The representation of absence: costume scenography of mid-life women

A representação da ausência: figurino cenográfico para mulheres de meia-idade

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[abstract] The paucity of life narratives in film, television and for stage productions focused on women between the ages of 45 and 60 years has led many of these women to experience a sense of having become invisible. To address this phenomenon, I instigated a cycle of four performances staged between 2017 and 2020. Ideas were developed across the whole cycle and also for each performance. In this article I refer throughout to one performed costume scenography in June 2019, in a South London park. As the scenographer who wrote, directed and designed the performance, I will be discussing the whole process of creation, the subversive elements and how the blurring of boundaries fostered the audience engagement. This discussion includes the context, the development and experimentation with ideas; the interviews that I made with mid-life women using a Photo-Elicitation method, and the realised performance itself. Audience responses captured on the day, formed the data analysis for the final reflection on the achievements of the work.

[keywords] **Costume. Ageism. Performed Scenography. Women's Theatre. Menopause.**

[resumo] A escassez de narrativas de vida no cinema, na televisão e em produções teatrais focadas em mulheres entre 45 e 60 anos tem levado muitas dessas mulheres a experimentar uma sensação de invisibilidade. Para abordar esse fenômeno, incitei um ciclo de quatro performances realizadas entre 2017 e 2020. Ideias foram desenvolvidas ao longo de todo o ciclo, bem como para cada performance individualmente. Neste artigo, refiro-me a uma cenografia performática realizada em junho de 2019, em um parque no sul de Londres. Como cenógrafa que escreveu, dirigiu e desenhou a performance, discuto o processo completo de criação, os elementos subversivos envolvidos e como o rompimento das fronteiras contribuiu para o engajamento do público. Esta discussão inclui o contexto, o desenvolvimento e a experimentação com ideias; as entrevistas que realizei com mulheres de meia-idade utilizando o método de Foto-Elicitação, além da própria performance final. As respostas do público, capturadas no dia da apresentação, constituíram a base para a análise dos dados na reflexão final sobre os resultados da obra.

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[palavras-chave] **Figurino. Etarismo. Cenografia Performada. Teatro Feminino. Menopausa.**

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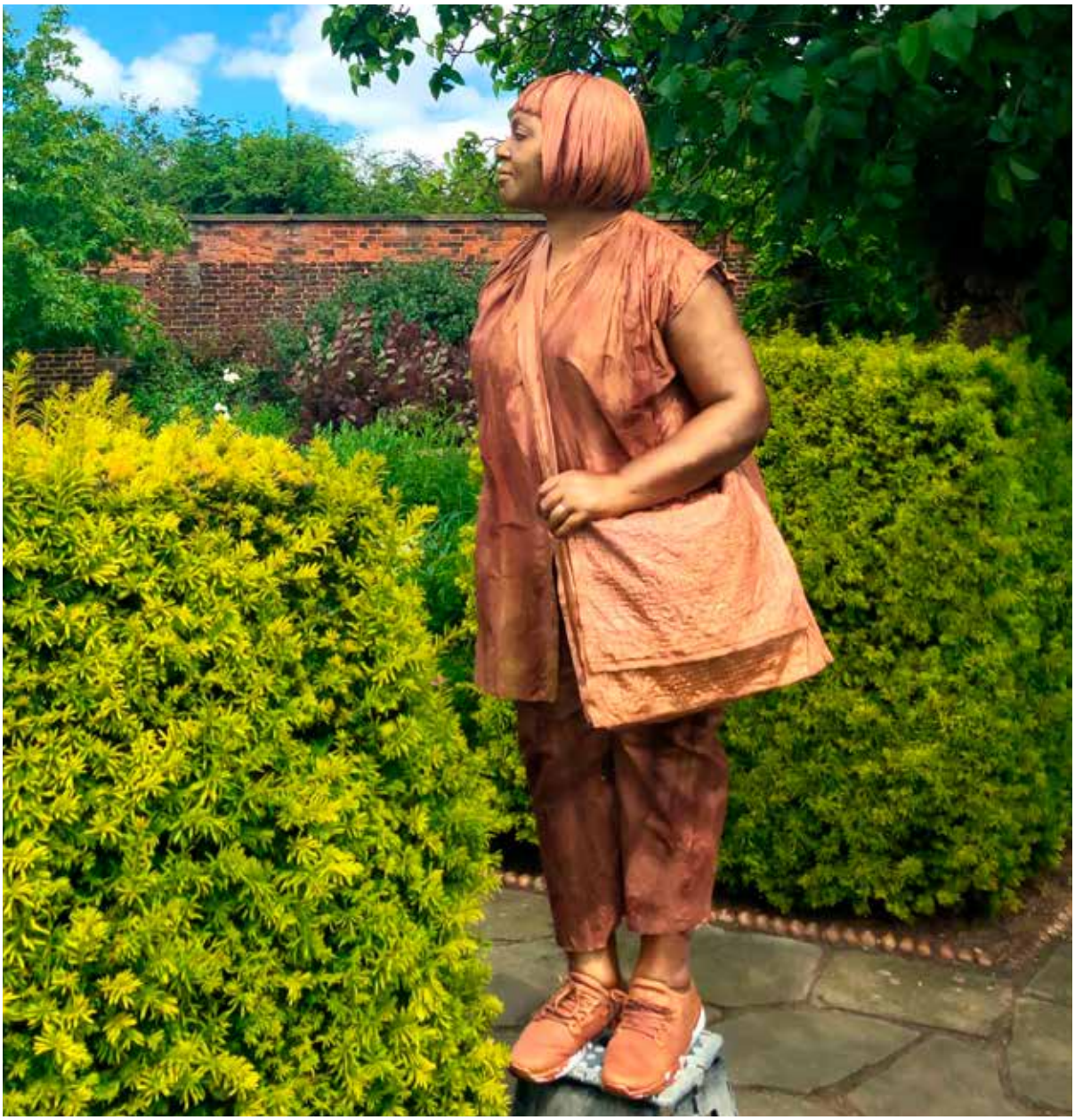
IMAGE 1 – "HELEN" LIVING STATUE IN THE PERFORMED COSTUME SCENOGRAPHY "WOMEN OF BROCKWELL (MISSING STATUE)" 30TH JUNE 2019.



SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

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1. Introduction

In both the UK and the US there is an identified absence of mid-life women[2] in visual media, both recorded for screens and in live performances. This absence has been noted in Academy Award speeches[3] in British courts[4] and in Research reports[5]. The bias against female ageing is not new news and sexist ageism has significantly long roots in UK culture. Mary Wollstonecraft, the eighteenth century advocate of women's rights, wrote about the prejudices she had encountered, "A lively writer... asks what business women turned of forty have to do in the world?" (1792: 7). No longer fertile, having been through menopause[6], older women were regarded as unnecessary. Between 2017 and 2020, my research questions focussed on the effects of the end of fertility as being a root cause of this absence. The long shadows of a cultural disregard of older women, has generated archetypal characters with superficial stereotypical personalities. Actor Juliet Stevenson has commented "As you go through life it gets more and more interesting and complicated, but the parts offered get more and more simple" (Segal, 2013: 76). These simplified parts dominate contemporary culture and are often nameless roles e.g. mother, aunty, teacher. Very few lead the drama.

