

the in/visible performance theory

Finding Borders

Movements in public spaces:⁽¹⁾ how fine and inconspicuous do they have to be in order not to be seen as something that is usually covered by the term “performance.” Where is the borderline separating movements of the everyday from movements that are ascribed to an aesthetic sphere? First I want to take a closer look of how I define “movements of the everyday”; at the same time the way the terms “aesthetic” and “performance” are understood in this project will become clearer. Movements of the everyday are intended as something we produce when moving from one place to the other. It is a kind of in-between unfolding itself between two coordinates in space, a means to an end, which we usually don’t pay attention to: walking, running, standing, sitting and waiting. For Paul Valéry these movements are pure forms of transition from one position to the next.⁽²⁾ This project does not recognise end points, where movements come to a standstill. Instead the “in-between” is focused and unfolded by stylistic devices of contemporary performance.

These considerations were the starting point of this research project, which was conceived as collaboration and documented using the medium of video; that was in 2009, and since then 12 choreographers (my position included) have been invited to investigate their questions and their style in public space. The location chosen was a tram stop in the centre of Vienna. Very soon it became clear that the border separating “visibility” from “invisibility” is not stable and therefore cannot be defined. Instead, it varies with every single artistic approach. While Satu Herrala (FIN/A) executed very fine movements with her arms and her body, which is reminiscent of a reduced version of a William Forsythe repertoire, and thus cautiously felt out the border of visibility,⁽³⁾ Oleg Soulimenko’s (RU/A) movements were sometimes very exalted – especially when he copied moments when passers-by greeted somebody and raised his arms in an apparently unmotivated way. Nevertheless, what he did was not recognised as performance. Since he continuously produced instabilities in his body, the impression he made was rather that of a drunk or someone with psychological problems. Only a few passers-by looked at him; most of them just turned away. Oleg was moving along a different border than Satu – namely the one that differentiates movement patterns and behaviour between those that are ascribed as “healthy” and those ascribed to “sick” people. When I copied Oleg’s movements at the same tram stop I provoked completely different reactions: legible as a “drunk woman”, I was watched very closely by people passing by, even stared at unpleasantly. I was making the dividing line visible between what is defined as the “female habitus” and what is understood as a “male habitus”. Movements in public spaces are subject to a gender regime: women have less room for manoeuvre than men.

The choreographer Philipp Gehmacher pointed out a further borderline, which has the potential to open up a broad spectrum of questions – namely the one separating the “public sphere” from the “private” or “intimate sphere”: for example the gesture of “lying down” is principally assigned to a private sphere.⁽⁴⁾

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If the question concerning borderlines of room for manoeuvre is raised on a more general level, one can say that basically western cultures do not provide a broad spectrum of movements. Our acquired habitus forces us to stand still, sit still: this body regime is based on reduced, more or less upright, movement patterns. When the videos were shown in a gallery for the first time, some of the visitors felt inspired to try out their own movements while waiting for public transport, a possibility to undercut this body regime.

Video filming

The location chosen at the beginning of the project happened to be a perfect place and thus was retained through all the years of the project: a tram-stop shelter in front of the Vienna National Opera. For practical reasons the opera was perfect, since passers-by who saw me filming had the impression that I was filming this national monument and therefore never linked my actions to the “in/visible performance” that was taking place in front of my lens. On a second layer the opera conveys cultural meanings, which turned out to be fruitful for my theoretical considerations in context of this project: The opera is home to movements (classical ballet) which are ascribed both a cultural and a monetary value. One of the reasons for this can be linked to the fact that ballet is based on a centuries-old tradition that has been institutionalised in many different forms. In contrast, what we were doing was an opening up of experimental fields: movements and structures which we developed were not aimed at repeating any movement canon and thus have no value per se. Their fineness and ephemeral quality highlights the question of the context that art needs in order to be realised as such. “Visibility” – according to the cultural scientist Tom Holert – is never just given but something that is always produced in certain ways. The implicitness with which we accept our ways of seeing as given is deceptive. The National Opera is a good example: the way we can experience a ballet representation is based on a grown structure that concerns both the staging as well the architecture. What happened to the fragile movement patterns in the moment they were recorded on my video camera? The framing which the camera produced extracted them from everyday life.⁽⁵⁾ This puts the focus on the choreographer’s practice, which has the effect of heightening the visibility for the spectators of the videos. In this form of translation they became part of an archive – ready to be shown and sold in galleries or museums (white cube) or as re-enactment in theatres (black box).

