

## **Seeing Beyond the Visible: The Choreography of Breath and Touch** **A reflection on the making of *Thermal Duets***

By Angela Woodhouse and Caroline Broadhead

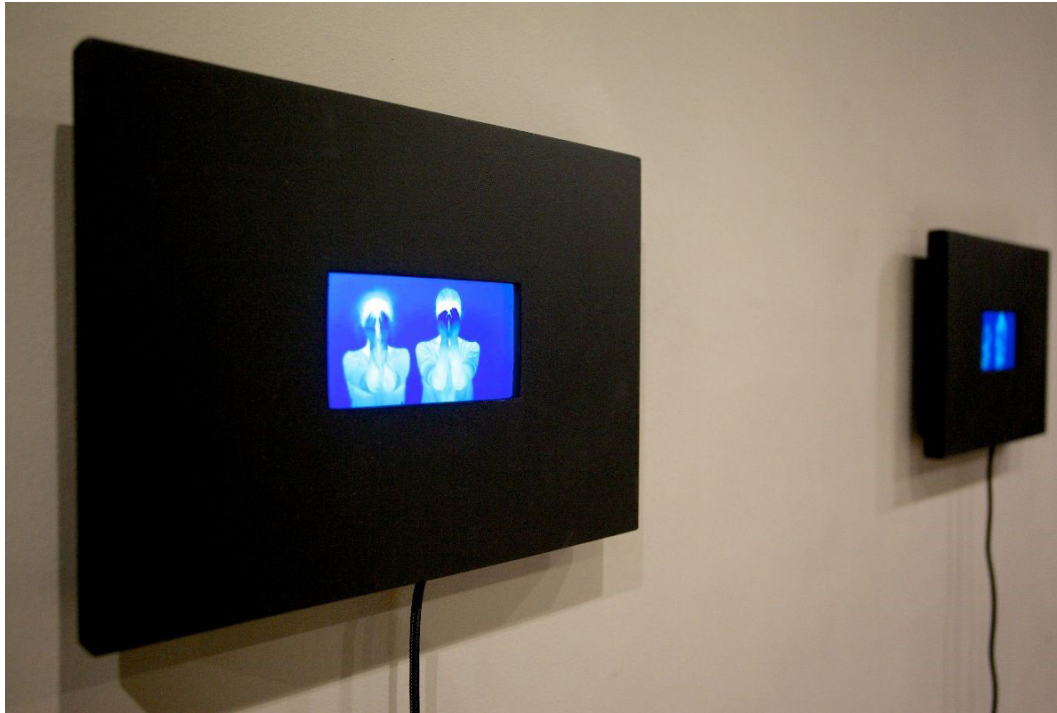


Fig. 1: *Thermal Duets*, Marsden Woo Gallery, July 2019. Photo by Philip Sayer.

This visual essay seeks to explore the themes and process of making *Thermal Duets* (2019), a collaborative work between ourselves and performed by Martina Conti and Alice Labant. It comprises a series of five short video pieces using thermal imaging technology. Each video is separately titled (*Shed, Shroud, Exchange, Spread, Stroke*) and offers a different notion of trace, either of breath or touch to amplify the residue and effect of body heat. Intrinsic is the tension and release as it exists here between the technology and the sensorial, between our understanding of our embodied selves and of that which the technology makes visible. Through careful design the work straddles scientific demonstration with an emotional resonance of one individual to another. This tension then

between what is seen (separated from us) and what is felt (enmeshed within us) underlines the sense of tension and release for the viewer.

The prompt of ‘Balancing Acts’ draws our attention in *Thermal Duets* to the highly luminous images intensified on the miniaturised screen set against the fragility of the body in its heated liveness impacting others and the environment. This fragility is looped into the wider context of damage, a dichotomy between the tender touch and the inflicted mark that speaks to our impact in the post-Covid understanding of ourselves, the power of touch as associated with both care and contamination. Reflecting on work made prior to the pandemic requires a re-adjustment, a pause in consideration of the work, its intent and impact. This re-balancing of how we perceive much around us gives weight to this work in respect of the delineation between one body and another.

### **Context and Process**

As collaborating artists, we have been exploring anticipated touch, intimacy, and detail through a number of dance installation works such as *Sighted* (2009) and *Between* (2011-13) to create highly charged performance events. Audiences were invited into constructed spaces in which the scores enacted by the dancers heightened awareness of one’s own body, both performers and viewers. Integral to the experience of the works were the viewers’ potential actions (whether of stillness or motion), and the impact these actions may have on the environment or other audience members. As two audience members remarked:

The piece made me want to move—the dancers made us feel all the things we want to do, all the anticipation reminding us of movement.

(Audience response, *Between* [2011])

The performers’ touch left my body feeling heavier.