My performed costume scenography "Women of Brockwell (missing statue)" in June 2019, was the third part of my practice-based research inquiry which used a familiar make-reflect-remake[7] cycle of four scenography[8] performances, each staging representations of absence for different audiences. This third performance was intended for a general public audience, and explicitly set out to collect data on audience responses to character narratives through the creation of five "living statues". Being a fully public performance, there were no

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[2] In this article I have used the term woman/women to reflect sex rather than gender, given that my research interest is the human female menopause, which is connected to the reproductive system and changing levels of oestrogen. There are trans-men who will also experience menopause to a lesser or greater extent depending on hormone levels.

[3] Frances McDormand won the Oscar® for Best Actress at the 90th Oscars® in 2018 and called for more inclusivity for women in film in her acceptance speech.

[4] In 2013 Miriam O'Reilly successfully sued the BBC for age discrimination after being dropped as programme presenter. In 2024, four more women have begun proceedings against the BBC for age and sex discrimination.

[5] The Inclusion List: Series Edition ranks the 100 most inclusive broadcast and cable and streaming series and the top 20 executive producers. The Inclusion List: Oscars Edition provides a 96-year historical analysis of gender and race/ethnicity at the Academy Awards. At http://inclusionlist.org.

[6] Menopause occurs between the ages of 45 and 65 when women are moving naturally from fertility to infertility sometimes referred to as "The Change" in English.

[7] The make-reflect-remake process, often connected with Action Research, is also noted in postdramatic theatre arts practice. (Harvie, & Lavender, 2010: 243)

[8] In contemporary UK professional theatre performances, scenography is generally referred to as performance or theatre design in programme credits, but individual theatre practitioners choose nomenclature fitting their own design work; there is no required consistency in usage. Here, I chose to use the descriptor 'practitioner' for consistency as a link to practice, rather than designer or artist, which might also be substituted.

tickets, as the purchase of a ticket or a fear of unknown performances inhibit inclusivity. Spectators would be invited to take part as they entered the Walled Garden in Brockwell Park.

My research question was framed as engaging a non-theatre public audience, with narratives of mid-life women expressed through a performed costume scenography. The aim was to maximise audience engagement by immediately capturing their responses to the costume scenography, to identify whether specific narratives were generally disliked or hugely preferred. The methodological approaches I used were an "accumulation" or "bricolage" (Lévi-Strauss, 1966 [1962]).[9] of research methods, from Ethnotheatre as well as Costume and Scenography practices. Bricolage has often been deployed in feminist theatre practice to bring together such "found" objects as memories and domestic experiences (Harris, 1999: 136).

The rationale for my choice of methods was their appropriateness and fitness for purpose in addressing my research question of how to overcome barriers in the cultural representation of mid-life women? The questions around representing absence were defined through a scenography practice, drawing upon Donald Schön's critique of question and method: "In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work… i.e. the way of phrasing the problem also enables the strategies." (Schön, 2011 [1983]: 40), and underpinned by the "diverse theoretical and philosophical understandings of the various elements encountered in the act of research" (Kincheloe, 2001: 679). This also enabled the use of ethnographic methods to interview mid-life women, using a specially developed Photo-Elicitation method (Harper, 2002), which contributed spoken and visual data collection. All interview data was anonymised.

Research methods employed:

- Site-specific scenography
- Development of "living statue" narratives and costumes
- Photo-Elicitation interviews with mid-life women
- Costume scenography performance
- Feedback collected from spectators
- Quantitative analysis of spectator's voting
- Qualitative analysis of spectator's comments

Performances are made up of numerous elements, all of which can have separate features, here I used costume, environment, text and movement. In scenography terms, I intended that the performed costume scenography be viewed as an holistic event. The reflection on the scenography interrogates the success of the performance, evidenced through the feedback collected on the interest generated in the narratives of mid-life women and the elements of subversion of the familiar cultural form of static "living statues" built into my research methodology.

[9] Related to the French name for a 'jack-of-all-trades', the bricoleur also carries associations of construction. The utilisation of this term in research strategies has been inspired by Lévi-Strauss's analogy of mythmaking and the 'bricoleur', who uses whatever is to hand for his constructions, a fusion of different elements.

To facilitate engagement for the audience/spectators there would be a certain amount of blurring of boundaries between real-life and the constructed performance. This allowed for an overlap with the use of specifically collected ethnography-based materials. Would the spectators work to understand the overlap or simply not respond to it? Would they engage with the written descriptions, or simply use the visuals to decide which narratives they preferred? Artifice would be used to separate fiction from fact, but familiar concepts would be an important element for audience engagement with the performance narratives, which would be collected in the feedback.

Once an ephemeral performance is recorded "it turns into that document" (Phelan, 2005 [1993]: 31). It has been immobilised, concretely fixed, but images and written language are really only "traces of performance" (Nelson, 2013: 30). In this article, the following two sections detail the embedded ideas of the performance through writing, photographs and audience feedback, which evidences the costume scenography through "traces" of practice and research.

2. Costume scenography

Working definitions of scenography practice are held closely by individual practitioners (Howard with Drábek, 2019: xx), who integrate their thinking into the fluidity of a creative process. "The concept and practice of scenography does not promote existing hierarchies of roles and functions in the creation of theatre, dance or performance." (McKinney & Butterworth, 2010: 5). The scenographer can choose to move across traditional role and creative boundaries between visuals, text and performing. Scenography researchers often emphasise their single interpretation as one amongst many: "an arrangement [...] what might have happened" (Baugh, 2005: xvi) rather than the portrayal of established "truths" or recognised traditions. The importance of avoiding a single narrative of succession is achieved by emphasising that all possible conventions (historical, technical, methodological) remain in use, as an "accumulation" (Burns,1972: 4) that can be used according to taste, need, circumstances or effect. This process culminates in a live performance within a defined space, sometimes a theatre. In the early 1990s, Richard Schechner predicted the benefits of a paradigm shift by moving the focus away from making theatre shows in dedicated venues, to enable many more inclusive performances. "Performance is about more than the enactment of Eurocentric drama. Performance engages intellectual, social, cultural, historical, and artistic life in a broad sense. Performance combines theory and practice." (Schechner, 1992: 9)

In describing my own "accumulation" of conventions, I am foregrounding Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theories. Lehman offers this definition of a dramatic theatre that is "subordinated to the primacy of the text. In the theatre of modern times, the staging largely consisted of the declamation and illustration of written text." (Lehmann, 2006: 14), which clarifies his postdramatic theatre positioning. This engendered new possibilities for performance-making, using a wide range of different sites rather than theatres. Lehman describes visual dramaturgy as not being exclusively visually organised "but rather one that is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic" (Lehmann, 2006: 93). The visual languages could have equal if not more value in the development of the scenographic ideas. But ideally, exist as one of several languages of performance, without dominating dramaturgically (Lehmann, 2006: 38). The proliferation of performance-making in the

early 2000s, both public and private (Lotker & Gough, 2013), expanded the understanding of scenography as mise-en-scène, the spatial-built/environmental/immersive/landscape, together with the temporal and/or the kinetic; these descriptors may be used singly or in hybrid combinations. Scenography often prioritises new working relationships and aims to attract diverse audiences, with new understandings that are often worked together with existing conventions, which continue to "accumulate" rather than replace previous practices.