As ever more contributions were collected, a definition of the term “capitalism” came to the fore, according to which capital is accumulated by a centre while return flows to the periphery are absent.⁽⁶⁾ In the context of this project the “aesthetic sphere” is defined and analysed as something that is constantly related to monetary, cultural and social value systems. Accordingly, what is understood by the term “art” is not something in opposition to these value systems.

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Instead, I regard artistic practice as a field where modes of distribution, hierarchies and devaluations can be reconsidered and new ways of distribution can be found. This was the motivation behind the decision to come to an arrangement with all the participating choreographers: if contributions are shown, the authors receive a certain monetary share.⁽⁷⁾ Instead of accumulation, the project was arranged in a way that money flows come back to the choreographers from the centre (me when I offer the videos as an installation or re-enactment) – without them having to provide any further work.

Re-enactment

Right from the start the project also aimed at the re-enactment of some of the contributions, in order to connect them to a live performance on stage in a theatre. The initial thesis was that fine movements would very probably be (very) visible in the black box of the theatre.

In the realm of the theatre and performance, re-enactments have a long tradition, which young contemporary choreographers also follow – although well-known pieces such as Nijinsky's "Rite of Spring" are usually chosen. Against this background, in course of this project movement material that is not usually re-enacted was consciously chosen. It differs in the sense that material that is usually quoted follows a clearly elaborated structure. In cases where the contributors had planned a structure, this was usually crossed by movements of public space. An essential attribute of choreographic expression was thus missing and is mostly based on very subtle movements.

The theoretician Therese Kaufmann (EIPCP) recently described the connection between spectacle culture in the field of art⁽⁸⁾ and money flows as follows: "Projects" (she mainly refers to biennials, cultural capitals, festivals and so forth) convey an idea of representation which can be linked to a policy of visibility. The aim of all these projects is to transfer artistic practice and operas into an economic dimension. According to Kaufmann, in a contemporary neoliberal era this pressure on cultural decision-makers leads to an exaggeration of the way visibilities are produced – while perfectly following the rules of spectacle culture. Projects that do not obey these "mantras of visibility" are denied cultural value and in consequence remain cut off from money flows.⁽⁹⁾ What Kaufmann describes here can be connected to biennials and festivals – but also to the individual parts they consist of, such as exhibitions, theatre productions and performances. For me as a producer of performances that can be labelled as "conceptual", the spectacle is certainly is a point of reference, or to put it another way a point from where my practice, which experiments with the borders of what can be read as "art" at all, should differ. The choreographer Martina Ruhsam (who also contributed to "the in/visible performance") recently published an article in which she questions whether, in the field of spectacle culture, the choreographic tools of "finesse", "slowness" and "stillness" have the potential to produce an exterior.⁽¹⁰⁾ All these tools provide the basis for

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my project – in addition to this I developed a further stylistic device when copying the contributions – which I called “the regaining of the body”. The aim is as much as possible to feel in my body when performing individual movements. Here I could draw on the Feldenkrais method. One of the theses that Malcolm Manning teaches in his workshops based on Feldenkrais states: if a movement is lacking clarity in the body it is helpful to execute it as finely as possible, often in the range of only a few millimetres. By doing this it becomes possible for example to feel a fine movement of muscles around the coccyx as an effect of turning the head. This practice results in a very special aesthetic that requires a slowing down of movement patterns, and occasionally even to a pausing of the body. In a culture of spectacle as it is also conveyed in contemporary performances one encounters movements that can be described by the terms “speediness”, “excitement” or also “acrobatic”. If these patterns are applied without adequate warming up and physical preparation they may lead to irreparable damage. The pressure described by Therese Kaufmann thus has direct effects on the performers’ bodies. In contrast, I understood my project as a position that counters effects of a culture of spectacle.

