

Clair Schwarz

**Iris in, Iris Out: Reflections on the production, exhibition, and viewing of a bisected-eyeball hand-puppet.**

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**Abstract:**

This article reflects upon my short visual recording *Eyedrops: A Monoculogue* (2021). It describes the thinking process of creative avoidance (both making something new, but recycling ideas and materials which already exist, both in the mind and close to hand); pleasure in making (the haptic joy of production); considerations of performance; being audience to one's own work when exhibited alongside other work responding to the same initial call; and re-presenting the work in a workshop context. While it draws upon interdisciplinary theoretical writing to provide phenomenological and ekphrastic considerations of the work, moving between the three-point dynamic which links and divides viewing positions: the image (screen); subject (eye); and the object (puppet), it employs an immediacy of writing, which resists the usual considerations of academic scholarship in a move to free up thinking and to expose the emotional and experiential, questioning what it is to 'see'.

**Keywords:** wellness, sight, puppetry, COVID-19, lockdown, performance

The short film *Eyedrops: A Monoculogue* (2021) can be viewed [here](#)

A Transcript of the film is included in the Appendix to this article.

**IMAGE** Figure 1: Clair Schwarz, *Eyedrops: A Monoculogue*, 2021. Still from Video Film. Copyright © 2021 Clair Schwarz. All Rights Reserved.

## **Iris In: Inception**

My eyes were sore. The arid strain of too much screen time brought about by the new way of working online, necessitated by COVID-19 and the first lockdown were most urgently felt on their dry surfaces. The shift to only communicating with students and colleagues through online platforms, coupled to the urgency of producing quality learning experiences for students accustomed to in-person teaching had, and continues to have, noticeable effects. During the first lockdown of 2020, ways of working involved extended periods of staring and sitting within one's home, resulting in a uniformity of posture and environment. Such sameness reduced the variety to which one had become accustomed; the entertainments of the bus journey, the sprints from room to room, the stairs to be climbed, the school run to be negotiated - all of those plebian opportunities to move suddenly halted, and that which had been mundane, time-consuming, a chore, took on a novel hue. In this state of being, to not freely sense the world beyond a screen, a window, or the immediate environs of home, felt like a life lost, a return to the shadowed walls of Plato's cave, a sensory bereavement, tempered only by the permitted exercise time. In this context of restriction and growth - the shrinking of the personal, physical world, the escalating scale of a global pandemic – I created *Eyedrops: A Monoculogue*.

Its inception stemmed from the group invitation from the Co-editor of this Special Issue (Clare Johnson) to produce a vox-pop which reflected upon exhibitions which

considered 'health' (Johnson 2021).<sup>1</sup> Originally conceived as installed exhibitions housed within The Arnolfini, Bristol, the lockdown restrictions of COVID-19 meant that the exhibits were only available through a recording, meaning that the experience of viewing was mediated by technology and the decisions of the camera operator. I wanted to support this venture and was keen to participate. However, I was reticent to produce a talking-head/vox pop as it felt too akin to the online teaching I was in the middle of creating and delivering. In this tension I devolved a plan to make something which reflected how I felt about the circumstances of COVID-19 and the way in which it impacted upon my wellbeing and that of others, but was also playful and performative, rather than instructive. My physical health was very apparent – hours sitting at a desk interacting with others via a screen engendered a stiffness in the spine and a strain of the eye. I had been diagnosed with early onset cataracts a few months before and was conscious of the ways in which my eyesight was affected. Depending on conditions, I have a diffuse vision, a blurring of the light, perfect for close-ups of screen stars of the Hollywood age, but

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I am writing to ask if you would like to contribute a 5-minute vox pop on 'wellbeing' to a project I am putting together with Keiko Higashi (Engagement Producer at Arnolfini), from the perspective of your discipline. The project relates to the exhibitions currently on show at Arnolfini: A Picture of Health (<https://arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/a-picture-of-health/>) and Jo Spence: from fairytales to phototherapy (<https://arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/jo-spence/>). The purpose is to critically examine the concept of 'wellbeing' from a range of different disciplinary perspectives as a response to the exhibitions.

Your response might focus on the notion of 'wellbeing' more generally or focus on a particular work(s) within the exhibitions. The gallery is currently shut during lockdown, but the Arnolfini's website includes a film of each exhibition.

The video responses will be edited together by Katy Smith (ACE) and hosted on both the Arnolfini and Visual Culture Research Group (VCRG) websites. Our aim is that this will become a cross-faculty resource for students and others interested in the concept of wellbeing.

