Northumbria University, Newcastle.
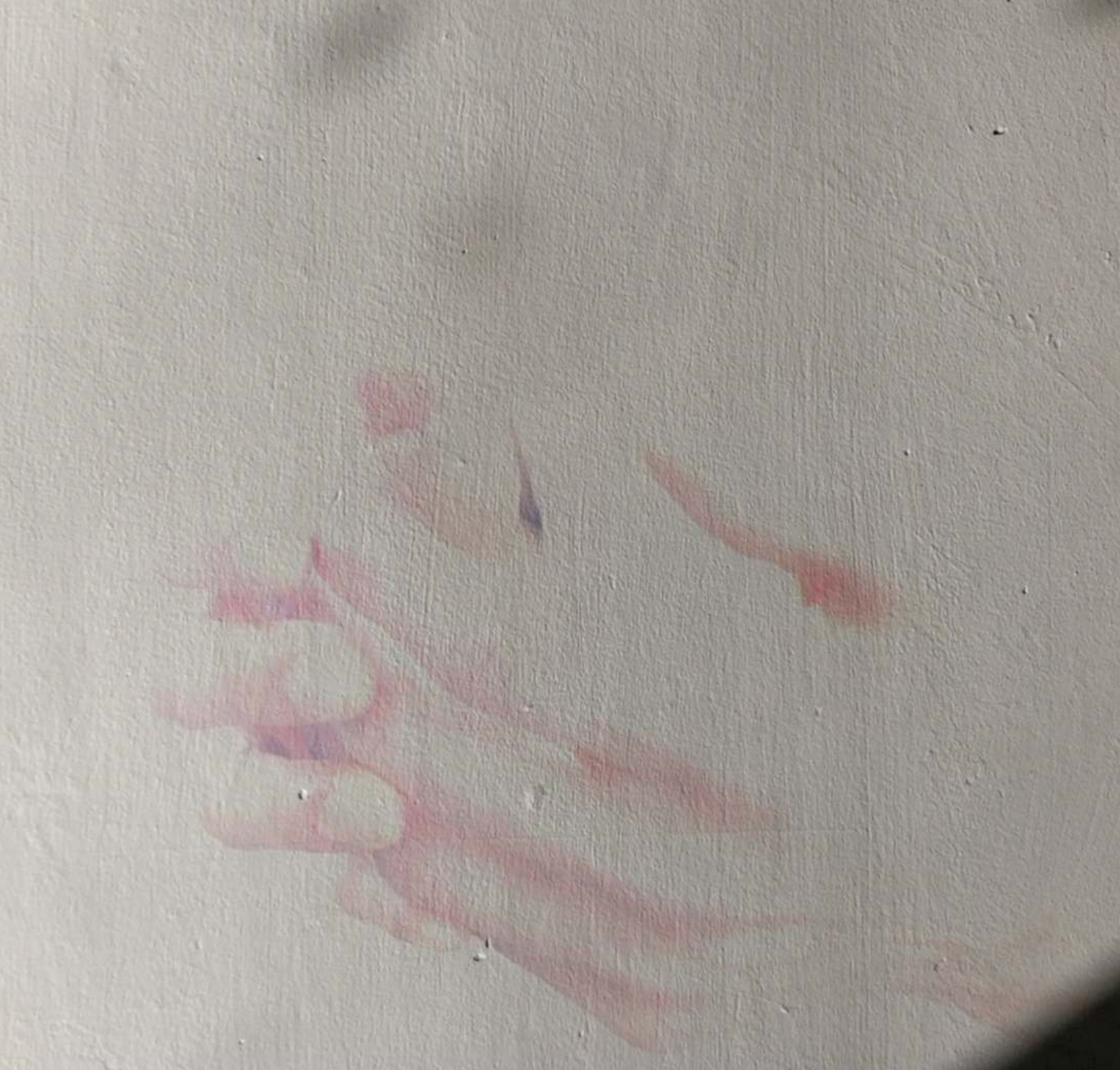Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.

Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE

VARIATIONS ON ASSEMBLY

Type of output:
Exhibition
(performance,
installation,
sound work and
HD Video)

by

Corin Sworn

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

Variations on Assembly encompassed a series of research performances and two large-scale art installations. Performance was employed as a mode of public-facing research activity informing the installations *WORKHOUSE*, presented at Glasgow International in 2018, and *Habits of Assembly*, commissioned by Edinburgh Arts Festival in 2019.