Space

In order to create a performance based on fine, slow and – in other words – non-spectacular movement patterns, an interesting question proved to be at which point I as the performer would imitate movements and scores – thus withdrawing myself as the subject – and which points in the course of the score and moments of standstill I could use in order to highlight myself as a subject in space – at that moment with my attention closer to the audience. I owe this suggestion to the dramaturge Chris Standfest, who commented on my work when I transferred it to the glass cubic sculpture of VALIE EXPORT. The switch between following recorded video material and pure presence in space results in a tension that can be noticed by the audience.

In his study around the topos or u-topos of “absence”, among other issues the theoretician Gerald Siegmund discusses the gap between original material and re-enactment. Referring to a piece by the choreographer Martin Nachbar in 2000 – a re-enactment of a dance cycle by Dore Hoyer from 1962 – Siegmund describes irreconcilable gaps that may develop in the course of a re-enactment; for example between “male” and “female” body, differences between an older and a younger dancer / performer, but also different time spheres which affect executors – for example the post-war period in comparison to the period of economic growth. In the re-enactment Nachbar morphs into the body of the choreographer Dore Hoyer, who was a product of the late 50s. In doing so Nachbar’s body is not his own any longer – yet nor is he Hoyer’s body either.⁽¹¹⁾

Siegmund describes two poles that constantly alternate between absence and presence: the absent choreographer and the present Martin Nachbar, who

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by standing still also transforms himself into an absent dancer. For the stage version of “the in/visible performance” I chose contributions by four choreographers and combined them into a “lecture performance”. I differ in principle from my colleagues in the fact that I have no dance education. Moreover, two of the selected approaches are “male”; their habitus differs fundamentally from my female one. In order to make the gaps between me and the original positions clear, short extracts of the original videos are projected in parallel to my live performance. What becomes evident is that movements that were produced by “original people” as something natural were re-enacted by me more slowly – thus the impression of a certain kind of constructedness arises. The second question, which is still unanswered, concerns whether the male habitus should be copied as accurately as possible – then I as the performer would be subject to greater changes from contribution to contribution – or should the difference between male and female habitus be made evident.

One of the methods applied by Philipp Gehmacher, who mentored the project as a coach, became a fruitful basis for working with the space of the theatre. In Gehmacher’s work the space is constantly an issue, reflected by the performer while executing the movements. The focus of the performer/dancer constantly shifts between movements of the body and actual position in space. The danger: if the concentration is too intensively on the issue of space, then the fine movements of my work acquire something of a floating quality. In this project the practice applied thus requires a double attention, a balancing act between body and space. Twists of the spine are simultaneously conceived as movement space that fills the whole stage.

If the method of double consciousness – on the one hand the body on the other hand the position on the stage – are connected with contemporary theories around issues of space, then further interesting questions and methods can be derived: the Vienna-based curator Ursula Maria Probst curated an exhibition at the Passagengalerie of the Künstlerhaus which was based on various theories of space.⁽¹²⁾ Among others she refers to theories of Edward W. Soja and Henry Lefebvre – both positions are marked by the fact that they distinguish between different concepts of space. To the dualism of geometrically constructed and physically noticeable space they add a third concept, namely space in the way it is actually lived.⁽¹³⁾ For me as choreographer, a concept of space that can be measured empirically and described by coordinates is an important point of reference in my work, a means to create structures that can be read clearly. At the same time each position that can be measured empirically conveys a symbolic and social meaning: what does it say to the audience when I turn my back on them – move away from them – turn around – and finally approach them frontally? The consciousness of a mixture between geometrical space and actually experienced space results in a fine tension which ultimately adds something to the performance motivating spectators to watch it attentively.

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The finished live-performance again highlights the question of the context in which art is put on show: a possible addressee might be the cultural events (for example dance festivals) that Therese Kaufmann was talking of. Would this work retain its potential if it were shown in this context? What kind of hybrid un/spectacular space would be produced as a result?

Iris Julian, 2013

special thanks to:

David Westacott, editor of the English version

(1) The term “public space” is defined as “architectural public space” thus a physical space. Since Habermas’s “Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit” it can also mean a “discursive sphere” immaterial discussions or lectures that take place for example on TV, but might be also linked to physical places where conversations happen, for example parliaments.

(2) Paul Valéry: “Über den Tanz”, in: “Tanz. Zeichnung und Degas” (originally published 1936), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1996, p.19.