Our deadline for sending a 5 min (max) vox pop is **Friday 5 February** and these can be simply recorded from home using a phone/tablet/computer or recorded using Panopto. See attached for guidelines about recording a vox pop. We know how stretched everyone is at the moment, but if you feel it's something you can contribute to please do let me know. We would, of course, love to have your input.

not so lovely as a lived experience. Like an old-fashioned camera lens, my world is brushed with Vaseline.

The puppet design came to mind immediately – a dissected eye hand puppet which spoke of its own experience. I pictured an eyeball, floating in a dark space, spotlighted, vocal. Samuel Beckett's play, *Not I* (1973) was the visual flash which sparked within. Mouth's lips alone, harshly lit, the host face and body hidden in darkness becomes, as David Houston Jones describes, 'a speaking object that is not quite a face and that interrogates the expressive capabilities of the face (Houston Jones 2018:77).' But rather than film my own eye, I wanted to displace my physical and emotional trauma onto an object which spoke of artificiality, of theatricality, an absurd hyperbolic thing of sight and sound. To riff on Houston Jones, something which is 'not quite' an eye which 'interrogates' the speaking 'capabilities' of the eye.

### **Iris In: And so to making:**

I looked to the bed. Upon it lay the Ikea storage box for wrapping paper, unzipped and gutted, its contents spilled. My children had been wrapping a present and the detritus of their efforts, although frustratingly untidy, spoke of an opportunity to make. The Amazon boxes which had brought the presents, disgorged, but potent with transformative possibilities offered up their materiality. Scissors, tape, and black sticky labels were conveniently pocketed in the box. Green and red pens were on my desk. The geography of creation took place within a triangulation of desk, bed, and sofa, a pacing of nine steps, a triangle of half a square metre. Making the thing I had seen in my head needed to be within the space of its conception – I refused to move from the space to obtain other materials, only the bricolage materials of my

office/bedroom were permitted. I felt that my response to the initial call – a vox-pop on wellbeing - needed to be answered within the geography of my state of being which involved a collapse of the spatial boundaries of work and non-work. The domestic space of my bedroom was now altered by the inclusion of the viewing eye of my laptop. The zoom calls and online teaching engendered a slide into a liminal twilight which unbounded the demarcations between day/night and public/private; the functions of the bedroom space expanding as the access to the world outside shrank.

Thus, the Amazon boxes were flattened, and two identical circles cut from them. These were covered with larger circles of lining wallpaper (stored with the wrapping paper), and the edges cut into tabs and taped onto the back. Each circle was bent at the radius, with one half of each secured to each other, so that the other halves formed a circle with a radial split. Using a mirror, I studied my left eye, and replicated the iris; green with a few brown flecks. This configuration was replicated in coloured pencil onto the lining paper, which was pleasingly matt and slightly textured. Upon this, an iris was stuck, fashioned from black sticky gift labels, and slightly off-centre. Partly for verisimilitude, and partly to emphasize the tired-eye look, a fine red liner provided capillaries, snaking from edge to centre. And so, the eye was made, but the mechanism for it to speak needed to be engineered. A flange of cardboard behind each hemisphere was secured with brown packing tape – something which worked well but caused audio problems (see below). Delighted with the realisation of my internal vision made papery flesh, I played with Iris, as I had named her, unapologetically anthropomorphising and gendering the materials originally designed to conceal and signal an object bestowed as 'gift'. Feeling her in my hand, I practised the movements of puppetry which turned 'it' to 'her', and like the carpenter

of Carlo Collodi's tale, felt the physicality simulate autonomous animation in an echo of Pinocchio's 'naughty wooden eyes'. (Collodi [1883] 2012: n.pag.).

The script came immediately, a stream of consciousness which I scribbled on the pad. Very few alterations were made when it came to recording. The set up for this took place within the defined triangle, with limited equipment of mobile phone, tripod, and light. My dark blue bedroom curtains were drawn behind to resemble a theatre stage. I directed the light onto Iris, the light serving as a spotlight to focus attention to the stage subject; but it also visually spoke of an accusatory stare: a desk light swung into the face of a suspect in interrogation; an ophthalmic torch searching for occlusions; a cue for the performance to begin – all of it scrutinous, a means to a gathering up of what can be witnessed upon the surface. Sitting on the floor, I held my hand aloft, moving Iris into the frame, my husband acting as assistant to help find the right position. I moved Iris down, marking her beginning with a bow to acknowledge her future audience. Moving my hand to imitate speech, I read the script, choosing a portentous tone to match the hyperbolic words (see Transcript below).

