Writer/critic Gemma Sharpe
- on the work by trans-disciplinary artist duo Lundahl & Seitl

I see it feelingly.
Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV, vi, 147.

Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.
Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, 1951

Once I was allowed to prowl through London's Victoria and Albert Museum after hours, (a book required collection). Passing unlit glass cases, corridors and stairwells, I paused for the duration of a footstep at the entrance of the Cast Collections to look at how in this darkness, the casts had become participants of a frozen battle. There were half-bodies, beasts and warriors – some performing the carnage of the Laptiths and the Centaurs in their drunken conflict, while others a Bacchic frenzy. In this darkness they were united into a single violent tableau.

It was in this space that *Symphony of a Missing Room* started to materialise – the artists Christer Lundahl and Martina Seitl, their friends and collaborators, (along with bemused tourists, students, visitors and security guards), collectively spinning out the work's earliest threads and raising its significant questions. Staring at statues and willing the statues to stare back, by using this museological environment as a research territory for performative work, Lundahl & Seitl were taking a logical, though ambitious step forward in their practice – a practice that has become increasingly formidable not only in terms of the physical scale of the spaces it inhabits, but also the complexity of those spaces.

Symphony of a Missing Room presented in the Museum Der Moderne as part of the festival, is the pair's most ambitious work to date. Virus-like, *Symphony* gathers its narratives and histories from the institutional collections and architectures it inhabits and has previously inhabited. At the same time, the work is infected by its visiting participants who, with each unexpected turn, movement or reaction to the piece, influence the artists' vision of it. Dependent on the visitor's aural, physical and imaginative participation, *Symphony* is conditioned by the unruly sequences of a visitor's sensory and social reactions, and will thus never be quite the same twice. With each new manifestation of this work, the lessons and internal memories that it has acquired – along with the narratives and soundtracks that the artists collect on their journeys – are adapted back into its frame.

On a micro-scale the piece adapts each time a new batch of visitors enter. On a macro-scale, the work presents an arc of incarnations – each adapted to the particularity of its site. While *Symphony* is concerned by physical displays of history described and embodied by museums, it is also a learning machine that absorbs and reconstitutes its own past, reciting the lessons of that past each time it is physically refashioned, and each time begins again.

Involving seven visitors at a time, *Symphony of a Missing Room* is approximately an hour long. The work had its inception autumn 2009 at the National Museum, as a commission by Weld, Stockholm Sweden, and has since found shape at S.M.A.K, Ghent; the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, (as part of Birmingham's Fierce Festival); at the Museum M,

Leuven; and the Gothenburg Museum of Art, Gothenburg. The performance purposely occupies museum spaces, through which its visitors are guided by a gentle voice that arrives through individual headsets. This voice, along with guides, performers and at times, the simple strategy of blindfolding, deliver the visitor's experience and direct their journey. With its sharply scripted and ghostly tone, this voice offers instruction, comfort and meditative direction. In tandem with this voice are the activities of the museum and the performance itself. "I am here" it speaks as the visitor's hand is caught by an invisible figure that gently chases and leads them – performing a dialogue based on touch, a 'white touch' that leaves the visitor bereft once it has gone, and aware of a new sensation, which is the benevolent after-sting of intuitive contact.

While *Symphony's* soundtrack and narrative, and the physical and visual activities of its performers guide the visitor in a precisely interconnected manner, the affective power of this work lies in Lundahl & Seitl's ability to create disjunctions within the visitor's experience. For example one might be sitting on a stairwell listening to the sound of footsteps disconnected from a visible body – aurally perceiving an activity that is not in fact taking place. The artists play with the classic "if a tree falls in a forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?" conundrum. If one hears footsteps but nobody appears to occupy them, do they still somehow exist? Or to take another example, while one is blindfolded or bereft of vision, the work's narrative might lead you 'out' of the museum into a space such as a forest or a tower that you are requested to imagine. While one's better judgment acknowledges the fact that you are standing in a museum and not a forest, both the elimination of logic and the sensory disjunction that Lundahl & Seitl promote, divides one's physical and intellectual facilities in order that one is led into a strangely revelatory space in which judgment, sense and sensation gently conflict.

It is the unknown that takes striking effect in the experience of Lundahl & Seitl's work, and utilising by analogy the principles of Quantum Physics, Lundahl & Seitl choreograph absences, negotiating the problem of observation along with the changing resonance of disclosure against the undisclosed. When one sensation is amplified in their installations, it is at the detriment of another. When information is lost, the power of what we do have before us – be it sound, a snatch of vision, an unlikely narrative, or the intuitive jolt caused by an unexpected touch – is exalted.