From the birth of cinema to contemporary discussions of mobile and personalised devices, screens have been seen to shape their users' attentions or be involved in capturing and harvesting data about them (Couldry and Mejias 2020). Through art forms employing movement Sworn sought to explore and challenge how imaging devices have been employed in capturing bodily task-based operations for systems of production.

Variations on Assembly charted a trajectory of physical assessment and gestural analysis through the camera, from the historical motion studies of the Gilbreths to contemporary motion capture and robot vision. Recent histories of improvisation in dance were used as generative counter-processes to discursively intercept practices of gestural standardisation.

Working with movement artists and a dramaturge, Sworn examined the use of the camera to segment and label gestures across Taylorist and post-Fordist production and within domestic surveillance and forms of reproductive labour. Sworn used techniques from dance to to analyse and explore bodily movement and system capture of such movement, contributing to understandings of the role of the camera in dance, in labour and economic production, and in practices of data extraction.

Initial research performances were presented in 2017 at *Reviewing Spectacle*, CCA Glasgow and *Hmn11*, Somerset House Studios, London. In 2018 they continued at *What's Love Got To Do With It?* at the Reid Gallery, Glasgow and *Here Was Elsewhere: >>FFWD*, Cooper Gallery, Dundee. Research from these events fed into the installations *WORKHOUSE* (2018) and *Habits of Assembly* (2019).

Right:
Production still *WORKHOUSE,* 2018.
Photo credit: Kendall Koppe

INTRODUCTION

Variations on Assembly comprised four performances and two large-scale installations as cumulative research activity running from 2017 to 2019.

Performances included:

- *Polarity Boxing* (2017) presented at *Reviewing Spectacle* a conference organised by the University of Glasgow, University of Kent and Université Paris Nanterre.

- *Some Soft Shell* (2018) presented at *What's Love Got To Do With It?* a project at the Reid Gallery, Glasgow with students from the Glasgow School of Art and L' École Supérieure d'Art et de Design Marseille-Méditerranée.

The following performances explored the recording and capture of daily life as live video dairies:

- *Speaking to the Screen* (2017) presented at *Hmn11*, Somerset House Studios, London.

- *In the Ether of WiFi* (2018) presented at *Here Was Elsewhere >>FFWD*, Cooper Gallery, Dundee.

Research from the above performances fed into two large scale installations:

- *WORKHOUSE* (2018) at Koppe Astner Gallery during Glasgow International. Installation of architectural augmentation, 4 channel sound and 20 minute video, photographs, calendar paintings, sound device and hand sanitiser.

- *Habits of Assembly* (2019) Edinburgh Arts Festival. Installation of architectural augmentation, sound piece, 4 channel sound and two 10 minute videos.

TIMELINE

2017 May	2017 Jun	2017 Nov	2018 Jan	2018 Feb	2018 Mar - Apr	2019 Jun - Aug
Polarity Boxing 2017, a 20 minute performance with dancer Kai Wen Chuang. Presented at *Reviewing Spectacle*, a conference organised by the University of Glasgow, University of Kent and Université Paris Nanterre.	Began research into 'live-feed' surveillance systems.	*Speaking to the Screen* 2017 a 10 minute performance presented at *Hmn11*, Somerset House Studios, London.	*Some Soft Shell* 2018 a workshop presented with dancer Claricia Parinussa Kruithof. Presented at *What's Love Got To Do With It?* Glasgow School of Art.	*In the Ether of WiFi* a 15 minute performance with video footage at *Here Was Elsewhere >>FFWD* Cooper Gallery, Dundee.	*WORKHOUSE* Koppe Astner Gallery, Glasgow International.	*Habits of Assembly*, Edinburgh Arts Festival.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Flexible managerial systems have encouraged labour practices that move across work and life (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) and new technological devices have arisen to assist in toggling between shifting employment roles and private lives (Russell Hochschild 2012). Rather than presenting the promised functionality of life management devices as options to be individually selected and employed, *Variations of Assembly* sought to situate the audience experientially within a meshwork of human-machine inter-active practices. The drive here was to reflect and embody interactive human-machine relations sufficiently to understand their terms of relation, even whilst their exact procedures cannot be mapped.