(3) On my method: What passers-by recognised (or not) is my interpretation, my conclusion, which I developed by watching these videos hundreds of times (in the course of my re-enactment project): primarily it is a quick turn of the head and a certain muscular tension, which leads me to the conclusion that they saw something they recognised as an “Outside” of their usual everyday experiences. This rarely happened – mostly they remained unimpressed.

(4) Philipp Gehmacher was the coach of the re-enactment project during my TURBO residency at ImPulsTanz 2012.

(5) Tom Holert: “Kulturwissenschaft / Visual Culture” in: Klaus Sachs-Hombach (Ee.): “Bildwissenschaft. Disziplinen, Themen, Methoden”, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005, pp. 232 - 233.

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(6) See for example: “Kapitalismus”: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kapitalismus> (terminal access: 23. May 2013) or in English: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capitalism> (terminal access: 05. February 2014).

(7) 5 % is planned for each contribution, 50 % for costs of materials and building of an installation, approximately 5 % for the ongoing archiving and the rest for my working time.

(8) In course of this project the culture of spectacle is defined as follows: phenomena (for example the depiction of women in the porn industry) are copied without any further comment. A comment could be very easily made here: as standstill, exit from the performative picture, role exchange with the male position. If no comment is made, I locate a spectacular emptyness.

(9) Therese Kaufmann: “Jenseits des visibility-Mantras”, in: Konrad Becker, Martin Wassermair (eds.), “Phantom Kulturstadt. Texte zur Zukunft der Kulturpolitik II”, Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2009, link: <http://eipcp.net/policies/kaufmann1/de> (terminal access: 23. May 2013).

(10) Martina, Ruhsam: “Gestures of Resistance: disrupting the dominant economic paradigms”, in: Maska “Gestures of Resistance”, Winter 2012, Ljubljana.

(11) Gerald Siegmund: “Abwesenheit. Eine performative Ästhetik des Tanzes”, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2006, pp. 110-114

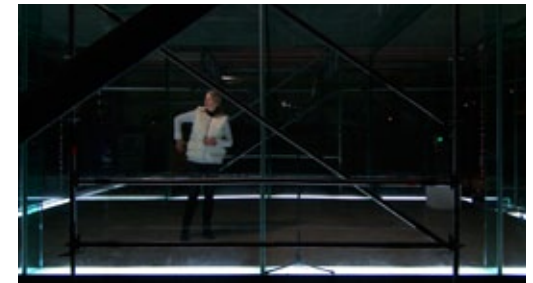
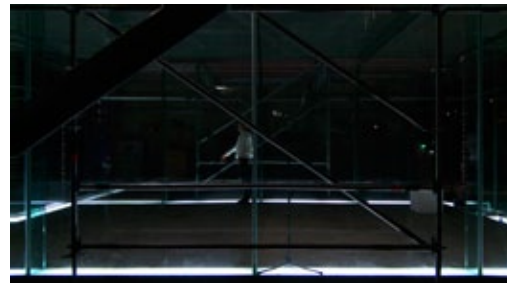
(12) Exhibition concept “Andere Blicke, Andere Räume” curated by: Ursula Maria Probst, Künstlerhaus, K/H Passagengalerie, 15th August – 9th September 2012 <http://www.k-haus.at/de/ausstellung/31/in-passing-16.html> (terminal access: 31. May 2013).

(13) <http://www.k-haus.at/de/ausstellung/31/in-passing-16.html> (terminal access: 31. May 2013).

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the in/visible performance

re-enactments of original contributions: live-performance (solo)