Ending as it began with a bow, the film was recorded, but what I had intended as a one-off performance with no editing, required some post-production tinkering – the mechanism which allowed the eye to open and close was loud – the packing tape crackled with an intensity too great to be a pleasing addition to the physical discomfort described by, and represented through, Iris. I re-recorded the script but included an ill-advised adlib which meant that the edited piece had sections of mismatched visuals and sound – moments when one could hear the words and Iris was close-mouthed, others when the maw revealed itself like hands clapping, but to silence. I was initially annoyed – 'why didn't I stick to the script? - but this soon

turned to a pleasure in the mistake, an appreciation of the honesty of the mismatch between vision and sound pointing to its separate production. It also made the film all the more ridiculous.

This journal article, writes *back in*, retrospectively, that which was intuitive and immediate, layering a reflexive patina on the raw surface of the unplanned, un-theorized and swift production. In a small way, it evokes the spirit (if not the precision) of Vivian Sobchack's liberating description of method in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of film Experience* which privileges the embodied experience with writing which is 'less theoretical as it is empirical' (Sobchack 2020: 10). The labour involved in my backward motion echoes Sobchack's urgent need to 'interrogate vision – vision as it is embodied, vision as it is performed, vision as it signifies, vision as it radically entails a world of subjects and objects to make sense of them and of itself as it is lived.' (Sobchack 2020: 10). This begins, like all things, with conception.

The film was mad in reply to Beckett's Mouth of *Not I* (1973), made material through the Billie Whitelaw's performance, but by way of Dali – the cushioned lips of The Mae West Lips Sofas (1938-39) - created in collaboration with Edward James - and the razor-slit eye of the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) whose free association of imagery prefigure Iris and the lines she speaks. It gestures towards Dali's dream sequence for *Spellbound* (1945) requested by Alfred Hitchcock who was 'determined to break with the traditional way of handling dream sequences through a blurred and hazy screen' (Hitchcock 1985: 163). The irony of my 'blurred and hazy' vision in my waking life is not unnoticed. These cultural objects create a pulsation of seeing, sitting, speaking, silence, scale, function, violence, witnessing, and sleight of hand. A fakery of pain, or pleasure, an absurdist grotesquery of carnivalesque inversions of

organ functions: a blind eye which speaks; silent lips which support a recumbent figure; an edit which swaps out the human eye for that of a non-human animal, commenting on the violence of vision itself and the camera's collusion in wielding the blade.

Like the subjective camera, Iris's 'vision' is monocular. As a one eye/mouth hybrid, she functions as two organs within one object; whilst singular (being one eye rather than two) functionally, she is doubly equipped – the slice through her eye is not just an allusion to the castrating knife; this violence gives voice to the eye, creating a duology through bisection which insists that that you hear as well as see. The eye which speaks is a readable image, its meaning easily discernible from its form which is supported by the dialogue. In some ways it is an obvious image; this is supported by the ease with which it came to mind, but the ease with which one can read it does not readily translate to the comfortable.

As a single eye, bereft of lid, and bisected to emulate the upper and lower lips of the mouth, Iris straddles the lips/eye/lips iconography of Beckett and Dali, but in resistance to, rather than in command of, the male voice/hand. In her introduction to her 1973 performance of Mouth in *Not I*, filmed as part of *A Wake for Sam* (1990) Whitelaw describes the exactitude of Beckett's directions:

He was so demanding inasmuch that he was so meticulous. If you said an 'oh' instead of an 'ah', or an 'and' instead of a something else you would hear from the stalls an "oh Lord", or you would see his head going down to his hands.  
(Whitelaw 1990)

Yet Beckett's distress at hearing his words altered by the actor in performance, for Whitelaw, originated from a loving place as he 'radiated love' and was concerned with the pursuit of perfection, where although 'not possible', Beckett 'wanted you to

be perfect' (**Whitelaw** 1990). My decision to not re-record the film, to let the imperfections be part of it, illustrates a different strategy to Beckett and Whitelaw's disciplined approach. The inclusion of error was of more interest to me than a pursuit of a goal I was unsure of.