Right: Production still
WORKHOUSE, 2018.
Photo credit: Corin Sworn

CONTEXT

At the turn of the twentieth century the motion studies of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth employed the camera to map the movements comprising an action across time. Employed in the analysis of labour, these techniques shifted management from a set of verbal orders delivered by a manager to calculable metrics ordering movement across time (Nyland 1996). Through the use of a camera and a light on the worker's finger, the Gilbreths made legible hitherto uncalibrated actions carried out in the completion of a task. By measuring the gestural components of a task according to time, variations of assemblage could be replaced by ideally efficient iterations.

Right: Research Material
Habits of Assembly.
Photo credit: Corin Sworn
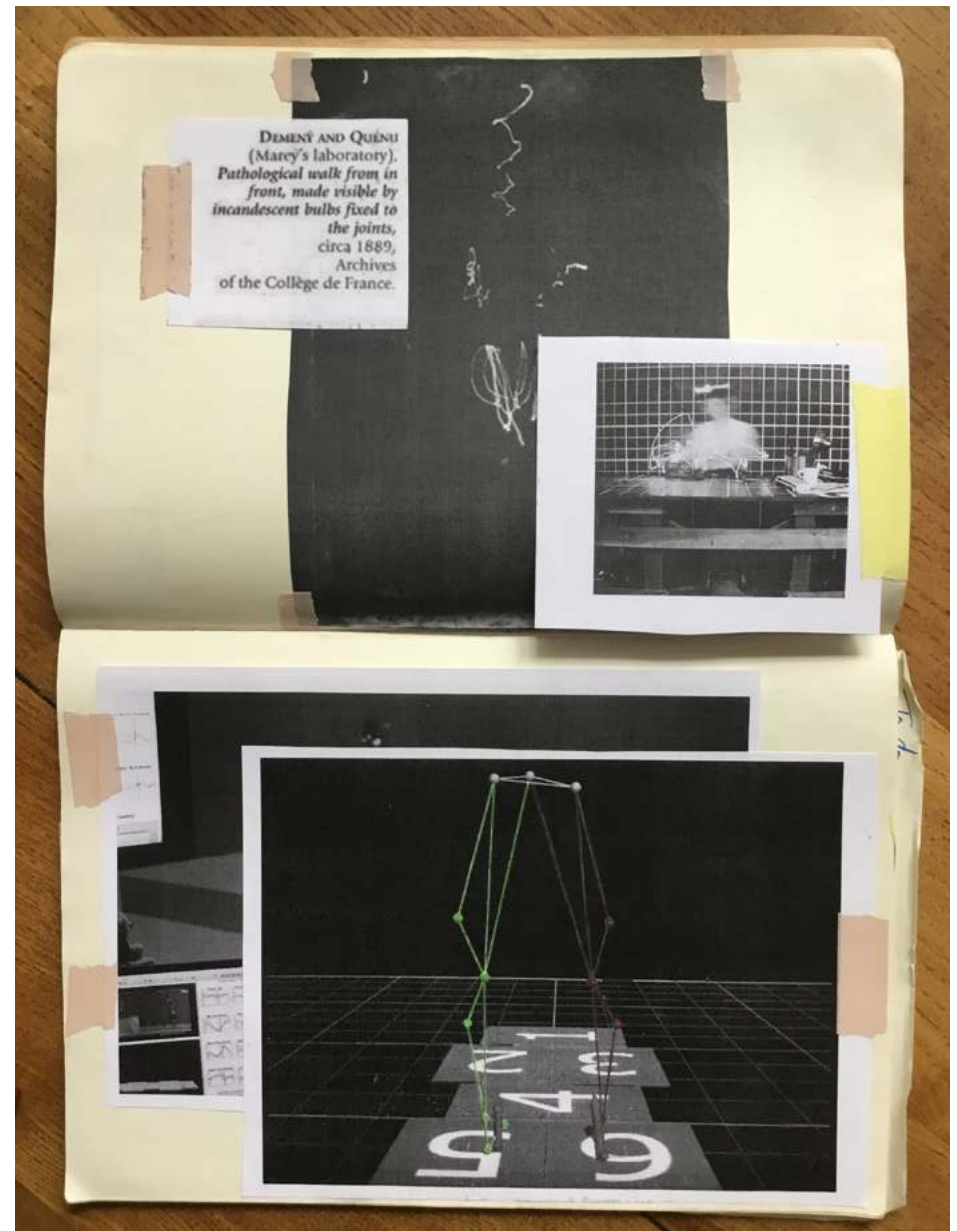
Over the past century, data capture and assessment have increased exponentially, moving from the factory floor into daily life. Motion and gait assessment are described as the next frontier within rapidly growing image processing industries (Yang and Murgia 2019). Seeking methods antithetical to the coding of bodies and movement, Sworn turned to task-based and somatic dance practices developed in the 1960s. These foregrounded the body as an object of study able to relate back to us our social conditioning, confinements, limits and possibilities (Wood 2007). For example, when the dancer Anna Halprin used a grocery list to map mundane movement, she rendered common procedures within daily life legible as complex gestural assemblages. Halperin saw these scores as offering tools to somatic awareness of pressure and strain (Schorn 2014). Sworn approached these task based somatic dance scores as practical tools for analysis of whether an ethos of efficiency has entered private life.