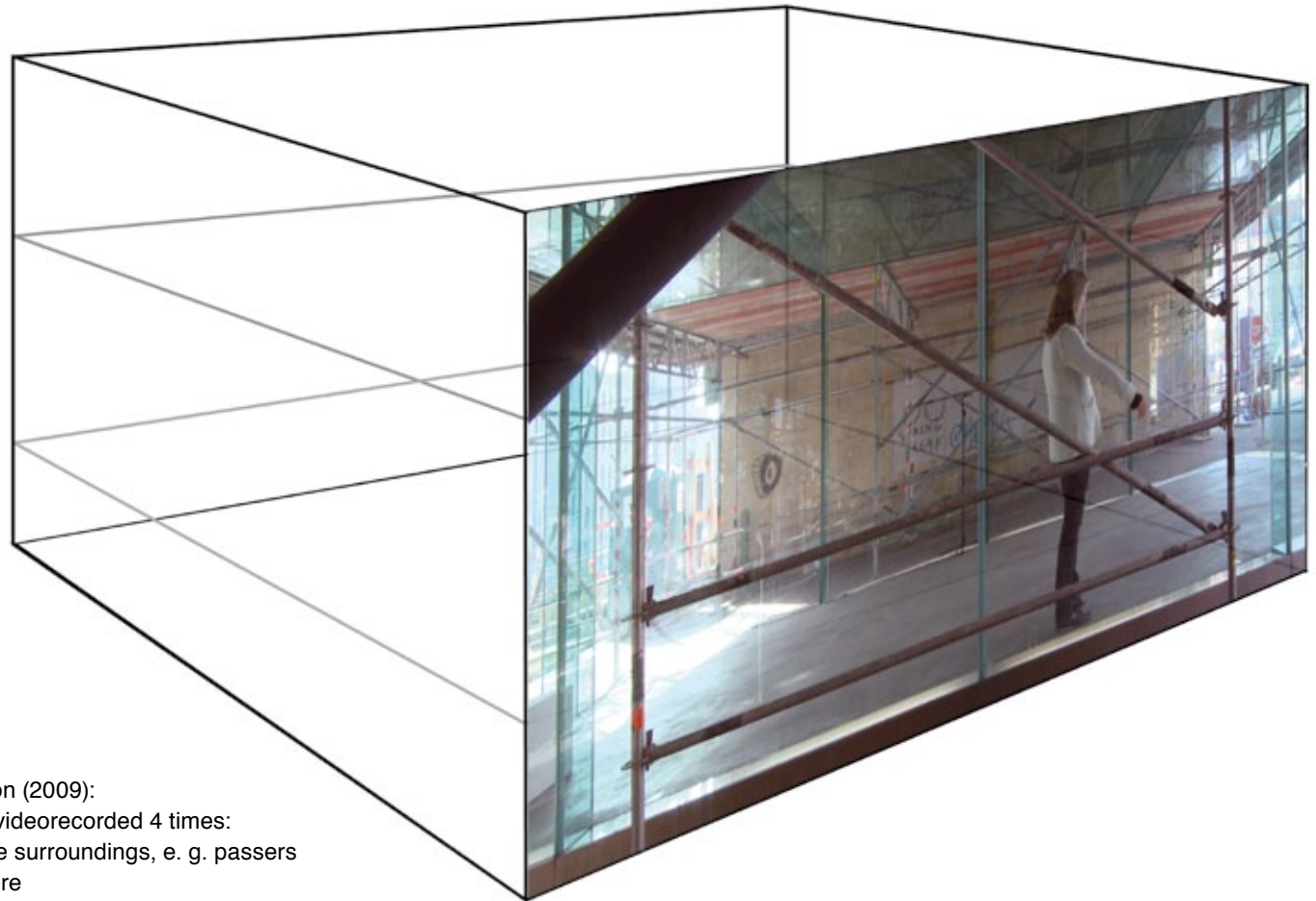
satu herralas beitrage (2009) war eine der choreographischen sequenzen die im KUBUS VALIE EXPORT reenacted wurden. die transparenz des gläsernen raumes überführt die einansichtigkeit des theaters in eine allansicht. das wurde genutzt um den selben beitrage viermal von vier seiten zu filmen.

Satu herrala's contribution (2009) was one of the choreographic sequences which were reenacted at KUBUS VALIE EXPORT. The transparency of the glass room translates the single perspective of the theatre into a wholistic view. This was utilised to film the same contribution four times from four sides.

live at KUBUS VALIE EXPORT (october 2013) a solo: recordings by night
contribution: satu herrala, performer: iris julian, 2013

the in/visible performance

reenactments of original contributions: videoinstallation #01



satu herrala's contribution (2009):
re-enacted 4 times and videorecorded 4 times:
with concentration on the surroundings, e. g. passers
by might change the score