In my performed costume scenography I am referring to a holistic approach to performance-making, in which different elements of production are brought together into a cohesive whole. This chimes with Hans-Theis Lehman's visual dramaturgy within postdramatic theatre practice by using visual material rather than text as the key performance inspiration, whilst also allowing written text to be available to the audience, to enhance the performance, whilst not dominating it. The costumes were the key visual language of my performance, but given the overarching research question, were also not intended to dominate as costume designs, but as a support to the understanding of character narratives. This distinction sets this performance apart from other costume scenography, where the experimental nature of the costumes is central to the intended narrative such as Madaleine Trigg's "Sutre" (2009)[10].

3. Site-specific scenography

The overarching research question focused on the visual representation of UK mid-life women, aiming to address absence with representation and creating a dramaturgy of costume, based on female character development. The scenography would place mid-life women firmly into the public gaze, with visuals as the primary language of the performance. By using public space inclusively, rather than a "closed" ticketed event, the potential for addressing the invisibility of mid-life women would be opened up in a public cultural expression. Even theatre companies using non-traditional performance spaces such as immersive theatre or landscape-based performances, struggle with inclusivity, because these often rely on previously "shared" understandings of established, but unwritten theatre practices. My choice to use a public park on Sunday afternoon, would circumvent the ticket/ advertising/ audience issues as many Londoners walk in the park at the weekend. Paper posters and flyers could be used to publicise the event on the day.

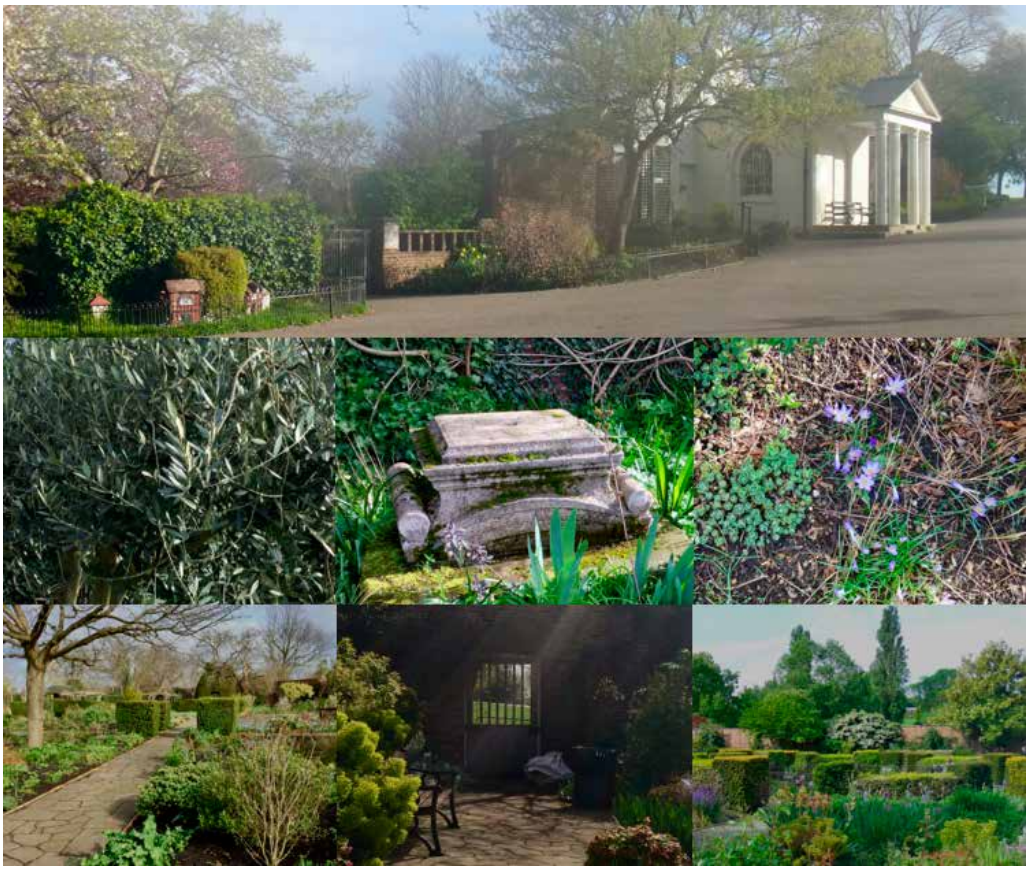
There are many garden parks across London. After careful consideration, this list was narrowed down to a choice of three and then in the Walled Garden of Brockwell Park, I found an old empty statue base or plinth, in an overgrown corner. These become the narrative impetus for my performance, in that the scenography could stage a "competition" for spectators to choose a statue to go on it. This builds upon the existing idea of the Trafalgar Square Fourth Plinth commission programme, a familiar London event, but here the "competition" would be purely fictitious as an interactive performance. The performance would consist of mid-life-women performing as "living statues" with created narratives. The site became the principal driver for both the visual ideas and the character narratives and informed the choice of local

[10] In 2011 Extreme Costume exhibition at the Prague Quadrennial Trigg's dissolving costume, Sutre, was shown as a video, "reflecting society's complicated relationship with self-image" https://aestheticamagazine.com/profile/madaleine-trigg/

community groups to approach for interview. This performance was therefore site responsive, in that ideas could not have been the same anywhere else.

Responding to the Walled Garden[11] as a site for scenography, I visited regularly between February and June 2019. This enabled the development process of the character work to deepen over the months, as the flowers grew and the garden changed in colour and appearance. The juxtaposition of real garden elements and performance was intended to create a "porous" border for the spectators, inviting them to make connections from the real into imagined fictions. As the spectators would come from the general park-going public, I was interested to find out how much engagement spectators would have with the personalities of the mid-life (menopausal) women, and which ideas were the most popular. There might be no appetite for the performance, and this would immediately be reflected in the nature of the written feedback.

IMAGE 2 – WALLED GARDEN SITE PHOTOS TAKEN BETWEEN FEBRUARY AND JUNE 2019. SHOWING WALLED GARDEN ENTRANCE WITH MODEL HOUSES LEFT AND "TEMPLE" FOLLY RIGHT; GARDEN DETAILS: OLIVE TREE, EMPTY PLINTH, SPRING FLOWERS, VISTAS AND WALKWAYS.



SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

[11] The reasons for using the Walled Garden were both creative and practical. The garden is continuously maintained and is a secluded and reflective environment, with flowerbeds and paved paths, wide enough for wheelchairs. The wall completely surrounds the garden space, with gated access, clearly defining the performance space. The use of the Walled Garden was negotiated with the events team at Lambeth Council.