But this eye, simple in its circular form, speaks of something which is not seen – its twin, which does not appear but is a mere ghost in the audience's imaginary, less physically present even than the shadow of *Not I*. Where is the other eye, what happened to it? How so its divested of lids, face, skull, brain? It floats in the screen, the hand of the puppeteer vaguely discernible below. While the absence of the site of the eye – the ocular socket/skull; its biological mechanism the optic nerve, the brain, can be notionally troubling, it is the absence of eyelids which is the most abject. In *Not I*, Mouth refers to the function of eyelids:

Just the eyelids, on and off. Just the eyelids presumably...on and off...shut out the light...reflex they call it...no feeling of any kind...but the lids even in the best of times...who feels them...all that moisture. (mouth 1990)

This absence of feeling, the binary switching on and off, the plenitude of moisture, whether lubrication or tears, articulates the mechanisms of biological and emotional functions reacting to trauma. Yet even in the sterility of function, within the 'reflex', the 'shutting out the light', there is some relief. Iris speaks of her witnessing events, and the physical strain of such experience. Her recounting of what she has witnessed, the physical sensation of being 'wheeled through the exhibition', or the scraping sensation of her descent down a well, mark a tension of agency and its lack – Iris can describe how she feels, but is unable to control that which appears before her. Without lids to close, she is subject to the violence of vision: the light which blinds; the air which dries; the scenes which traumatize. She is a disembodied sister

to the eyes of Anthony Burgess's Alex, the central character of *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) whose eyelids (in a technique frighteningly similar to cataract surgery) are hooked open, the reflex to blink checked by the apparatus of the state, forcing him to gaze upon the horrors projected before him. This trauma is viscerally depicted in the 1971 film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick, in a production which played out the relationship between vision, violence, and film. Cast as Alex, Malcolm McDowell describes this relationship in the pre-production preparation, stating:

I spent nine months with Stanley before we started shooting, watching violent movies every day. They were the most horrendous films: concentration camps, bodies stacked up. He was thinking of using them in the treatment sequence, where Alex is given aversion therapy. (McDowell 2019: n. pag.)

This strange gestation of visual horror echoes the pregnancy and birth verbally gestured by Beckett in *Not I*. Similarly, Beckett's exactitude is echoed in McDowell's description of Kubrick's process:

In the scene where I'm being worked over by the police, the probation office, played by Aubrey Morris, was supposed to spit on me. Poor old Aubrey ran out of saliva and so Steven Berkoff, who was playing a cop, said: "Don't worry, I've got some." He brought up the most hideous lurgies. Stanley asked: "Can you get it on his nose?". Berkoff says: "Yeah!" We did so many takes, what with Stanley not accepting anything less than 100%. He wanted it to dribble down just right, to be totally humiliating. Obviously, I was a bit pissed off. (McDowell 2019: n. pag.)

The repetition of process until one actor literally runs dry, to be replaced by another, replete with the abject fluid and its 'humiliating' placement, is shocking to read. The tears of Whitelaw's character, Mouth, springing up from within, are replaced here with an externalized, shower of disgust from without. The place of love Whitelaw describes is not repeated in McDowell's assessment of the physical pain and damage endured for the shoot, where the 'Ludovico Technique – a type of aversion therapy caused the actor harm:

When we shot it, the lid-locks kept sliding off my eyelids and scratching my cornea. When the anaesthetic wore off, I was in such pain I was banging my head against a wall. But Stanley was mainly concerned about whether he would get his next shot. (McDowell 2019: n. pag.)

The favouring of aesthetic considerations, the prioritization of art over care for the individual resembles the utilitarian approach of the 'Ludovico Technique' which is performed by the State against an individual. The 'greater good' of the film is at the expense of the physical and emotional state of the subject, whether character or actor, where violence can serve as both symptom and medicine. This relationship raises questions about what it is to be well. What if one is unable to close one's eyes and turn away from the traumatic? While some may have attempted to avoid the mediated details of the pandemic, the lived experience of being in the world, the restrictions to space and the visible signs of infection control, made such turning away impossible. Our lids were prised open and the drip, drip, drip, of confusing graphs which made sterile the daily death tolls and rising infection rates, fell upon them with an unrelenting sting.

