted through email exchanges between 2013 and 2015. With the distance of time these email conversations (guided by themes suggested by Woodhouse) rely on the dancers' memories and are therefore distinguished from the immediate responses of the audience members. This accumulated knowledge has

extended to new projects. The work that followed *Sighted*, entitled *Between* (2011), attempted to develop further a notion of bareness in movement and materials, to focus on how small acts impact on the space and the experience. In this work the activities circumnavigated the performers and the audience; slight incidents of attention, such as gold leaf on an arm or a string of pearls drawn across the space, happened from any point in the space. All aspects were very detailed and explicit. As with *Sighted*, it took time to develop the sense of extended time, of proximity and slightness of gesture in order to recalibrate attention to one's own feelings and actions.

The visitors' book became an important vehicle to express vulnerabilities and reflect on desires and questions. The work acted as a conduit to uncover the psychology of the viewer. The responses did not drive the next new work but their positive tone lent a confidence to the effect the work had. The comments were generous and honest, and proved how the experience of *Sighted* could elicit a direct commentary. The visitors' book revealed the layers of meaning and effect, which could not be predicted but underlined the deep engagement with a dance performance installation that was antithetical to the complexity and speed of modern life.





Figure 6 & 7: Sighted (Photographs by Hugo Glendinning; Dancer: Stine Nilsen)

References

- Borges, J .L, (1999). *Everything and nothing*. New York, NY: New Directions.
- Cage, J. (1966). *Silence. Lectures and Writings*. Middletown CN: M.I.T. Press
- Sontag, S. (1983). *A Sontag reader. The aesthetics of silence*. London, England: Penguin.
- Visitor's Book comments, (2009). The Place Theatre, London; 2009, Burton Taylor Theatre, Oxford; 2015, Collect, The Saatchi Gallery, London, England.