To model the enmeshment of bodies and popular management devices Sworn employed installation for its physically situating capacity. While, interested in Dan Graham's use of performance and delay-loops to allow an audience to self-consciously engage sensory experience within the "system" of an artwork, Sworn further considered the degree that techno-physical enmeshment has grown since Graham's time. Hence, Sworn examined Sondra Perry's work charting loops of capture and profit through the distribution of bodies across assessment and entertainment and Ben Lerner's discussions of the expropriations of 'human-ness' more generally through auto-tune and motion capture.

Right: Research Material
Habits of Assembly.
Photo credit: Corin Sworn
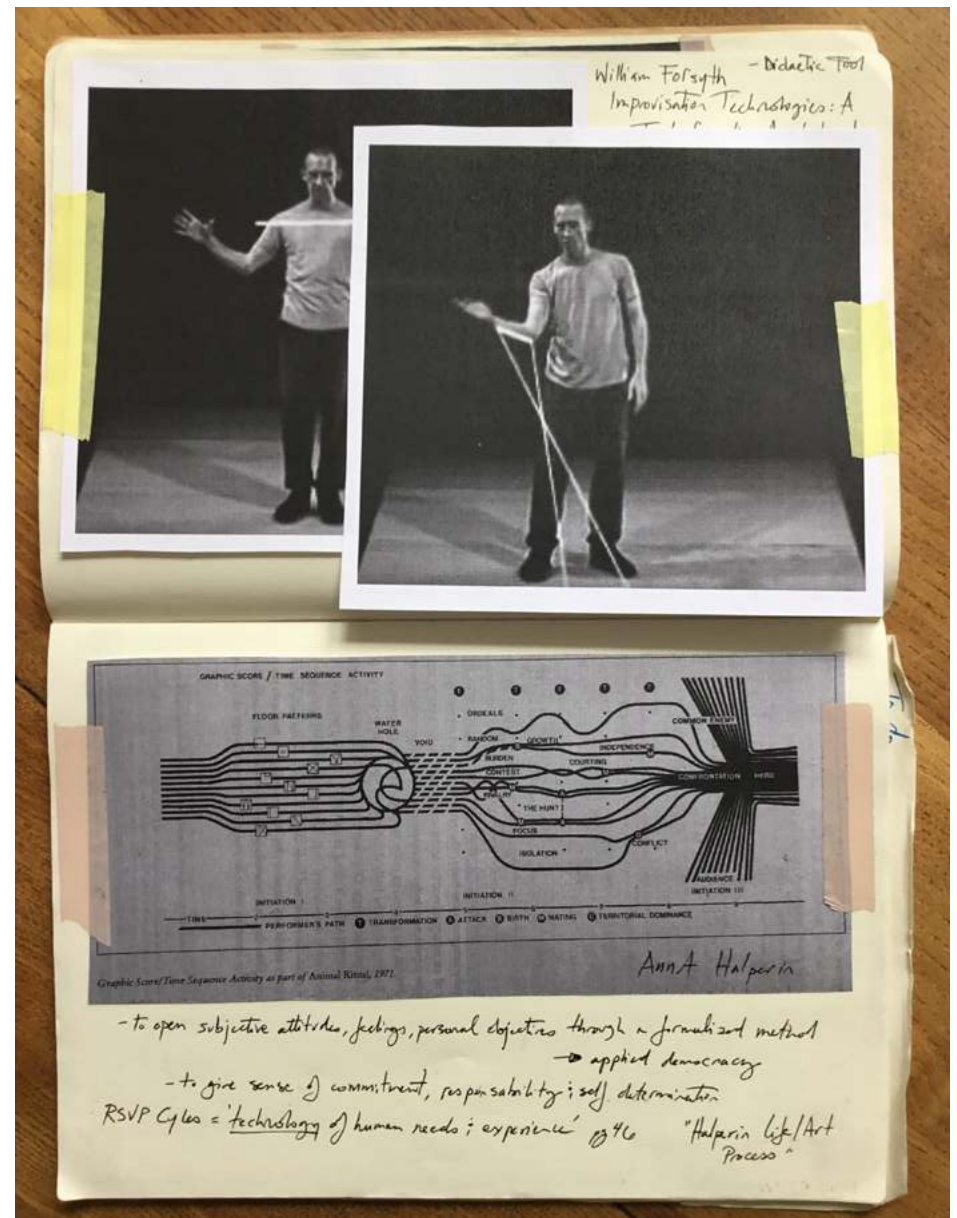
METHODS

