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Abstract

This illustrated paper describes how, through visualization, the pertinent and frequently embodied theme of obliteration of a therapeutic movement and witnessing practice was made available in artistic, public form. It describes why and how this particular project served to make a usually hermetic, privately experienced quality accessible for wider consideration and to more people through art. It states that engaging in practice-led research affirms and gives additional value to arts methodologies. The processes of planning and making the sculptural installations are described from the perspective of one whose long-term practice has involved movement, dance and witnessing. The term obliteration was purposefully chosen to lend a detached and collective aspect to the topics of death and loss, which often lack open public discussion. It aims to create a less emotive, safer feel so that the topic may be approached with respect but with less fear.

**Sculptural Installations on the Theme of Obliteration:
A Response to Themes Embodied in the MoverWitness Exchange
(Authentic Movement)**

Eila Goldhahn Ph.D.

Dr. Eila Goldhahn was educated at and received her Ph.D. from Dartington College of Arts and the University of Plymouth in Devon, UK. She is a Senior Registered Dance and Movement Psychotherapist with the Association for Dance and Movement Psychotherapy UK and an artist and lecturer in the UK and in Germany, where she currently runs a studio practice at BASIS e. V. in Frankfurt am Main. She is a member of the Gesellschaft für Tanzforschung (GTF), Germany. She has led a number of interdisciplinary, publicly funded arts and research projects and has collaborated with architects, artists, biologists and dancers. Her research interests include Authentic Movement and its interdisciplinary, methodological application, an approach she has coined the MoverWitness exchange.

Prenote

The *MoverWitness exchange* is a practice-led research method that examines movement and language in creative *and* systematic ways. Its new name and methodological emphasis was the result of my Ph.D. research project (Goldhahn 2007) that examined the workings of *Authentic Movement* (Adler, Chodorow, Whitehouse, Pallaro 1999, 2002, 2008). Authentic Movement originated from the field of Arts Therapies and is used in the contexts of dance and movement therapy, choreography and dance pedagogies. The MoverWitness exchange in turn crystallizes the practice's original workings into a new framework that can be used in interdisciplinary applications including visual arts, design and natural sciences. The thesis also critically examined the term 'authenticity' which was shown to be a limiting term in this context (Goldhahn, 2007 and 2009).

Arts Based Research

My research at Dartington College of Arts, Devon, UK, examined Authentic Movement and developed the *MoverWitness exchange's* methodological potential. As part of this work I designed a series of sculptural installations to visualize some of the practices' normally hidden qualities and themes and to test whether my proposition and its principles could be transferred into other disciplines.

(Un)marked Boxes at Delamore Arts and at Dartington Trust consisted of three different configurations that I made for different sites in response to the themes related to and surrounding death, in this context named as obliteration (a much wider and less emotive term). By making these art works my intention was to avail profound qualities and themes normally only derived in the entirely private sphere of the *MoverWitness exchange* to wider appreciation in a public space. By using visual art as a method to disclose I was able to reconcile the disparate agendas of movers' privacy with a public's perception and curiosity. A topic usually shrouded and hidden in privacy became accessible to the public in this way.

By choosing a purely arts-based research method for my investigation, I asserted an Arts Therapist's prerogative, need and desire to be involved in creating art, and gave value to art's inherent aesthetic, cultural and reflective ability to create and reveal knowledge (McNiff, 1998). Whilst making works of art that stand and speak in the public entirely independently and in their own right, I used an alternative practice in which my movers' privacy was untouched. Hence an arts based methodology supported several of the issues at stake: others' safety, my own research questions and a consistency between method and subject matter. This particular coherence affirmed research process, methodology and topic: I used visual art to examine and enlighten other creative practices: movement and witnessing.

Arts Psychotherapists, whose primary focus is on helping other people to function better through the recreative and healing power of making and expressing through art, drama, dance and music, frequently neglect their own, personal creative arts practices. In the training and supervision I provide, I have encountered surprise and even reluctance when questioning how an Arts Psychotherapist can work knowledgeably and effectively without nourishing his/her own creativity and artistic practice. The outcomes of this project, the art works themselves, demonstrate how visual art itself can provide a way to express and reveal new knowledge and perspectives. The art works speak for themselves, also

through the images on these pages, and I am satisfied to have used a method that has provided new knowledge to others and myself in ways, which words alone could not have done.