A lidless eye is unable to 'shut out the light' of realities, but forced into this constancy of vision, it can become supernaturally prescient allowing one to see into the future. But this future is for women one where aging is abject, a failure, a descent into the crone. In *Clash of the Titans* (1981) a staple of family viewing returned to during lockdown, the Graeae of Greek myth who shared a single eye (and tooth) appear as The Stygian Sisters. With their shared eye held ransom by Perseus (Harry Hamblin) they question each other, asking "what do you see, sister?" What they see of course is a displaced version of their own demise through the motif of the beautiful desirable woman made abject and destructive: Medusa. In the stop-motion model of the film, animator Ray Harryhausen created an eclectic monster, increasing her visual threat

by addressing what he saw as a 'contradiction' in the snake hair/beautiful face hybrid of previous interpretations in art. Instead Harryhausen 'felt she needed to be hideously ugly but with perfect bone structure, thus giving her a threatening, mysterious quality, but at the same time a grotesque beauty' (Harryhausen 2005:123). The consideration of the attraction/repulsion dynamic of the perfect bone beneath the reptilian skin speaks of the way the surface of a woman, the smoothness of her skin, or lack thereof, marks her. 'To-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1975) is conditional: the caption for the close-up image of the model of Medusa reads:

Left: Latex body with internal metal armature. 17" (h) x 252 (d) x 102 (w). C. 1979. Even after twenty-four years, Medusa has stood the test of time although I have had to make a few running repairs. She was built to be photographed in close-up. (Harryhausen 2005: 99)

Here, even with a latex model (can I venture puppet?) the language of preservation is couched in gendered terms with the sin of physical deterioration held in check through the craftsman's Pygmalion-like hands.

Conversely, Iris was born of deterioration. She is the eye informed by the terror of cataracts, a retreat from perfection, associated with age, debilitation, and surgery, a shrinking from the knife and scissors of Dali. She was informed by the everyday representations of the condition through popular culture, such as Liz Smith's portrayal of Norma Speakman in *The Royle Family*, in particular the episode in which she appears with a bandaged eye and describes her cataract surgery ('Nana Comes to Stay' 1999). This episode uses humour to ameliorate debility while cleverly raising questions about the place of aging women as burdensome. Smith's portrayal of Nell in Beckett's *Endgame* (Warchus 2004) furthers this circuitry, with the character's confinement to a bin echoing the slippage into the deepening well of unwellness,

voiced in *Eyedrops*. Similarly, the immobility of the sightless Hamm, the central protagonist of the play has thematic resonances: he, paralyzed and misanthropic; me, desk-bound and cloudily myopic, both looking at worlds hit by disasters.

Iris was all these things and none – she was a toy.

Through this description of toy, I imply a range of etymologies, encompassing the trivial, the absurd; the playful; the humorous; the entertaining; that which teases. This ‘toy’ is also a puppet, but as any puppeteer will tell you, few puppets are toys. My claim of ‘toy’ is not pejorative, it marks Iris’s ability to produce delight and dread. Like the ventriloquist dummies of horror cinema: Hugo of *Dead of Night* (1945) or Fats of *Magic* (1978), the animated humanoid object which mouths the words of its human operator, only for those words to be heard back through the object, strikes one’s centre with a destabilising blow, fracturing subjecthood.

In his introduction to Part 1: Theory and Practice, of *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, John Bell posits that ‘basic questions about the nature of human and material existence constantly wait beneath the surface of puppetry’s benign or seemingly inconsequential existence (Bell 2014: 13).’ Following from Jena Osman’s observation that all puppet performances are touched by Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, (Osman cited in Bell 2014: 44), Bell proposes that ‘every puppet performance is also an instance of what Sigmund Freud and Ernst Jentsch called “the uncanny”’ (Bell 2014: 44). Bell problematizes Jentsch and Freud’s relegation of the a consideration of lifeless objects to have agency as related to the infantile or uncivilised, arguing that the rejection of animism has never been complete, but instead ‘we attempt to control it with concepts of the “uncanny”, which want to tame the effects of object theatre by assigning them to the irrational and

pathological, rather than consider the disconcerting agency of such things.’ (Bell 2014: 49).

For me, the agency of Iris is key to the creation of *Eyedrops: A Monocologue*. I titled the work in reference to the last line which saw Iris plea for a ‘blue-gloved yet generous hand’ to alleviate her arid condition with simulated tears. Like me, Iris, in her well of unwellness, was suffering, not from a surfeit of tears, but from an absence of ‘all that moisture’ (Whitelaw [1973] 2020). Borrowing Matthew Isaac Cohen’s description of the identity of puppets, Iris is ‘not me’ and also ‘not not me’. (Cohen 2007: 124). While the creation of the work felt in practice like a dialogue between myself and the ‘not, not me’ of Iris, the subtitle of the film offered up a neologism which described one eye speaking, describing the singularity of vision by a sighted object in a well.