4. "Living statue" narratives and costumes

The choice of a "living statue" performance with costumed non-speaking characters, links to the early forms of female performances in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century salons, which used "enactment" (Case, 1988: 47) with personal dialogue rather than the mimesis of the theatre. This resonates within my own scenography practice interests. But while salon performances were for elite society, in the twenty-first century, living statues populate public space. They are frequently considered a busking nuisance at tourist sites, and as a degraded art form. However, the statues have great potential for making an immediate "human connection" (Palmer, 2014: 2). This meant that a familiar and under-valued form of street performance, could be re-visited by being shown in an intimate garden site, to be re-presented to highlight the under-representation of women generally in public art and mid-life women in particular. A subversive use of over-familiar conventions.

In her ground-breaking feminist analysis of "Monuments and Maidens" (2000), Marina Warner considers the allegorical female image in public, presented devoid of personality and individuality, preferring allegorical representations of mythical characters such as Athene and/or Britannia. This relates to contemporary campaigns in the UK such as that raised by Caroline Criado Perez in 2016 and the InVISIBLE Women campaign[12] for more "Women On Top of Plinths", who are seeking gender equality in representation, stating that less than 10% of UK public statuary is of ordinary women[13].

Once I had established the "competition" construct of the scenography, and permission from Lambeth Council to use the garden, I began to consider the visual languages of the statues. In addition to the empty plinth found in the Walled Garden, there were two park fixtures just outside the entrance that I wove into the narrative and used as ideas for statue characters. To one side of the gate are three 1940s model houses and on the other a white garden "folly" known as the Temple. The models resembled doll's houses, which could be linked to Henrik Ibsen's character of Nora in "A Doll's House", and the Temple could be used to reference the Greek goddess Athene, a nod to Warner's mythological monuments.

In researching the history of Brockwell Park, I found that a spinster had inherited the western side of the Brockwell estate in 1807. Mercy Cressingham was born around 1796, so was young and unmarried at the time of the inheritance, which automatically passed to Dr Thomas Edwards, when she married him a few years later. Cressingham Housing Estate, which borders Brockwell Park, was named after Mercy, and this link was mentioned by some spectators in the garden. The UK census records indicated that Mercy outlived her husband and died at the age of 55 years, so a middle-aged Mercie became the third statue. For the fourth statue, I was interested in making a character based on the short story "The Space Crone" (1989) by feminist writer Ursula K. le Guin. Le Guin's Crone, although potentially older than a menopausal woman, represented a different female experience, who was family orientated and hard-working; this would intentionally represent some local Lambeth

[12] https://invisiblewomen.org.uk

[13] In London 2019, only two statues portrayed a woman in her mid-life/menopause years: Martin Jennings' "Mary Seacole" outside St Thomas' Hospital, and the recently installed statue of "Millicent Fawcett" in Parliament Square by Gillian Wearing.

residents. The fifth and final statue, Helen, was most closely related to the women I observed walking through the park with dogs and friends on a daily basis. This site-specific collection of "living statues" covering the span of history (Ancient Greece, mid-Victorian 1850s & 1870s, the 1960s and contemporary) would also likely be reflected in other UK parks.

The development process commenced with the use of familiar design methods: historical research, site photographs, observational drawing and ground plans, which were all used to interrogate the first ideas. The site responsivity and immersivity of the performance became more embedded elements as the ideas came to fruition. The final choice of statue colours and position of each statue was only confirmed during June as the changing colours of the flowerbeds developed.

In scenography, the experience of the spectator is paramount within the narrative, and therefore my fictitious explanation of why these statues had been placed in the garden, circumnavigated a reasonable assumption that I was merely decorating the site. I intended to invite spectators to think deeply about the statues, so that it would be a slow and contemplative experience for both performer and audience. The existing layout of the garden with long vistas, benches, low hedges and secluded corners, with distance to walk between the statues, could facilitate the reflective thinking that was being triggered by my request for the audience to judge the statues.

The active spectatorship would be evidenced through a paper-based voting system. Feedback forms were posted in a voting box by the spectators as they left the garden. No subsequent data would be collected, all feedback would be kept anonymous. The forms would be analysed twice. Firstly on the day, immediately following the performance, for first choice results, announced at the end of the performance to conclude the performance. Afterwards, both quantitative and qualitative analysis could be used to elicit a fuller range of responses, emerging from the full data set and the written comments.

5. Photo-Elicitation interviews with mid-life women

The secondary research question involved the choice of ethnography-based methods to inform the scenography, which would concentrate on defining the individuality of female mid-lives outside of menopause, maintaining some focus on working women, as salaried work has obvious importance in women's lives. Concomitantly with choosing the site, I had begun to develop connections with community groups that were local to Brockwell Park, whose women members I intended to invite to interview. Despite setting up requests and visits well in advance, the cancellation of one recruiting event and the difficulty of getting one group together for an introductory session, meant that interview data was collected late in the production process. It generally took a number of visits to build trust for women agreeing to be interviewed. I secured five women's interviews, from three different social groups, as the basis for the costumed characters. The five were all working women or had been employed till recently, and all had worked in London, where they also lived. One interviewee was born in Asia and one in Germany. One identified as a Londoner and another described a "traditional English" upbringing whilst living abroad. Some of the interviewees knew one other; one recommended two others as part of a "snowball" sampling technique. None were previously known to me.

To support my decision to move away from collecting purely text-based data, I created a specific research instrument for the interviews, using a form of "photo-elicitation" (Harper, 2002), book-ended by general questions. By adapting photo-elicitation[14] as a method, visual images became an integral part of the interview, intimately linking the spoken response with image choice. The shift here is from an interviewee answering my (previously decided) questions to more dynamic participation in directing the focus of their responses. A subversion of general interview practices. My adaptation asked individual interviewees, for a response to a large number (100+) of pre-selected images[15]. First by sorting them into two sets: "likes" and "hates", Then re-sorting these two sets into two further subsets. One that would be a very strong feeling about the image (like or hate) and the second subset of images generating weaker reactions. Four piles of images were created. Strong likes, weak likes, strong dislikes and weak dislikes. The interviews used the photo choices to generate individual responses concerning positive and negative visual languages about their midlives as woman.

Concentrating on the images in each sub-set, the interviewees then explained why they liked or hated this image, as I laid out each one from their set on a table surface in front of them, making an instant collage of their responses. First their "likes" followed by a second collage of their "hates". The immediate collaged response was photographed as a visual record of the interview, which was also recorded and later partially transcribed. The focus of this interview was how the women would define themselves, positively, in visuals and spoken language, giving a rich description of likes and dislikes.

Life details from the interviews were used to flesh out the details of likes, interests and life experiences that make up complex personalities and avoid generic stereotypes. I created depth by developing a backstory of personal details for each individual statue. Character ideas came mainly from the interviews, occasionally from their own style. When the interviews were completed, I rebalanced the performance narrative towards visual dramaturgy rather than using verbatim text (commonly used in Ethnography-based drama). I blurred the identity of individual contributors, so that no one interviewee was identified with only one statue.

