

## Where and what is the artwork? Lessons from developing a score to 'preserve' a live film performance

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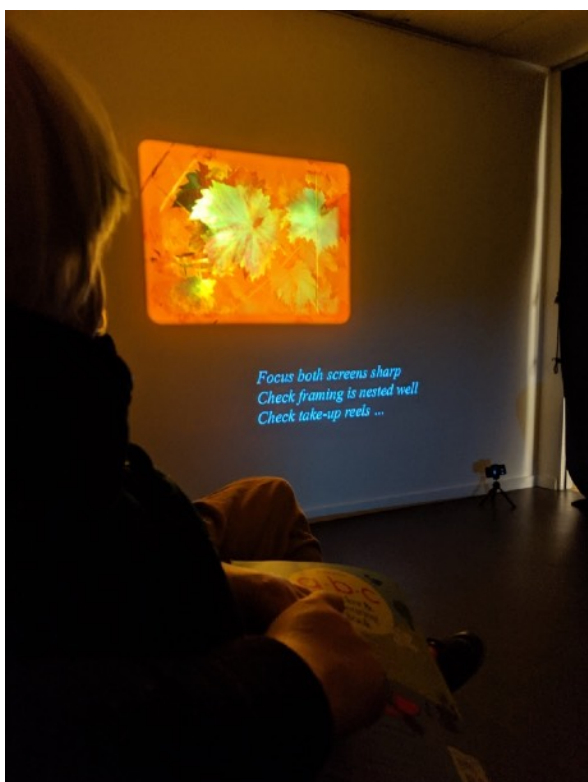


Louise learning *Autumn Fog* from Lynn at La Salle College of the Arts, Singapore, February 2019. Photo: Guy Sherwin.

### ABSTRACT

*The Stand-in Lab* (2019) was an art exhibition by Canberra artist/archivist Louise Curham and Singaporean London-based artist/archivist Lynn Loo. It explored sharing, transferring and archiving live art.

Throughout the Lab, guest artists tested and developed a score to allow Loo's experimental film performance *Autumn Fog* (2010–) to live on beyond her original performances of it. Visitors to the gallery tracked efforts by the guest artists to develop the score. This evolved from a standard text document into a series of haikus and the addition of an audio track. The process brought to light a surprising discovery – we presume an artwork has an essence, identifiable and similar for both audience and artist. Instead we found that the 'essence' is fluid and contextual. For example, while, for Lynn, *Autumn Fog* has been focused on film as image, other artists wanted to share the new scores with audiences through sound and text projection. Rather than a new work, I contend processes such as this 'ensure an artwork's progression in time', strengthening and therefore preserving it (Stigter 2010 in Van de Vall et al 2011).



Lucas Ihlein's performance at PhotoAccess gallery in Canberra, 13 July 2019, using text projection of the haiku score. Photo: Stuart Harrison.

### DISCUSSION

**What is *Autumn Fog*?** It is a 15 minute performance for two 16mm film projectors. Lynn filmed her London garden in autumn. She intentionally exposed, or fogged, areas of the film before she developed it. She projects the film negative on one projector and the film positive on

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the other, slightly off set in size and time, creating a curious stereoscopic quivering. It makes a familiar scene, a garden, beautiful and strange to us, inviting us to look with fresh eyes at the things we see every day. During the performance, the two 16mm projections are overlaid on top of each other, undergoing subtle changes through her blocking and unblocking the images at the projector lenses.

If essence is contextual, can we pin the work down enough to still call it that work?

Essence has been discussed as an identity comprised of work-defining properties (Laurenson 2006) and it has also been defined through praxis—what we have done with the work in the past becomes the map for what we can do with it in the future (Hölling 2017).

When Lynn agreed to work together to make a score, we anticipated Lynn would lead the authorship of the score, I would support the artists to test it and report back on their experience. Together Lynn and I would adjust the score. The default was that Lynn's wishes would come first. She gave the artists some guidance in a 'letter of consent'. Along with considering the letter, I observed the artists approach the score in a spirit of *tact* and *courtesy* and *good will*, in the spirit of score based art from the past such as Fluxus (Dezeuze 2002, italics in the original). While the artists wanted to respect Lynn's letter, they also responded to *Autumn Fog* and wanted to try different things they felt explored or extended it. One wanted to try adding interventions to the performance, to further blend the negative and positive image. Another added an audio track of the instructions spoken aloud. Another extended the border of the film projection by displaying adjacent powerpoint slides of the haiku instructions.

**I observed that *Autumn Fog* remained as a 'kernel', whole, within the additions the other artists made.** Lynn would still have recognised it.