Initially I had identified obliteration as being one of the typical themes that recurred again and again within the practice of the *MoverWitness exchange* (and in the practice for Authentic Movement) and was curious and impressed by its apparent high collective relevance. I wanted to reveal and recreate this thematic topic publicly not by using performance with movers and witnesses, but in a less intense, more easily approachable way. I wanted to create a situation in which an uninitiated public could feel free to enter and leave, and gain an experience entirely on their own terms. I was interested to see what would happen if the theme of obliteration was made available sculpturally, not through monuments of grieving and loss related to specific historic events, such as the Holocaust, wars or indeed in memory of individual heroes, but in a more generally open, not entirely defined way. For this purpose I chose to use a modernist visual language. My ideas demanded to recreate the specific theme from my source discipline without becoming too explicit or literal. Initial sketching clarified the simplicity and openness of forms that I wanted to use.

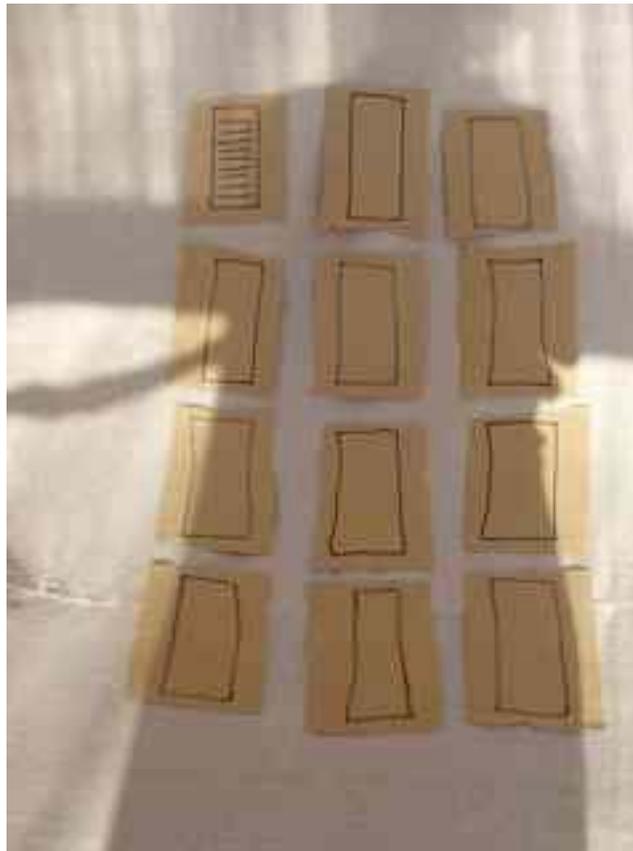


Plate 1
Title: Sketch for *(Un)marked Boxes*

Artist: Eila Goldhahn

Obliteration, a Theme in Collective Body of Work

Obliteration as a topic plays a dominant role in the collective awareness of Western societies whilst at the same time the individual experience of death is private and often simultaneously avoided and unacknowledged. Daily news confronts listeners with the deterioration of the planet, whole countries and societies, from the physical to the moral fabric: life, apparently, is being destroyed on an unprecedented scale. Obliteration and fear of death are important aspects of collective narration. The survival of specific human groups and the human species are deeply embedded and instinctually founded concerns.

Obliteration, as a collective theme, frequently arises within the embodied group improvisations of the *MoverWitness exchange*. Fascinated by the depth of feeling that I have witnessed and felt myself also when moving, I identified obliteration as one of the major recurring topics of the *MoverWitness exchange*. Whole groups can, at times, be seen to embody rituals of decline, suffering, dying, burial, grieving and departure. Obliteration is a common collective theme, something that I have observed to appear more frequently in groups than in individual moving.