The statue I based on Mercy Cressingham was re-named Mercie to differentiate her from the real woman, as there is little information about her in the public domain. Mercie's backstory combined her historical reality as a Victorian wife with elements from the interviews which resonated with nineteenth-century female lives: mentions of patriotism (Int 3), her charitable works (Int 2) and the importance of family (Int 5). The census dates placed the real Mercy in the menopause from 1841 to 1851, so Mercie wore the distinctive bell-shaped crinoline skirt and bonnet from the 1850s. The costume was made from a mixture

[14] The different adaptations of photo-elicitation allow for personal responses in an interview and is often used to encourage participants to share their life/circumstances/interests/world view through the taking of photographs, which are then discussed in the interview. In this way, the autonomy of the participant is asserted, in that they can set the terms of the discussion, which otherwise will have been framed by the interviewer.

[15] These pre-selected images were from a complete set of issues of the Radio Times between April and November 2019. This magazine was chosen because it is widely available in print, sold in most local shops and also relates to culture, broadly. It is aimed generally at the UK population, but more often reflects the dominant culture. The Radio Times is read by older generations rather than young people and, supposedly, does not have any left/right political affiliations.

of old and new materials, an existing crinoline underskirt, old lace trimmings and pleated fabrics were painted and sprayed with acrylic colour to seem old and weathered. Mercie's statue, coloured in aged copper verdigris, was placed by the entrance of the garden, a nod to her own ownership of the garden in 1807.

Olive was a modern version of an ancient statue of Athene, known to be missing from the Parthenon, but described in the mid-second century AD (Beard, 2010 [2002]). The description is of a gold-leafed wooden statue, which was assumed to have been burned away before the fifth century AD. In using the idea of this actual missing wooden statue to create an imaginary "missing statue", I re-named Athene as Olive, linking with the olive tree (part of Athene's mythology) growing beside the empty plinth in the garden. Athene/Olive here had become "the patroness of women's work [...] Ergane, Worker" (Warner, 2000 [1985]: 90), which I intended would side-step some of the patriarchal allegorical and mythical baggage. Olive's costume was constructed from old white cotton lengths, dyed into shades of gold and yellow ochre, before being dripped with thin black paint, as if smoke-damaged. Her Greek helmet retained some of Athene's war-like personality, juxtaposed with her meek presentation in the garden.

The actor playing Olive incorporated knitting into her performance (Int 5's craft hobby). Several interviewees had mentioned travelling overseas (Ints 2, 3 & 4), intimated on one level by the journey undertaken from the Parthenon to Brockwell Park, but also in the widespread influence in British public statuary of interpretations of the classical Greek goddess as Britannia (Warner, 2000 [1985]: 47). Olive's damaged gold statue could be seen in the garden and through a window grill next to the park Temple.

Nora's backstory, whilst originating from Ibsen's play, drew from "A Doll's House, Part 2" (Hnath, 2018), in which Nora is aged 45+ years and therefore arguably peri-menopausal[16]. The older Nora was now independent, having educated herself (Int 4), but had not yet been divorced and so was still married (Int 1 and Int 5). Young Nora is referred to by her husband as "his" little bird, referenced in the costume through the suggestion of clipped feathers. Nora's costume had different detailing for the left and right sides of her body. One side reflected her married status, with an intricately coiffed hair style, puff-topped long-sleeved blouse and tight-boned waistband, whilst the other side was less formal, with bare arm and loosely plaited hair. An 1870s early bustle shape was formed by male shirts tied by their sleeves, encasing her body to form the drapery, with a few feathers cut into the fabric of her dress. Nora's white stone statue was placed in front of the red-brick shelter at the far end of the garden.

Violet's name, linked with the tiny garden violets, influenced the colour choice for her Space Crone's overall-type utility space suit. Violet's costume was based on an old boiler suit, with pockets and other details taken from old work clothes. Violet's paint finish resembled a swirling dark skyscape. Her backstory referenced swimming weightless as a child (Int 2) as being similar to floating in space. Her work as a carer (which had been updated from Le Guin's story as Woolworths is no longer trading in the UK), and her preference for "clean" places both came from Int 5. There were numerous drifts of purple flowers in the garden during the spring and early summer, linking the statue closely with the colours that surrounded her in the middle of the flowerbeds.

[16] Peri menopause is the term used for women who are entering their menopause, but are still fertile.

Helen's statue (a modern park user) wore a version of 2019 summer streetwear: loose oversized shirt, trainers and a large cross-body bag. The costume was created from contemporary second hand clothes, spray painted with a bold metallic finish. Helen's back-story had the most links with the interviews, which was appropriate given her "park user" designation within the statue scheme. The "titian" colour of Int 3's hair became the bright copper colour choice for Helen's statue, and the coloured band on the same participant's own skirt inspired a distinctive band on her bag. Helen's back story of audacious youth also came from Int 3, her self-care routine came from Int 2, her love of abstract art from Int 1, and carrying a big bag came from Int 4 and Int 5. Helen's description ends with a quote that if you talk to other people about your life experiences, it can make you "feel a lot better" (Int 5). Helen's statue was placed next to the hedges in the middle of the garden.

Through experimenting with stiffening materials and coloured surface decoration, I first considered a highly realistic statue-like finish for the costume. But this changed to a looser more familiar street-style of "living statue" costumes, so that spectator choices would not focus on the technical accomplishments of fashion/costume details of construction or decoration, but on the overall visual language, supported by narrative details, respecting the integrity of the ethnography-based interview materials. The visual languages of the performance brought together ideas from multiple sources: literature, the interviewees, elements of the park, public statuary and observations of the garden itself, in terms of the seasonal changes as the plants grew and flowers bloomed. The colours of the flower planting informed the final visual languages of the statues and their placement in the garden.

6. Costume scenography performance

"Women of Brockwell (missing statue)" was installed in the Walled Garden, Brockwell Park, South London on Sunday afternoon of June 30th, 2019 (120 minutes' duration) as a site-responsive scenography, with promenading spectators giving written feedback on forms. Collaboration with five female actors each accompanied by a younger female usher.