Her phenomenological description of her imagined experience of ‘Being in a well, held in its rough walls, stuck betwixt and between the terrible depths below’ was enabled by her agency as a puppet, allowing her to go where I could not, becoming as Kenneth Gross describes: ‘an object in performance, an ally and a challenger of the living body of the actor’ (Gross 2014: xxiii).

The fear of my sight being lost, of my eyes failing, created a separateness of feeling, that my eyes no longer truly belonged to me, that they had betrayed me with their secret occlusions. Conversely, I felt I had betrayed them through poor stewardship by unwittingly exposing them to that which could be damaging. This rationale for early onset cataracts (late forties) was levelled to me by the ophthalmic optician who first diagnosed cataracts during a routine eye examination some months before, stating ‘you’re very young to have this, do you work in extreme heat?’ While I

answered 'no', a true assertion, I felt guilty of somehow allowing this to happen to my eyes through actions within my control. The eye examination was taxing: the struggle of reading some of the smaller text of the exam (I am short-sighted); the stress of deciding which is clearer – 'number one or number two?' when neither are completely clear; the strangeness of the various tests which puff air into your eye while your head is immobilized within the medicalized stocks of the device; the seeing of a photographic image of the retina, its sunset of nerves and capillaries, an exposing through technology of that which is usually hidden yet is part of oneself but can only be viewed by the intervention of a medically qualified stranger and his magic machinery; all of this made me want to cry.

The optician morphed into Guiseppe Coppola – a progeny of Hoffman's itinerant optician (but also, as Freud suggests, an amalgam of Coppelius and the Sand Man ([1919] 2003: 7) in the story which evokes the uncanny. Like the protagonist of the tale, I was fearful of the questioning optician, and felt the violent truth of his diagnosis as a blow. His accusatory question, coupled to the analysis within the darkened claustrophobia of the examination room resulted in an immediate destabilizing effect on my relationship with my material body, a feeling of separation and shame.

The allusion to the uncanny in the context of Iris is furthered through her use as a means to articulate my relationship with my body; the affects of home-working and the particularities of my altered sight. The condition is currently mild and can be addressed in the future with surgery but during that examination I experienced the panic of creeping blindness. As Mary Bunch argues in her consideration of the work of the artist Bruce Horak, 'blindness is a nuanced, highly variable and socially constructed experience' (Bunch 2021: 241). And in that optician's chair I felt it touch me.

Iris speaks of my pathography, while reflecting the horrors of a frightened world shaken by the blooming disease of COVID-19. She is an explicit manifestation of the uncanny – the inanimate silent object, made mobile and vocal – and the physical and psychological horror of the wounded eye – the failing sight, the castration of power, and the alterity of my relationship with my own body.

In a paper which evokes phenomenological evocations of the uncanny in pathographic testimony, Megan Perram notes how ‘self-identity and selfhood, become abnormal in the sense of Freud’s uncanny’ (2019). In relating Freud’s reading of ‘The Sandman’, Perram remarks how Olympia’s seeming humanness which troubles its appearance as a doll, sparks an anxiety which ‘is the eternal doorman’s puppet reminding us of our mortality, our inherent evilness, or perhaps our shame.’ (2019). As described above, my sense of shame was unequivocal – was it I who was the Sand Man, figuratively throwing sand into my own eyes and make them burred (rather than bleeding as the nurse of Hoffman’s tale terrifyingly describes)? Was it my own neglectful hand which flung the abrasive grains, which scoured the lens until its clarity dulled? How could I not know?

In their definition of puppetry, Posner, Orenstein, and Bell describe it as ‘the human infusion of independent life into lifeless, but not agentless, objects in performance.’ (2014: 5) This idea of agency is key to my conceiving of Iris – she is not a mouthpiece for ‘me’ but an agent with whom I can speak to myself through an articulation to others; she is a “do-er” (Parker-Starbuck 2013: 385). The use of puppetry in considerations of health and wellbeing is well-established. As Marzenna Wiśniewska notes ‘puppet performance can offer intriguing insights into the physical, psychological and metaphysical tensions of various forms of existence.’ (2020: 17). Through the creation of Iris, I was able to force a confrontation with this shame and

to negotiate a new relationship with my body through externalizing a part of it into a malleable representation, a puppet, which connected to my hand, creating a human/object hybrid which allowed my thoughts to be expressed and my condition to be confessed to the world through a consideration of wellness.