In light of *Symphony's* theoretical logics, Christer Lundahl has described the concept of history as a kind of "backwards prophesying."[1] In same way that one must call into the imagination an event that someone tells you *will* happen, one must similarly imagine an event you are told once *did* happen. One must make a leap of imagination in order to believe that narrative. Events of the past – however many remnants are left behind – cannot be 'experienced' again beyond a narrative that inevitably flirts with modes of fiction and imagination. The historical narrative is always a partial reconstruction of an event from which ones' sensory functions are largely deprived. One can stand at the place of event and *feel* the texture of the ground and *imagine* the sounds and visuals of that event happening, yet even with the most sophisticated technologies at hand, that event will remain a flawed repeat. The philosophy of history embodied in *Symphony* therefore, is one that venerates the role and function of the imagination as it fills a factual, experiential or material void.

In this work the art museum becomes a repository of disjuncted visuals that project, prophesy and document both the past and the future. By turning the insufficiencies of these objects and their collected narrative into an asset with which they can artistically and imaginatively play,

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[1] In conversation at Weld, Stockholm: 7th September 2009.
[2] In conversation at Weld, Stockholm: 7th September 2009.
[3] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, part 15, (1927).
[4] In conceiving this work Lundahl & Seitl were reading, among other texts, Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (Routledge: London, 1995), a book that examines

Lundahl & Seitl site this artwork within the museum's absences – its absences of space, knowledge and experience. Lundahl & Seitl rewrite the narratives of the museum in a kind of ameliorative institutional critique that demonstrates the possibility of multiple spectacles within the institution. Describing the trajectory of the work's early research Lundahl states that, "we were thinking about the museum as a temple for objects. But then we were also thinking again about *all* the objects in a museum and then about the most important *part* of the museum. What is the most important object in there? What do we use to mediate our experience of the museum's objects? This question led us to what the museum left out."[2]

Placing this work within a wider trajectory of the artists' practice, *The Memory of W.T Stead* stands out as a significant precedent. Produced in 2009 and involving six visitors who experience the work simultaneously, this piece was the result of an ongoing collaboration between Lundahl & Seitl and experimental pianist Cassie Yukawa. Guided through the Steinway & Sons piano workshop aided by wireless headsets and interventions from performers in the space, the work's visitors were led to question the alliances of watching with listening, sound with movement, and music with performance. Partway through the work, Yukawa performs Bach's *Fuge in A Minor* at one of Steinway's magnificent pianos, a composition chosen to sit at the work's core and to reflect the shape of its narrative: an 'expanding spiral' that deliberately warps the listener-viewer's sense of space and duration.

Requiring a workshop emptied of its daytime managers, customers and technicians, *The Memory of W.T Stead* was largely performed at night. Apparitions within the workshop such as the unspeaking pianist and figures that appeared and disappeared from within it – along with a tightly choreographed lighting arrangement – brought the viewer's attention not only to human movements within the space, but to that space's material composition. Stranded piano keys waiting for attention, or a spotlighted hammer (in a deliberately Heideggerian[3] reference), were the tools that Lundahl & Seitl led their audience to focus upon and to perceive afresh within the half-lights of the piece.

With its complex environment that contained worldly images, institutional narratives and material paraphernalia, *The Memory of W.T Stead* presented a contrast to earlier pieces such as *Work/Workshop*, (first shown at Weld, Stockholm in 2008), and the short piece *My Voice Shall Now Come From the Other Side of the Room*, (first performed in 2007), which rely on container-like spaces that permit next to no influence of the outside world beyond the entering visitors. Another significant precedent of *Symphony* is the work *Recreation Test Site*, (also titled *Rotating in a Room of Images*), which since its first production at Weld in Stockholm in 2007, has been reformed according to the pragmatic and architectural nature of its setting. Permitting only one participant at once, this short work of around 15 minutes, sees the visitor moving through a series of largely whitewashed and 'neutral' spaces supported by an instructional yet ghostly narrative conveyed through a wireless headset, along with the movements of seen and unseen performers sharing the space. Including the apparatus of a closed circuit video – in which at one point the visitor is presented with their own 'replica' on a screen – the work culminates in a strange tableau performed by its actors. The tableau is shocking both for its contrast to the inhuman and sterilised nature of the work's preceding 'scenes', yet also for its familiarity – the shape of this scene (along with its distinctive characters), having been subtly introduced to the visitor throughout the work.