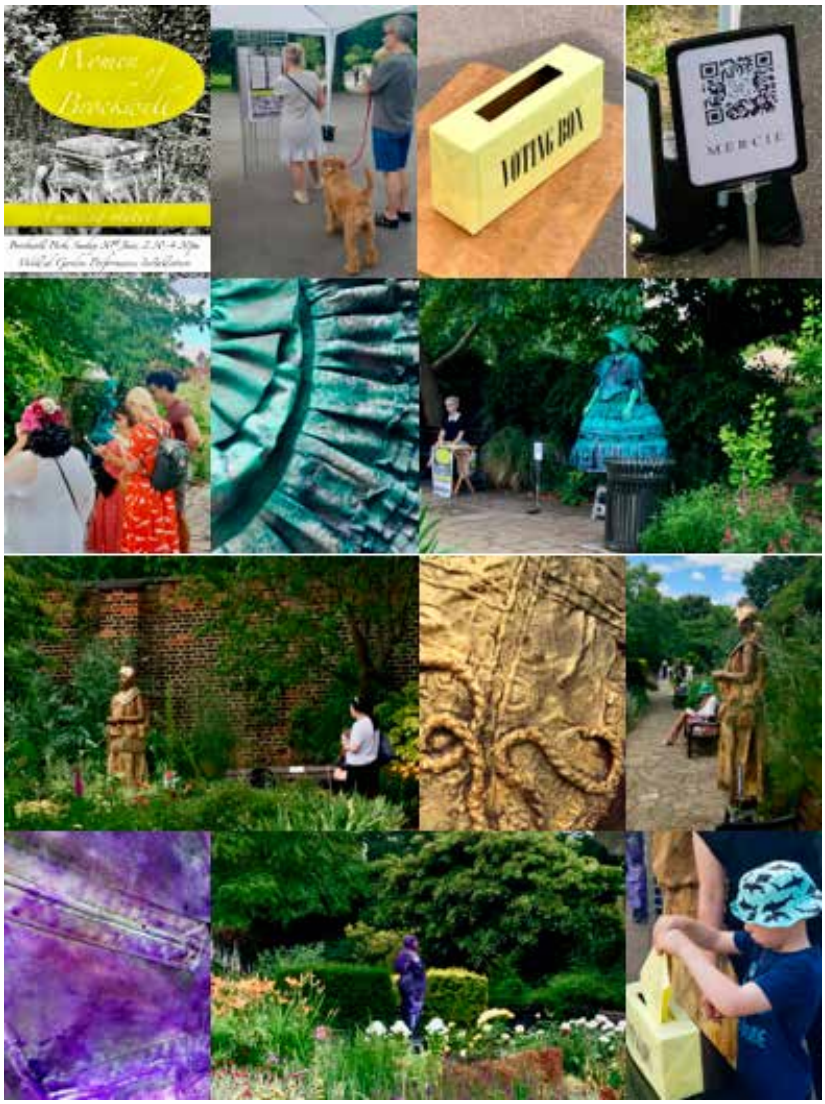
At the gated entrance to the garden, all visitors were invited to take part in the performance. The premise of the performance was of an imaginary competition for a "statue" to be placed on the real empty plinth in the far corner of the garden. This was explained to each spectator who was then asked to view all five statues and complete a voting form, to rank them in order of preference, giving reasons for their choice. Supporting text was available outside the garden and in a digital space, so the visual dramaturgy of the statues was the pre-eminent language of the scenography. I used the existing empty garden plinth as an imaginary "Fourth Plinth" type competition, which is a familiar concept to many Londoners. As long as the fictional basis of the "competition" was completely understood, then spectators could enjoy the process of judging each statue and ranking them in order of preference, favourite to least liked. 55 voting forms were collected for analysis.

Each statue stood on a small temporary plinth, fifty centimetres above the audience, also raising them to be seen above the garden's hedges. The information about each statue could be accessed during the performance by scanning a Quick Response (QR) code displayed beside the statue. It is worth noting that pre-pandemic, QR codes had fallen into disuse, being regarded as cumbersome and restricted to those who only had smart phones.

By using them as a key tool to access information quickly from a specially created webpage, one for each character, my use here predates their now ubiquitous use in exhibitions and performances, which was regarded as a novelty during my performance.

Spectators read the character description of the personality and backstory narrative of the mid-life woman statue design, sometimes aloud. Each statue was accompanied by an usher sitting near them during the performance, who helped them on and off the plinth. The usher arrangement was primarily for health and safety purposes, to ensure the welfare of both performers and garden plants. The ushers were teenage girls (16+), a younger female "daughter" generation supporting the performance of mid-life women as "living statues".

IMAGE 3 – POSTER, INFORMATION STAND, VOTING BOX, QR CODE STAND, "MERCY" WITH SPECTATORS, LIVING STATUE PERFORMANCE, DETAILS OF CONSTRUCTION, "OLIVE" LIVING STATUE PERFORMANCE, DETAILS OF CONSTRUCTION, WITH SPECTATORS, "VIOLET" DETAILS OF CONSTRUCTION, LIVING STATUE PERFORMANCE, SPECTATOR VOTING.



SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

Using teenagers as the attendants/ushers for the show contributed a new layer both visually and performatively. The teens weren't costumed, to save pulling focus away from the statues, but each carried a tote bag printed with the performance details. Practically, the ushers were necessary to support the actor's performances, and the actors reported warm relationships with "their" teenagers, which opened potential for further daughter/mother interaction for a later cycle of practice. The ushers also engaged with the spectators by helping them use the QR codes on their phones and explaining some of the details of the performance of their statue. This informally supported the spectators' experience of the performance.

The statue performers were mid-life women actors recruited through a combination of previous work together and word of mouth. The performers were rehearsed during their fitting and asked to develop an interior narrative for themselves, based on the character descriptions, later published on the website. As the statues were not busking (for money), they were asked to engage the audience only through looks, expressions and posture. The statues were allowed to shift position when needed, and were not allowed to make any invitation for physical contact, money or to give anything to spectators. Descriptions of performing as statues were shared with the performers: "to thoroughly entertain an audience that did not expect to be one, and to make random people care for a few minutes". (Palmer, 2014: 29). What I was hoping to achieve was in the nature of "sudden, powerful encounters" (Palmer, 2014: 30). The success of this aim can be evaluated in the comments by spectators, which were overwhelmingly positive on the day. Two performers introduced actions involving props into their characters: Olive was knitting a small square as part of her "craft" backstory, and Nora held a small folding fan, for cooling herself.

Whilst there are many different types of living statues seen in the public space, usually busking, the majority are either young and/or male performers. In 2019, "floating" statues such as Yoda were common. Some were more individualistic, but none were of women who looked older than 30. The deliberate choice of presenting a mid-life woman in the public space and asking the audience to consider not just the visual presentation, but also elements of her life story, underscores the absence of narratives of female ageing in public discourse. My collaboration with the female actors allowed them autonomy from the responses of the spectators. Given that the statues weren't busking, movements could not be triggered by cash, and spectators had to attend closely to the performer to see how and if they could trigger changes.

7. Feedback collected from spectators

The performance concluded for the spectators when they put their voting form in the box, having decided to leave the garden. Spectators were provided with pencils and clip boards to fill in the form, which was formally collected in a box, outside the garden, as part of the "voting" narrative of the scenography. The idea of the "competition" was broadly understood, with a wide age range of spectators taking part, engaged in making individual reflections upon the statues and evidencing active spectatorship. The 55 voting forms were counted on the day and the immediate "winner" of the plinth "competition" (the highest

number of first choice votes) was announced as the end of the performance. The full results, which were scored using the numerical scoring system outlined below, were loaded up on the website soon afterwards.

The feedback form was designed to facilitate the speedy counting of first-choice votes within the 2 hour time slot of the performance and simultaneously collect feedback comments for richer analysis to indicate what level of engagement had taken place. The forms asked spectators to rank the statues in order from one to five for each statue, where one was "liked the most" and five "liked the least". The most popular first choice statue on the day was Nora (white stone), with 21 votes. The form also asked for two written answers providing discursive reasons for the choice of favourite and least favourite statues. The voting forms were numbered, scanned and further analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

8. Quantitative analysis of spectators' voting

All the forms recorded a first choice, although one (no. 2) chose four first choices and one second, and another gave two names as first choice (no. 36). Four forms numbered the first choice (nos. 3, 25, 28 and 55). One form had given only first and second choices (no. 49) and only 49 forms used the full scoring system. As the voting forms were an essential part of active spectatorship, there was no assistance in using the form, so no mechanism to ensure consistency in completion. However, it was the written comments that were of most interest, the rich "soft" data, which gave individual insights into the success of the scenography.