Across the different elements of *Variations on Assembly*, new forms of practice-based exchange were developed to read device display in parallel with the body so as to reflect human-machine relations as a set of interactive demands, images and ideals configured through rehearsal, response and deployment.

Through initial performances Sworn trialed methods of reflective rehearsal in a set of public-facing performances which drew from sociological studies of Second Shift economies and the commercialization of emotional labor (Russell Hochschild 2012). These events included collaborative work with dancers and task-based scores. To facilitate research across skill sets and art forms while developing interpretive movement scores for performance, methods of personal storytelling were developed.

Right top:
Discussing scores with students
and dancer Claricia Kruithof.
Some Soft Shell, 2018 presented at
What's Love Got To Do With It?
Reid Gallery 2018.

Right bottom:
In the Ether of WiFi at
Here Was Elsewhere >>FFWD,
Cooper Gallery, Dundee.
Photo credit: Sophia Hao

The installation *WORKHOUSE* employed live feed surveillance cameras for perpetual recording. Various community groups were filmed in the gallery space over the lead up to the exhibition and a video was made with the resultant footage. Thus, when viewers moved through the space and watched the video, they both looked at and sat within the space of the work. Here Sworn encouraged viewers' proprioceptive knowledge as a means of enquiry to foreground reflection and understanding as encompassing embodied experience.

The installation *Habits of Assembly* employed systems developed by the Gilbreths alongside contemporary motion capture to present a historical trajectory of body and movement mapping through image capture technologies. The movements presented in these systems were generated with dancers. Techniques from somatic scores and movement media works, such as Trisha Brown's *Set Reset*, were used to juxtapose the granular difference of bodies against the exact, but uninflected, reproduction of imaging technologies.

Below:
Video still *There is Movement*.
Photo credit: Corin Sworn

Habits of Assembly 2019.
Photo credit: Keith Hunter

DISSEMINATION

WORKHOUSE video:
https://vimeo.com/266951070
Password: Movement

Links to *Polarity Boxing* video:
https://vimeo.com/224745486
Password: PB

Links to *Habits of Assembly* videos:
https://vimeo.com/429949800
Password: Habbits1
https://vimeo.com/429952414
Password: Habbits2

Right:
Video still *Habits of Assembly,*
Photo credit: Steven Jones

Habits of Assembly, 2019.
Photo credit: Keith Hunter

2017 May
Polarity Boxing (2017), a 20 minute performance with dancer Kai Wen Chuang. Presented at *Reviewing Spectacle*, a conference organised by the University of Glasgow, University of Kent and Université Paris Naterre.

2017 November
Speaking to the Screen 2017 a 10 minute performance presented at *Hmn11,* Somerset House Studios, London.

2018 January
Some Soft Shell 2018 presented at *What's Love Got To Do With It?* a project exploring collaboration, exhaustion and love in the field of artistic practice, Glasgow School of Art 2018.

2018 February
Here Was Elsewhere >>FFWD Cooper Gallery, Dundee, a 15 minute performance with video footage 2018.

2018 March- April
WORKHOUSE Koppe Astner Gallery, Glasgow International.

2019 June-August
Habits of Assembly, Edinburgh Arts Festival.

Invitations Following:

October 2019 Artist Talk Ryerson University, Toronto.

October 2019 Residency at EMPAC Rensselear Polytechinic Troy New York.

August 2019 Artist Talk Edinburgh College of Art and Design.

July 2019 Lux MasterClass, LUX Moving Image Glasgow.

Below:
Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) website.

Selected Press:

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Available at: https://mapmagazine.co.uk/look-at-your-shoes
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