### **Iris Out: Exhibition**

The exhibitions of *Eyedrops*; firstly, as part of the Wellness Voxpops, and then as a singular thing presented in the third WoW workshop (discussed at length in Linda Taylor's article in this issue, 'Sprinkle Lunacy over Legs: A review of WoW workshop writing exercises') facilitated different ways of seeing. As a slice of experience edited into a series of short films concerned with the shared theme of 'wellness', my film looked aberrant – a puppet where before living heads had spoken and gestured with a natural humanness and authoritative command. The artificiality of my film interrupted the flow of speech and images, the organic replaced with the artificial. And I liked it.

When presenting the film at the WOW workshop, I was party to the audience's reaction, straddling the experience as maker and viewer. From this uncomfortable see-saw with a singular seat, I could take up multiple viewing positions. Being online, with only some participants turning on their cameras so their expressions could be vaguely discerned within their thumbnail theatre boxes, my experience of viewing was not quite that wished for by Whitelaw: being audience to her own performance of *Mouth* in Not I. Whitelaw describes the disconnect between the embodied being who performs, and the audience who witness, stating 'I can't imagine what it looked

like, I know it sounds silly, but I wish to God I could have gone out front and seen that ...I can't imagine what it looked like' (Whitelaw 1990).

How strange, but how telling that Whitelaw's embodied knowledge of the words perfected through rehearsal; of the body held tight within the confines of the part; and the make-up which restricts vision and movement other than that of the speaking Mouth ultimately fails when one asks oneself to uncouple our experience to that outside oneself. Just as one is unable to see one's own face, only an image of it, a performer is unable to see one's own performance from the point of view of an outside witness. But through the proxy of Iris, by the recorded re-playability of the film; and by the apparatus of the online platform hosting the workshop, I was able to be witness to (albeit partially) a performance displaced from my own face through the facility of puppetry. It is less important what I drew from this position - what could I read in those thumbnail camera views – incomprehension, amusement, boredom? The chat function offered an immediate critique, subject to social niceties of course, filtered through the gauze of online academic etiquette, but the shifts in viewing positions throughout the production, exhibition, and reception of the work is of most value – the dynamic unfixity of plural viewpoints of a thing made in consideration of a fixed position.

### **Conclusion: Reflections in a cardboard eye**

This journal article writes *back in*, retrospectively, that which was intuitive and immediate, layering a reflexive patina on the raw surface of the unplanned, un-theorized, and swift production. The labour of this backwards motion is felt – here I am back at the desk which bounded me in lockdown, frantically working to deadlines

which, unlike Pinocchio's revealing nose, refuse to expand to accommodate the lies of my ambition. In writing this reflective piece, a hodgepodge of explanation, ekphrasis, observations, linkages, and a *writing in* of things, rather than a *writing from* of things, I have come to know that which I did not previously, or possibly more accurately, that which I did not hold explicitly in my mind when creating *Eyedrops* and its performer, Iris.

My consideration of 'wellbeing' through the creation of *Eyedrops* led to a confrontation of my embodied existence within the context of lockdown and the unresolved legacy of a recent diagnosis about my own health. Through the creation of a puppet, constructed within the strict rules of bricolage to emulate the restrictions of lockdown and the realities of my own work life/home life amalgam, I was able to intuitively make something which felt immediate and raw, produced with a brevity of time and planning. Iris was made because she needed to be made. I thought it was a clever ruse to avoid yet another recording of my own face and a way to ignore the usual rules in academic preparation and delivery: the reading; the writing; the synthesis of argument, doing instead an act of deliberately playful avoidance of labour through delegation to an object not defined by the boundaries of human life. Iris was free to be, not held in check by self-criticality, not caring about the redness of her sclera, of the effect of her appearance on others.

While I was concerned about how she would be judged, Iris was not. As Bell argues, puppetry does not equate to a 'mastery of the material world' (Bell 2014: 50) but instead a 'constant negotiation' (2014:50) where:

puppet performances reveals to us that the results of these negotiations are not at all preordained and that human superiority over the material world is not something to count on, especially since we all eventually end up as lifeless objects. (Bell 2014 :50)

How apt then, that in the context of a pandemic caused by an invisible pathogen which prompted a throwback to the terrors of a pre-biotic age making viscerally real the fragility of humanity, that a humble object emerges to speak in my place the words which I could not.