The voting system was designed to establish whether any of the statues had been unsuccessful in connecting with the spectators. Nora was the most preferred with 38% (21 votes) of first choices, with Helen in second place getting 25% (14 votes). Violet was the least preferred first-choice costume with 6% (3 votes), but this order was not simply reversed in the choices for least preferred statues. Here Violet was the middle choice with 20% (11 votes), whilst Mercie and Olive were tied with 25% (14 votes) each. There were five forms (nos. 3, 25, 28, 49 and 55) that did not complete all the voting choices, so the least preferred statue votes were distorted. A better understanding of the spectators' preferences was obtained by considering the total number of points attributed to each statue in the numerical system.

Each spectator could cast 15 points, which meant that 55 spectators could have cast a total of 825 points. The total points recorded were 792, a 96% completion rate, suggesting a high engagement with the performance. This suggests that my aim of audience engagement through the scenography indicating active spectatorship was successfully accomplished.

A further question can also be asked of the data, concerning the individual statues: What level of interest did each one inspire? When all the points were considered, the overall ranking followed that of the first preferences, but the percentages indicated a much more subtle response to all the statues. When the total points were considered, Nora had 202 points (26%), Helen had 168 points (21%), Mercie had 151 points (19%), Olive had 137 points and Violet had 135 points, so the latter two tied on 17%. These overall vote percentages show a much closer spread of marks overall, with the top two over an even share (20%) and the remaining three remarkably close. My interpretation here is that all five statues

were found to be interesting by spectators, who related to different strengths and qualities, and interpreted them as a positive affirmation of the mid-life narratives. This indicated that all the characters had the potential to engage interest, even though the original on-the-day count had indicated otherwise.

9. Qualitative analysis of spectators' comments

The rich data from the forms was in the written comments, where the responses ranged from single words to short paragraphs. Three forms had no written comments (nos. 17, 26 and 51), two forms had one-word comments (nos. 6 and 12) and 18 forms had single- point comments. More than half of the forms therefore offered several comments on what they had liked or not liked about the statues, of which eight forms had ten or more comments. Four forms also offered a general comment on the project, written in the space at the bottom: two offered thanks (nos. 52 and 53) and two commented that it was hard to choose a favourite statue as they liked them all (nos. 5 and 35). There were no disrespectfully critical comments, which was impressive for a show open to the general public. Three of the forms (nos. 12, 14 and 22) were in children's handwriting and older spectators were observed taking part (not always possible to identify by handwriting), evidencing that a wide range of ages were involved in the voting and engaged positively with the performance.

To understand how the spectators had responded to the statues, I identified two questions that could be asked concerning the reception of the scenography and the level of spectator engagement with the statue characters. The first question was about how much of the statue's backstory was mentioned in the spectators' reasoning. This would indicate engagement with the text accessed through the website rather than how the statue looked. The second question asked whether the spectators expressed emotions or feelings about the statues or the performance as a whole.

There were 18 forms (32%) in which the reasons for preference referred to backstory information. These were mostly referencing details of their favourite statue, e.g. "Nora's interest in education and willingness to embrace life" (no. 43), or sometimes their least favourite as well: "Mercie seems weak and without character, seems to settle without argument or opinion" (no. 29). Only one form used the backstory negatively: "I don't like the ursula le guin" (no. 44).

The second question was around how the spectators were moved emotionally or "felt" about the performance. This can be answered by identifying emotions expressed in the comments:

IMAGE 4 – CHART OF SPECTATOR COMMENTS DETAILING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO THE LIVING STATUES AND THE SCENOGRAPHY.

#	Written comment	Form
1	I **love** this statue, it was beautiful. My choice is based on the likeness to a statue	no. 1
2	It was the most statue effect, less human. **Love** the expression on the face	no. 4
3	I would **love** to see all of these statues as a permanent fixture in the park & in other public locations...	no. 5
4	She's **scary**	no. 7
5	Very beautiful & l**oved** that she (Nora) spoke many languages & travelled	no. 13
6	the **scary** model!	no. 23
7	Less interested in the costume although still **love** the presence of the statue herself	no. 32
8	NB. I like all of them, there are aspects of all these women that I **love**	no. 35
9	the white created a sense of space and she was highlighted as she was clear to see against the gardens backdrops of green colours. I **loved** her attitude and the frills of the costume. It felt both traditional + contemporary at the same time	no. 39
10	the background for the statue really resonated with me And I **love** the style of the statue. Statue 2 was a close second for the same reasons	no. 46
11	I l**ove** the idea of a statue based on Ursula le Guin – not a type of character you often see as a statue	no. 48
12	Thank you for creating a thought provoking work and adding a wonderful element to a relaxing Sunday walk around the gardens. **Love** the highlighting of women from this age group.	No. 52

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

This analysis indicates how emotionally involved the spectators had become with costume scenography and individual characters. Two responses are negative, using the

word "scary" rather than hate; the rest are enthusiastic about the character or performance, expressing strong emotional responses (love) from the audience. From this grouping, we can also see that three spectators expressing emotions (nos. 5, 35 and 52) understood the performance as scenography, the whole experience and three other forms that referred to the event as a whole performance rather than individual statues (nos. 36, 46 and 53). One form (no. 39) commented that Nora's statue "created a sense of space and she was highlighted as she was clear to see against the gardens backdrops of green colours". This comment could be understood as referring to writings by Michel de Certeau on place and space further defined developed by Marc Augé. The nature of a "frequented place" (Augé 1995: 79) which might often be associated with movement but in this performance was wholly to do with presence, as the statues had limited movements.

Other responses indicated different reactions to the connections formed with the performers. Two of the forms (nos. 14 and 22), in children's handwriting, negatively commented that they didn't like the statue that "stared" at them. Two forms (nos. 3 and 30) revealed that the actor playing Olive had winked at them. This was part of the actor's development of Athene's "flashing eyes" (Homer, 2003 [1946]): 323) described in The Odyssey, and was given as the reason for getting a "favourite" vote. One form offered the most critical comment, about the same statue:

> I am programmed to recall Athene as goddess of wisdom, justice, warfare etc (even maths!) rather than "just" traditional craft skills and was a bit disappointed that none of the above were associated with "Contemporary mid-life women"! However maybe this is a telling limitation and unfair evaluation on my part of traditional craft skills! Interesting. (no 47)

This criticism is couched in terms of being thought-provoking and a sense of self-reflection prompted by the work, which is an excellent example of spectator engagement. Also, the comment referred to Athene having a considerable presence in classical history, which was unreferenced in the statue. Although my argument here, from a feminist viewpoint, is that Athene, as an approved representative of patriarchy, has only a limited resonance with contemporary mid-life women, this was also noted and remarked upon in the feedback comment. Still, it was a reminder that classical references can only be deployed with care within the scenography, because of the complexity of their multiple reference points.