Death can be understood as the ultimate dissolution of individuality. Individuality is usually cherished as one of the most desirable values, enhanced by fame, professional role, socially important relationships and status symbols. Death then is a falling apart of what has been relied on and what was painstakingly built up during the life of an individual. Obliteration of the individual body, the only carrier able to give organization to these values attached to it, falls apart. In death individuality is given up and surrendered. Each part, each limb, each organ, however perfect, beautiful, skilled, famous or loved, deteriorates, loses its perfection, its beauty, its skillfulness in order to become simple ingredient for the potentiality of new gestation at another time and place. Perhaps it is easier to give way to difficult and painful contemplations of obliteration when feeling part of a collective than when feeling on one's own.

Contained within its own form and rituals one could liken collective forms of Authentic Movement practice to containing elements of what we know about the Eleusian Mysteries of Ancient Greece, also this being an event only imaginable as a collective one. The Mysteries were the main societal events of the year and no one was left out from participating. Society as a whole, temporarily dismissing class and status, came together for these important days. The purpose of these mysteries provided a collective reminder of death, for both the ultimate individual as well as a shared collective fate (Hannah Arendt 1958).



Plate 2
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

Main features in these rituals, which lasted over several days and weeks, were the presence of animals accompanied by a massive evocation and public display of emotions and outpouring of grief. A special ritualistic chest was passed around between participants, evoking a sense of closure and disclosure and associations relating to the usually private experiences of birth and death. In the *MoverWitness exchange*, and particularly when obliteration becomes a main feature of a group's collective embodiments, I perceive a similar purpose. Actual grief, anticipation and knowledge of death are then commonly and purposefully enacted. However, the collective is a small group within the larger collective. It maintains the screen of a closely-knit community and the privacy of individuals within.



Plate 3
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

In creating *(Un)marked Boxes* I explored typical spatial formations of groups, similar, yet static, to those observed in collective group movements in the *MoverWitness exchange*. I wanted to find out how expressive these formations could be in a time-frozen medium and whether I could make a similarly powerful space available to be entered and experienced by a public. Could my solid ‘collective bodies’, my sculptures, reflect the powerful qualities of obliteration that they were emulating? Could the installed boxes be experienced by the public collective as a poignant reminder of obliteration?



Plate 4
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

Creating *(Un)marked Boxes*

My three versions of *(Un)marked Boxes* show different collective configurations and spatial relationships. The stark thingness yet anthropomorphic form of their single elements, the boxes, is reminiscent of objects usually associated with death and obliteration, such as a doorway, a coffin or a gun case. The boxes evoke notions of profound and irredeemable emptiness and the many psychological, physical and spiritual associations of this term. The empty, open space that each box contains invites curiosity, play and physical interaction, but can also provoke annoyance and, at times, the sublime. The boxes were found by chance; disposed on an industrial estate and later supplied to me in multiples by the firm that had their electronic train equipment delivered in them. The crates were packing cases for this sensitive equipment and made from roughly sawn Italian pine, untreated and unvarnished. Their rough, industrial quality provided me with an ideal ready-made that was neutral enough to become a good enough 'screen' for a wide range of viewers' projections and in keeping with a modernist and stark aesthetic.



Plate 5
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

The installation processes for *(Un)marked Boxes* required considerable strength and skill of my moving body. I physically moved and labored whilst setting out and installing these works. The actions of carrying the empty crates on my back, of stemming my own weight against the weight of the wood, of straightening and balancing them, of hammering long iron rods into the earth in order to ground and anchor them, all this left memories and imprints within my own body. This was a time of excitement, tension, and apprehension and of deep conviction and intuitive knowing about the purpose of my project; what I wanted to achieve and which forms I wanted to create. The image of doorways became a metaphor for the questions that I posed with my work. It seemed to me as though I arranged these in patterns to be pondered and played with by the public. Physically moving and making these works was reminiscent of the actual practice that the ideas were derived from; also in moving and witnessing I experienced questions, intuitions, and clear knowledge in vivid images and these always occurred in relationship to the rhythms of my dancing and witnessing body.

