



PHANTASMAGORIA: SPECTERS OF ABSENCE

CHARLOTTE, NC

Some two hundred years ago, newly industrialized society developed a novel form of leisure: the spectacle of fear as a pop-cultural mechanism for managing anxiety. Phantasmagoria, entertainments of projected light and shadow which prefigured cinema, were all the rage. These splendid cathartics of terror and pleasure offered a collective glimpse at the supernatural. They took the form of elaborately staged "hauntings," an eloquent theater of death and separation that spoke to feelings of loss of control in an era of accelerating technological advancement. To this day, countless genres of such horror-delivery systems persist in all media, high and low. Designed specifically for the pleasure of stimulating fear of the unknown, and more poignantly the unseen, these entertainments mine a nexus of fear: the thin veil between this life and an imagined afterlife; the visual erasure experienced in loss; and the paradoxical construct of the ghost as specter—that is, the visible embodiment of absence.

Curated by José Roca and co-organized by Independent Curators International (ICI) and the Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, the traveling exhibition *Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence* explores the manifestation of these impulses in contemporary art through the work of twelve artists,

including Christian Boltanski, Michel Delacroix, Jeppe Hein, William Kentridge, and Rosângela Rennó [McColl Center for Visual Art; February 8—April 26, 2008]. The projects on view share themes and strategies that echo their archaic, early phantasmagoria counterparts—the image or literal use of breath or vapor, the presence or concept of shadows as ghostly entities, the use of mirrors and projections, and interactivity, which casts the viewer variously as reanimator, vampire or ghost. Ultimately, *Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence* sets in motion a mode of inquiry that is pertinent to visual art in general. As Christian Boltanski has pointed out, the formal properties of the museum and the mausoleum are identical. As such, the placement of artwork in a museum has everything to do with death.

As one moves through the vaulted stone archways of the McColl Center, a restored and retrofitted 1926 church, one first encounters Jim Campbell's *Library*, 2004, a hybrid of new and old forms that melds LED technology with photogravure imagery. In this work, Campbell digitally manipulates presence to signify absence. He recasts library-goers as phantoms or moving shadows by layering their video image upon a photogravure rendering of the New York Public Library, where they become ghostly evidence of vital activity. Campbell

pushes the eye's instinctual recognition of human kinetic action to its limits. The degraded resolution of Campbell's digital phantoms traces the edge of this phenomenon—a few pixels less and the figures would merge into atmosphere.

Regina Silveira's *Transitorio/Durevole* [*Transitory/Lasting*], 1998, is a fantastical construction. A shadow appears on a white wall: the perfectly black silhouette of a seated woman—poet Mirella Bentivoglio—reading a book. Cut from self-adhesive black vinyl, the sleekly torqued shadow seems to slide up from the floor, angling along the crease of the wall upwards, into its lower right quadrant. The wall is otherwise blank. The figure reads an actual three-dimensional book that opens out from the wall. Its pages are blank, underscoring the shadow's lack of material referent, which is nowhere to be seen.

Julie Nord's *The Hands*, 2007, tells an abbreviated children's tale, illustrated in black paint on a white wall. In the story, hand-shadows take on a life of their own, revealing the dark side of play—a literal depiction of the Jungian shadow aspect. The narrative begins with three examples of basic hand-shadows: dog, cat, and rabbit. The fourth shadow explodes outward, beyond the borders of possibility, in a confluence of florid demonic figures, a malevolent cluster of anthropomorphic trees

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Julie Nord, *The Hands*, 2007, site-specific wall drawing, dimensions variable (collection of the artist and MOGADISHNII); Teresa Margolles, *Aire [Air]*, 2002, five humidifiers, water, antiseptic solution, and organic material; dimensions variable (collection of the artist; courtesy of Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich)



sprouting from fingers, a fire-breathing dragon, and a lurking devil. The text reads: "...just as she thought..." "...everything to be in place..." "...it got totally out of hand!" In a lower corner, a little girl holds her hands up in horror, conveying the sense that, somehow monstrous or demonic, they channel dark forces. As such, *The Hands* gives visibility to dark psychological fears of loss of control surrounding the primal drives of sex and death, and the chaos of embodied experience. And while *The Hands* evokes the unconscious terror of hands obeying strange desires, it also follows the logic of dreams, where hands function symbolically as agents of one's own will.

Of all the works in *Phantasmagoria*, Teresa Margolles' *Aire* [Air], 2002, is the singularly most chilling. Much of Margolles' work ritualizes engagement with death. Here, five humidifiers are evenly spaced on the floor in a row, without pedestals. Lights placed on both sides of each component illuminate a steady flow of emergent vapor. These are domestic machines, designed to facilitate breathing, health, and to humidify the air—basic life-sustaining elements. However, the water used in Margolles' machines contains a "symbolic" amount of liquid left over from the cleaning of corpses in a morgue. With this single gesture, Margolles ups the stakes con-

siderably. One is confronted with one's own preconceptions about death and spirit. Do the morgue liquids somehow retain an essence of the dead's being that, now vaporized, floats upon our skin, is inhaled into our lungs?

Laurent Grasso's *Untitled* [Projection], 2005, a single-channel, rear-projected video loop, presents a continuous tracking shot of a forward-rolling cloud, a vaporous entity that engulfs everything in its path. It rolls ever forward with malevolent force along narrow Parisian streets, consuming vintage architecture and modern cars until it fills the entire screen, only to pull back and continue rolling. Thundering white noise accompanies the image, shaking the matte black walls of the narrow viewing area whose shiny black floor reflects ambient light from the screen, doubling the impact of the churning luminous action.

New media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer created the installation *Sustained Coincidence* [Subsculpture 8], 2007, specifically for this exhibition. Incandescent light bulbs are hung along the back wall of a room. A computerized surveillance system organizes and overtakes the expected shadow-producing process, and the viewer's shadow is thrown across the room in counter-intuitive and astonishing ways. Here, lights flicker, one's

shadow projects diagonally across the space, replicates, and reinstates itself somewhere else. The effect is akin to time travel, or rather, to the amplification and reification of oneself—now here, now there, and simultaneously in both places at once. One blinks, shifts or moves across the room and the mystery redoubles—a strobe-like effect but more complex, communicating an other-worldly system of logic and physical law.

Phantasmagoria's final piece is its most ephemeral. Oscar Muñoz's *Aliento* [Breath], 2000, consists of nine metallic mirrors hung in a row. The visitor's participation is required to complete the piece; when one breathes on a mirror's surface, the phantom photographic image of a face appears for a brief moment, to disappear almost immediately. The faces represent people who have died, often in violent circumstances. As such, the installation casts the viewer as a life-giver or channeling medium who, for a split second, summons the dead back home.

Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence is deeply resonant, in both concept and execution. What's more, an elegant hardcover catalogue ensures its afterlife through Roca's essay, brief interviews with the artists, and—hackers, goths, and steam punks take note—a short story by Bruce Sterling.

—Amy White

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Rosângela Rennó**, *Experiencing Cinema*, 2004, DVD, fog machine, photographic projection on smoke wall, dimensions variable (courtesy of Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo); **Laurent Grasso**, *Untitled* [Projection], 2005, single-channel rear projection with sound, transferred to DVD, 3 minutes, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chez Valentin, Paris)