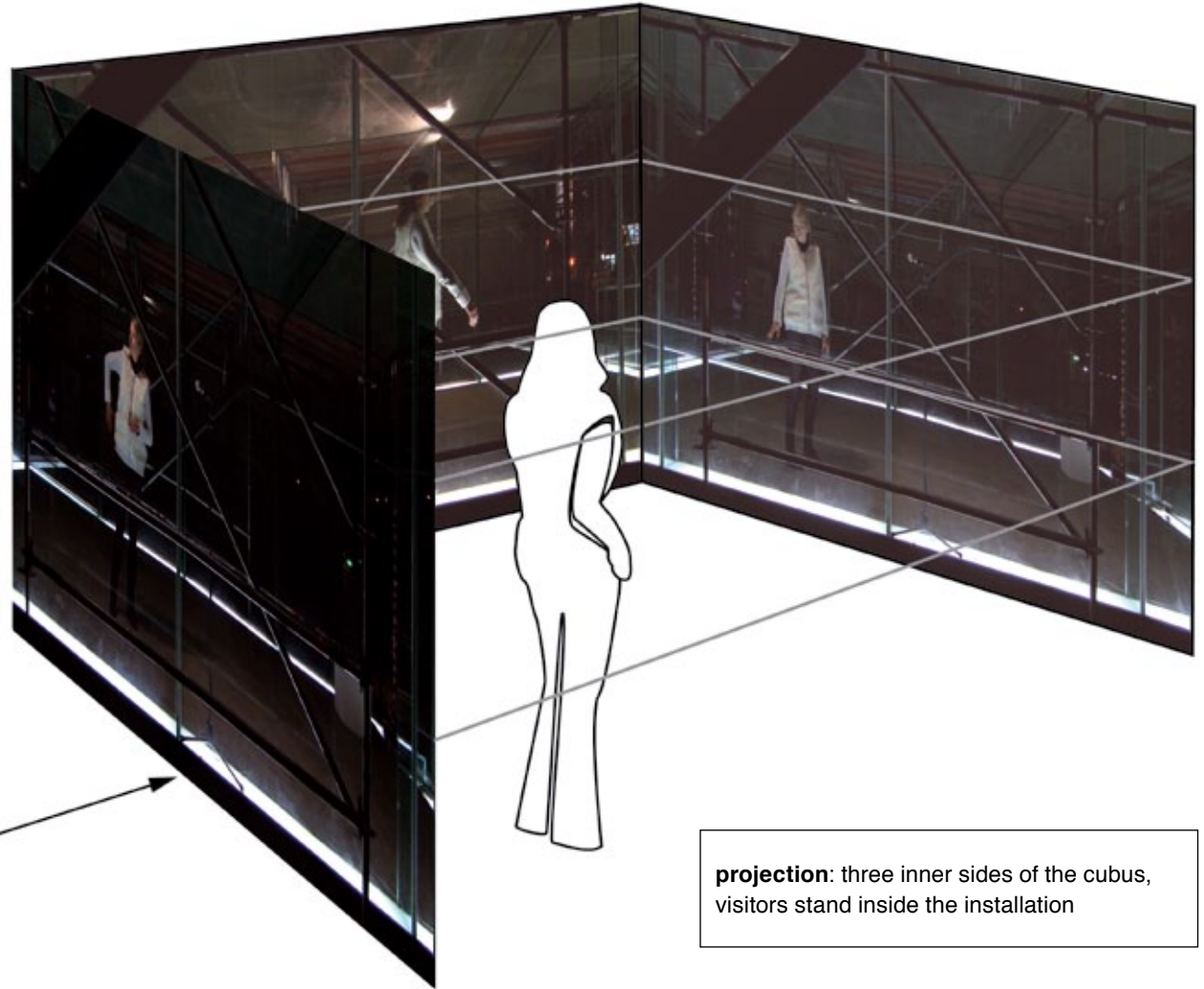
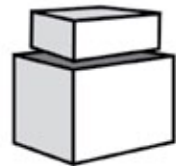
re-enactments at KUBUS VALIE EXPORT (october 2013) a solo: recordings during day time
video installation #01: model 1 : 8,4 limited edition

the in/visible performance

reenactments of original contributions: video installation #02

projection:
reverse of inside and outside

projector for short
distances



projection: three inner sides of the cubus,
visitors stand inside the installation

re-enactments at KUBUS VALIE EXPORT (october 2013) a solo: recordings by night
video installation #02: model 1 : 2,57, limited edition