The exhibition purposely drew attention to the artists' process of interpretation of the instructions. For example, in the first performance, given by me, the lights remained on so that the audience and I could both see the greatly enlarged score I was using to carry out my performance.



I address the audience before the final performance by artist Lucas Ihlein. On the wall behind the audience is the 3 metre print of the score I used for the first performance with the lights up. Photo: Lucas Ihlein.

**I observed audiences able to shuttle between absorption in Lynn's work and participation in my performance of it.**

**This extends our ideas about what authenticity of an artwork can be.** The experience of *Autumn Fog* performed by me was different from a performance by Lynn. Lynn invites her audiences to watch her as well as the screen. I extended that, explaining to the audience about the score and its development, in which they were participants during the performance they were attending.

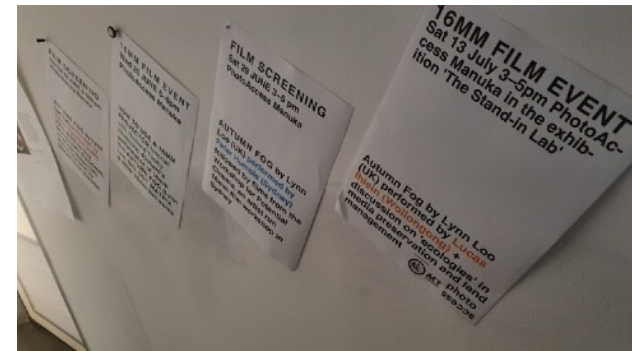
Let's consider that authenticity further. In the gallery, we also showed a video projection of Lynn performing *Autumn Fog*. Some visitors encountered only the video. I observed them gain an understanding of what happened in Lynn's performance but their engagement was brief (less than 2 minutes in the visitors I observed) compared with the experience of the performance of *Autumn Fog* (15 minutes). Talking with visitors who only consulted the recording, they were under no illusion about their experience *Autumn Fog*, they felt they'd only 'got an idea' of it.

While technicians, in theory, could perform *Autumn Fog* according to the score exactly as Lynn performs it, I contend that such a performance would once again be a consultation with it rather than an experience of it, chilled by exact replication.

I say technicians could achieve this 'in theory'.

**Activating *Autumn Fog* is not just about performing the score. It also requires activating the delicate 16mm equipment, likely to exceed the skills of most technicians, compounded by the difficulty of finding the equipment in the first place.**

One visitor commented surely it could be performed using video and programmed to produce the changes in the image Lynn produces in performance. It could. This would get around the 'fixed moment in the past' of the video recording. And it would accurately present **part of** Lynn's artistic intention. But I contend, like the technician's exact performance, its replication would be chillingly accurate. Why would an audience feel an obligation to sit and 'be with' the algorithm while the computer or the exacting technician enacts it? **The next piece of work for us in this project is to explain exactly what that distinction is between an algorithm enacted with the chilling accuracy of exact replication and the liveliness of performance by another artist using a score.**



Four artists performed *Autumn Fog* using new iterations of the score for each performance, their experience informing the next iteration. Photo: Lucas Ihlein.

**The artist score-testers and I** observed that the score splits the work from Lynn. The creative decisions about how to use the score then fell to the artists along with the activation of the 16mm. Because of the unreliable and unexpected performance of the 16mm, we realised two artists could be involved in the performance, one to perform the technology, the other to lead the performance by interpreting the score. This opens the work up beyond those with specialist 16mm skills and this too is what we next plan to explore.

It has been observed that understanding complex situations can best be grasped through a multitude of viewpoints, a process of composing, performing and witnessing to gain a feel for what's going on (Gibson et al 2018). What this amounts to is you tell your 'story' of the situation. Walter Benjamin persuades us that storytelling strengthens the story. By repeating it, the story grows strong (Benjamin [1935] 1969). As one of the artists who tested the instructions has said, enacting instructions for someone else's art has the potential to form strengthening 'growth rings' (Ihlein 2017).

Artworks like *Autumn Fog* fall into a category of art called expanded cinema, accepted as a pre-cursor to new media and interactive art (Ihlein 2005). These are artworks recognised as presenting complex situations. By applying the approach of making instructions, adding to them over time to capture users' tales of use, I contend we make the work stronger and preserve it as well as offer an authentic experience of it.

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Links: <https://lcurham.tumblr.com/post/185244745591/the-stand-in-lab>; [www.dewfields.co.uk](http://www.dewfields.co.uk); [www.teachingandlearningcinema.org](http://www.teachingandlearningcinema.org)