In the dialectical movements between mind, eye, voice, hand, screen, recorder, editing equipment, digital storage, wi-fi, cardboard, paper, packing tape, sticky labels, the objects of my room, Iris and I communed in dialogical tension – a see-sawing of me and thee. Instead of Iris being a mere efficiency, a strategy to avoid work, she directed greater work, imploring me to say what I wanted to despite of myself. Iris enabled me to answer the call, to write myself, to ‘return to the body which has been more than confiscated’, but through a writing/creation which allowed the uncanny material thing to confront and challenge the ‘uncanny stranger on display’ (Cixous, 1976: 880). It is no surprise that puppets enable this transgression into greater freedom. Cohen describes this power of dissimulation, drawing upon Sir Francis Bacon’s essay ‘Of Simulation and Dissimulation’ of 1597 which speaks of the power and necessity of hiding one’s identity (Cohen: 2007: 129) a manoeuvre facilitated through puppetry. The ‘not, not me’ of Iris is a cardboard ‘flesh’ which ‘speaks true’ (Cixous 1976: 881).

If I had planned a more thought-through film, the outcome would not have allowed for the instigation of feelings I had suppressed through shame of a physiological failing, forcing a confrontation with that which I did not want to confront, articulated through a confession woven into a stream of consciousness riffing on ‘wellness’. By rejecting the usual format of communication during lockdown: a mediated image of myself and substituting instead the hybrid puppet, I could displace my own image

and 'look back at myself'. I became my eye, and my eye became me, an *I/eye pars pro toto* relationship simulated in a roughly made construction of repurposed ephemera. Watching *Iris*, I could witness my own fears with acuity, and truly hear truths dressed up in the hyperbolic ramblings which described a time where hyperbole failed. The dreadful toll of the pandemic continues, with immediate and future suffering playing out, but in the instances of viewing the film, whether placed among the collection of other Voxpop films; within the online community of the WOW workshop; and in the reflective process of writing this article, I was able to step back and see.

Thank you, *Iris*, take another bow.

## **Appendix**

### ***Eyedrops – A Monoculogue (2021) Transcript:***

When invited to contribute to this project I considered both the form and origin of the vox pop:

the vox populi;

the voice of the people;

a person's voice;

a voice given a platform;

a voice on a platform;

a stage;

a theatre stage;

a voice speaking from a stage;

a monologue;

a speaking;

a speaking from a mouth on a stage.

Beckett speaking his words through the monstrous red lips borne by Whitelaw, grotesque, beautiful, mesmerising.

Thus inspired I rejected the talking head and instead give voice to the organ of my field – the eye – to create an monocologue. For this I fashioned the most analogue of avatars, formed from the detritus of disgorged Amazon boxes, the corrugated skins of our contemporary hunting where flint arrowheads have been replaced with mouse clicks or screen taps.

With these cardboards pelts I constructed a homespun eye to relate my tale of lockdown wellness. My eye, wheeled through the *Picture of Health* exhibition was virtually swivelled by unseen hands, left and right, up and down, panning and tilting my vision to commune with the works doubly framed through the screens which both divide and unite us.

*A Picture of Health* was held up for scrutiny by an eye, reddened and dry, which felt all too keenly the violence of the gaze. My eye pondered upon the concept of 'wellness', itself feeling far removed from this wholesome concept. Wellness: a measure of health?; a condition of being well?; or not being well? a destination?; a place of wellness?; of being *in* wellness, of being in a well.

Being in a well, held in its rough walls, stuck betwixt and between the terrible depths below – the place of ghosts retold in songs by Lightfoot or films like *Ringu* and its

inevitable American remake, films which present the horror of the gaze, the violence it causes to the voice which is held captive behind the sealed mouth; or above up to the (non-blue?) tantalising, distant light of a vaccine-enabled freedom.

My eye no longer blinks, it scrapes, sloughing its bloodshot sclera against the scratchy stone of the well walls. It blurs with the dried moss grown from a sedentary existence, cataracts forming, And while it gazes upon the screened aridity of the Covid landscape, images sliding before it like coloured chips of bone, presenting prone bodies gasping, the charity drives, the clapping, the voting, the bent knees and the unfurled flags, the toppled statues and the raised hopes, the mouths masked but not silenced, it anxiously waits, suspended in the Covid well of ever decreasing wellness. But, occasionally, albeit fleetingly, it raises its gaze to glance up, towards the dim light above in the hope that sometime, someone, with a blue-gloved yet generous hand, will pass the eyedrops.

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