No. 28 only voted for Olive and commented "I am a socialist", which showed that they had likely understood the political context of the performance, notwithstanding the obliqueness of their comment. This was also indicated in the references to Nora being "independent" (nos. 29 and 37): Mercie emanating "power" (no. 32), Helen reflecting "calm modernity & confidence" (no. 5) and Violet as "an older looking woman being able to represent the human race" (no. 47).

IMAGE 5 – "NORA" LIVING STATUE PERFORMANCE, CLOSE UP, DETAILS OF CONSTRUCTION, WITH SPECTATORS AND CHARACTER NARRATIVE.

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

The importance of the written comments collected from the spectators both evidenced the connection of the spectator to the scenography and confirmed possibilities for a subsequent cycle of practice. However, I decided not to fully encode this soft data for further analysis, and cause a rupture in the reflective practice cycle, because new thinking would be influenced by my choice of analytical tools, rather than identified through my scenography practice. This could mean that a close reading of audience feedback might assume too great a part of the synthesis process, subverting a future outcome towards pleasing an audience. This isn't necessarily a negative thing, if only pleasing the audience is an aim, but in the practice my emphasis rests on encouraging the audience to encounter difficult or even unpleasant ideas.

10. Critical Reflection

The critical reflection on *Women of Brockwell (missing statue)* was the second stage of my make-reflect-remake creative cycle, which then took me forward into the re-making for a fourth, different scenography. For that reason, the overarching research question was to identify positive and negative spectator responses to narratives about mid-life women communicated through the costume scenography. This was the only feedback data collected, to make an assessment of whether any of the character decisions were insufficiently interesting. If this had been the case, then some justification could be given to the current norm of absenting these characters from cultural representations. My claims for subversion are substantiated by a comparison with customary practice. Often this is confused with titillation or voyership say the use of nudity or aggression. But this was a subversive use of a very common and under-regarded art form- the living statue, not used as buskers, but as a considered creation of generally unrecorded lives- mid-life women.

The feedback form did not collect any identifying data from the audience. As this was not a marketing exercise, neither the age, gender or ethnicity was asked for. In a future stand-alone performance, with a different aim, this data might be of more interest, perhaps to understand potential biases. Around twenty or so invites were given to colleagues and friends, not all attended. Some of those invitees who came brought their own friends, unknown to me. Many spectators were simply walk-ins from the park. It might have been useful to identify how many walk-ins joined in, given the intention to appeal to the general public, but on an informal basis, I only recognised a few invitees. Three of the forms were in children's handwriting and older spectators were observed taking part. Given that I had decided not to insist on form-filling being overseen by the ushers, it was interesting to see how differently the form was used, whilst still supplying some or all of the information asked for. Some spectators had reversed numeric system, but the comments made it clear which statue was preferred. A more didactic approach could be adopted for a future iteration.

I was expecting some negative pushback from the audience- objections to the all-female statuary, or the range of characters offered. Although the event was clearly labelled as an imagined competition, one walk-in spectator was clearly bothered by the request to judge the statues, and wanted to discuss this at length with me. This singular response highlighted to me the problems associated with introducing a competitive element, however light heartedly, and is something that I would not repeat in future iterations. Concentrating on a "first" choice winner on the day, gave a specific timeframe for the performance, in collecting immediate responses and reporting back that afternoon, thus engineering an urgency to contributing feedback.

But the feedback form asked for a range of responses for each statue from most to least preferred, and in this format, the statue which had the least first choices was not the least preferred. Here the spread of marks was much closer, so that it was possible to see that the feedback form had collected enough data to allow for some depth of analysis through the mixing of methods.

The unusual event of mid-life women as living statues did not elicit any negative comments from the public either about the ages of the women or the fact that they were only women. I did not describe the living statues as a response to the paucity of female statuary

in the UK, and only one form (no. 52) commented on the age group, noting the unusual feature of the performance. Menopause was not named in any statue's backstory, and the mid-life age of the characters was not specified other than through the performer herself. Two backstories included some references to husbands (deliberately referencing patriarchy) and one of grandchildren, indicating that these were not young women. The feedback indicated that all the narratives were enjoyable and that for some, it was difficult to choose a favourite. The combination of visual languages with some text-based narrative had proved important to facilitate deeper understanding of the character ideas. A few spectators referenced the visuals only for their choice. The feedback evidenced a high level of positive engagement within active spectatorship, even generating new thinking by the spectator.

11. Conclusion

The scenography addressed the absence of female statuary in the UK, and of mid-life women in particular, through making a intervention: a performed costume scenography of "living statues" in a public park space. Using a popular form of 'street' performance within the familiar "Fourth Plinth" public culture concept, enabled a public audience to actively engage with and respond to the character narratives. The identification of a missing statue through the empty plinth, and subsequent redressing of absence by creating competing visual narratives, connected positively with the Walled Garden visitors.

Creating space with the addition of the five statue narratives and the combination of visual languages, showed the achievement of the scenography and evidenced a high level of engagement through active spectatorship. Spectators behaved respectfully to the statues, and were observed reading the information aloud in front of them, often to share with their companions. Using teenagers as attendants facilitated the use of QR code technology and also introduced a new and significantly different layer of energy into the scenography, that of the younger working women and their supportive relationships with the mid-life statues. The support from the written narrative, accessed individually through the spectator's smartphone was an important element for many spectators. But, the feedback forms suggested that for other spectators it was the look or material that had been the basis of their judgement, the visual language rather than the written narratives.

The inclusion of narratives from the interviewees helped blur the boundaries of the artifice, by contributing a more deeper sense of real personality to the statues' backstories – "hoping that the spaceship will be clean!" (no. 47) – but not distracting from their presence in the garden. Using strong colours, for the visual language of each statue made each one a complete visual statement, whilst staying within a group of believable statue colours, albeit stylised. The bright copper colour of the contemporary park going woman (Helen) made it possible to consider her as a personality even though she was identically dressed identically to many of the spectators, but for the colour. The stillness of the statue performances highlighted the restraint (and physical stamina) of the actors, which did not overpower the visual language of the scenography as the primary dramaturgical driver of the performance. The street-style costumes did not distract spectators with over-detailed aesthetics or technical skills.

The positive feedback on the installation, the statues and their backstories suggested that there were no perceptible barriers to representing mid-life women in this way using cultural forms. Comments did not suggest that the elements I previously identified as being subversive had prevented audience engagement. Using the abstractions of statue forms, strong colours and standing on plinths together with the colours of the garden, meant that the women were very visible in the garden space. The spectators expressed connections that they had made with the backstory themes: freedom, self-education, travelling and speaking many languages were all mentioned in comments. The "least preference" statue comments referenced a lack of connection with the backstory. So I had developed narratives of female mid-life that could interest audiences, but were not universally enjoyed. By concentrating on the visual language as a performance, new representations of mid-life characters had been created that were both understandable, relatable and interesting. The absence of these stories and narratives says much more about the views that exist within commissioning bodies, than it does about the potential of audiences to appreciate them. Perhaps this is the kind of "programming" to which spectator no.47 referred. The deep nature of these cultural biases have yet to be interrogated.

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