As precedents for *Symphony of a Missing Room*, *Recreation Test Site* and *The Memory of W.T Stead* are significant. Like *Symphony*, and indeed most of Lundahl & Seitl's works, these pieces produce a looping journey with the visitor being gently introduced into the experience by the same person that leads them out of it. In the case of *Symphony*, it is the aged gallery

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[2] In conversation at Weld, Stockholm: 7th September 2009.
[3] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* part 15, (1927).

guide who initially leads us through the museum and is later re-presented before the final 'meditation' that completes the work. Figures of comfort, Lundahl & Seitl's visible hosts nevertheless produce an uncanny sensation of déjà vu and perhaps even agitation in the visitors when they reappear at the end of their experience. Spatially or even temperamentally altered by the journey of the work, these visitors have been led through narratives contrived like incomplete circles that eject them at a point tantalisingly close, yet crucially removed from their starting position. Perhaps many viewers emerge from Lundahl & Seitl's pieces blinking and shell-shocked because their position in the world, if not only the building, has been so unexpectedly jarred: not quite *dis*placed, but deliberately *re*-placed. The re-entry of their host at the end of the work services this incomplete loop, reminding the visitor of their having been physically conducted and externally observed throughout the work.

Symphony of a Missing Room is not the first work by Lundahl & Seitl in which the artists have punctured a 'found' space however. The institutional and social environment has been explored within their practice via the trope of 'avatarism' in the 'Birthday Series', beginning with *Christer's Birthday* shown in 2007 at Ken, London, and its precedent *Christer's Birthday II* (retrospectively titled), shown as part of the Whitechapel Gallery's programme of late night events. This series, including *Martina's Birthday*, (Cell Project Space, London, 2010), *James' Birthday* (Battersea Arts Centre, London, 2010) and *Birth Series (*Tate Modern, surrealist gallery), are disruptive pieces in which performers carrying miniature cameras attached to headsets move through and unsettle a social gathering. Through these headsets they hear the directions of visitors known as 'avatars' who sit away from the space and, by watching corresponding television monitors, direct these subservient performers: "move that person's arm," "walk into the corner," "lie on the floor." Directly manipulated and disturbed by the presence of these performers, the social arena is infiltrated by bodies which act against its schema. In a similar way the museum is interrupted by *Symphony*. Even those not partaking in the work sense an environmental shift in the museum's spaces, spaces so commonly prescribed by institutional rubrics and behavioural codes.[4]

The museum however, is an unruly space in which to place an immersive artwork that so depends upon accuracy and to some extent, each participant's physical containment. Yet the development and delivery of this expansive work has significantly 'unfastened' Lundahl & Seitl's practice. A number of changes have taken place in subsequent works, including the artists' creeping out of the relatively inhuman white space that they had previously constructed for their works in order to confront a manifestly institutional environment. The pair also appear to be exploding the narrative possibilities of their new pieces, allowing wider brackets of contingency into the work. In the 2011 work *The Infinite Conversation* shown at Magasin 3 in Stockholm, they shattered and divided the solo instructional voice, producing a work in which the visitor is gently pushed into an environment of darkened language, with disembodied voices exchanging dialogue around and perhaps even *through* the body of each entrant.

Lundahl & Seitl's practice extracts poetry from the predicament of not-knowing. It exploits quantum problems of observation and imprecisions of historical narrative. It locates itself within the dark corners (both physical and political) of institutions, and it encourages the unruly short-circuiting of thought that occur when we attempt to understand a site, narrative or situation. The practice of Lundahl & Seitl begins with curiosity about our understanding of space, time, cognition, sensation and social schemas, and also about the role of performance as a vehicle to bear these curiosities. There is no single line of research here – rather multiple questions that form the design of a work and anticipate further questions that arise from its

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[4] In conceiving this work Lundahl & Seitl were reading, among other texts, Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics,* (Routledge: London, 1995), a book that examines the role of the museum and the exhibition as a socially regulating force within society throughout and since the nineteenth century.

realisation. This entire practice is an experimental site that scatters rather than consolidates. And necessarily so, for instead of basing itself on a homogenous view of experience, the work accepts the singularity of it's every visitor: how one may touch, listen, see and feel, or indeed, see feelingly.

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