By using a visually minimalist language my imagined intervals and spatial forms for the installations became transformed into tangible cultural, social, public realms. First I and my helpers, then other people could enter and interact with these new spaces. When finalized *(Un)marked Boxes* provoked and inspired strong and surprising responses, ranging from the thoughtful, amused to the shocked and touched. With completion, my own response to witnessing choreographies of obliteration within the *MoverWitness exchange* had migrated into a different sphere, one in which the unexpected could once more take place, this time not by movers and witnesses, but by viewers, visitors and pundits. Whether playing hide and seek, or standing within a crate to get 'that feel of what it might be like to be within a wooden box', or feeling daunted to walk through the powerful circle of crates, visitors experiences covered a wide range of feelings and associations. Even literal obliteration took place when one night a group of youths pushed a number of boxes over.



Plate 6
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

The Three Versions of (Un)marked Boxes

At Delamore Arts the Cromlech, a folly stone burial chamber erected in 2000, at the top of a lime-lined avenue determined my designs. Half way up to the chamber I created an elliptic space by lining the boxes in four quarter circles, standing all in an upright manner. Reminiscent of a circle of standing stones or of a circle of standing people this space became an open interior, a special place, and a sacred space. This formation demanded circumspection to be entered and walked across.

I also created a group of three ('walking off into the woods') between the surrounding trees, seen just before arriving at and entering the main circle. I also placed a singular box on the right hand side, again away from the main avenue and partially hidden by low hanging branches between the trees. These more individual standing figures related a coming and departing from the circular collective shape. They added perspective to the dynamic between individual and collective, between informality and formality, between coming and going and the profane and the sacred.



Plate 7
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

At Dartington Trust I used two very different spaces for juxtaposing formations. By the Gallery, a grassy and partially wooded slope next to the drive to the car park was a very prominent and challenging space visible by everybody visiting or passing by the estate. Its whole topology persuaded me to create a formation that was loose, open and not geometrical, but a more organic form loosely based on a spiral. Boxes here appeared to tumble down the slope whilst maintaining their stark uprightness. They appear as individual boxes, which relate to each other and make up a group by their tangible proximity to each other.



Plate 8
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

The old tennis court on the other hand provided a very formal rectangular space. Here I devised a shape that both mirrored this geometrical shape yet at the same time invited the audience to disperse its strictness by playful interaction. The boxes were placed on two intersecting lines at an angle of 90 degrees, creating a shape roughly in the middle of the court. Each row of boxes was placed at irregular intervals in order to give the rigor a human feel. The vaguely military configuration was undermined by humour and idiosyncrasy.

Light and shade played an important part in all the formations. Particularly low sunlight accentuated the chosen patterns and illuminated insides and outsides of the crates. Uprightness was chosen because it was the strongest and most visible position that lent uniformity of form and still invited an association with the human figure.

With *(Un)marked Boxes* I created formations reminiscent of humans' 'social sculpture' (Joseph Beuys). My installations spoke of collective gatherings, obliteration, emptiness and human severity, formality and seriousness. My work's visual language being situated between minimalism, arte povera and object trouve created its own specific territory and topology, namely figurations that created their own moving and witnessing experiences reminiscent and evocative of themes to do with death and obliteration. They served my purpose to visually and kinetically make public what usually remains privy to the practice of the *MoverWitness exchange*. This transposition has been effective, as it has shown how one artistic practice can stimulate another and how private practices can nourish wider artistic and public concerns. Placing obliteration into a public sphere, where normally other imagery prevails, is provocative of new feelings and thoughts to enter a public discussion. A quality experienced within the *MoverWitness exchange* could so be related and communicated to others who would not normally participate in this practice.



Plate 9
(Un)marked Boxes
Artist: Eila Goldhahn

Public spaces come to life through individual experience that is shared. *(Un)marked Boxes* transformed empty packing crates into temporary cultural and social sites where individual experience could be shared in public. Once seen and interacted with in the public realm *(Un)marked Boxes* became works of art in their own right no longer dependent on me and on my personal imaginations. They were doing a job on their own, mediated through their own physicality. Making art is always accompanied by the experience of letting go as the work quite suddenly belongs to the public sphere; another lesson that art teaches and in this case entirely entwined with the specific topic explored.

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