(Audience response, *Between* [2012])

The aim of *Thermal Duets* was to expand on the intimate and sensorial but in the virtual sphere. As before, we drew on observing the body extended through time, of detail emerging and fading, of quiet attention, but within the context of thermal technology, specifically using the Helion Camera (able to pick out more detail on hair and clothing and which produces a deep blue/low heat). The palpable sense of warmth in a previous live work, *Between*—manifested at one point in the slow and deliberate removal of an undergarment by a dancer and handed, still warm from her body, to an audience member—would in *Thermal Duets* be translated into an image intended to evoke the potential for felt responses. As one viewer reflected:

There is a sensual feeling as the figures merge —‘I wanna feel the heat from somebody’ sang Whitney Houston in 1987. The desire for human interaction is pretty universal. They breathe more heavily. I feel a certain sadness that what made the figures burn more brightly is ended so soon. (Audience response, *Thermal Duets*)

And here another remarked on the ‘slowly breathing, placing and displacing, a sense of stillness, bodily arrival, grounding’ (audience response 2019). The emergent change of colour indicating a recording of heat slowly bleeds out from the gestures onto the other, to clothing and the environment in painterly form. The colour range of dark blue, light yellow to red indicating changes in body temperature were manipulated in the choreographic process to become painterly marks of wounding, subsuming or blanketing the other. The challenge here was to extend the sensorial quality beyond the screen; to record the *trace* of touch was in effect to *touch* the viewer. Erin Manning’s writing resonates here as she reminds us that touching another is never singular:

Touching you, I propose to you to receive, to touch...  
To touch is to violently or gently encounter a surface,  
a contour. To touch is to feel the perceived limits of  
my contours, my surfaces, and my body in relation to  
yours. To touch is to expand these contours, creating  
new perimeters. (12)

She goes on to elaborate how the impact of touch modulates between violent and tender acts. Equally, the extent of breath made visible in *Thermal Duets (Spread)* indicates how the boundary of the body is not easily or tangibly defined, the edges overlapping and tipping into another's body expand and filter into the air.

In attending to work in the field by other artists, Italian video artist Stefano Cagol comes to mind, in particular his environmental project *Body of Energy* (2014) for which he recorded the natural exertion of bodies and heat trace from volunteer participants in different outdoor locations, leaving their mark on trees or urban infrastructure. We were equally interested in this bleed onto the environment but wanted to articulate the quiet detail of action through gesture, pace and sculptural form of the body. This incorporated its furthest reaches, for example the detail of hair or the heat tone of the underarm, and equally through garments in their texture and layering. Our purpose was to exploit and attune the materiality of recorded body heat towards the poetics of movement and image, balancing the association of scientific forensics with art making.

### **On Miniaturisation**

The videos are presented on iPods. This miniaturised scale feeds into the common experience of looking via our smartphones into a small illuminated space. French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, in his essay on the miniature notes the small scale as the essence of imagination since 'values become condensed and enriched in miniature' (150). He also notes the idea of small scale having the ability to appear larger,

‘[t]hus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness’ (155).

We, as artists, take advantage of the burgeoning understanding of the small screen space to draw the viewer closer, to see into the luminous colours, to call upon a more intimate relationship with the screen and thereby a sense of, and empathy with, the continual motion that allows the viewer to slow down and follow the action moment by moment. Susan Stewart in her book *On Longing* (1993) suggests ‘[t]he miniature has the capacity to make its content remarkable; its fantastic qualities are related to what lies outside it in such a way as to transform the total context’ (46). We choose to exploit these concepts, extending an artistic enquiry through the body that alerts viewers through minute action rather than expansive outward and recognisable virtuosic dancing. Miniaturisation acts in tension with the experience that ironically *becomes* expansive in highlighting the slow materialisation of heat trace. This is also supported in the use of the fixed frame single shot to evoke a sense of time extended and shared, of real time, of the now.

### **The real and the imagined**

The dimension of the screen, and the sense of stillness and scale are important factors as they invite a certain intimacy and closeness when viewing. The effect is to encourage the viewer to walk up to and, one might say, *into* the exotic body, imprinted on the screen, not in its form but through its heat. This is very apparent in the saturation of colours, vibrant blues, soft greens, yellow and red, referred by one viewer as ‘a jewel-like quality that is enticing’ (Audience response, *Thermal Duets*). Another viewer reflects:

With these pieces I am constantly aware what I see is invisible to me... The protagonists search for the obliteration of identity in each other, expecting perhaps it will only last for a fleeting moment. (*ibid*)

Recognition of the other becomes an acknowledgement of oneself as an expanded body beyond the frame and through the exertion of energy. In some ways this extraordinary capture of the body via technology exaggerates the liveness, though only visible in this virtual space.

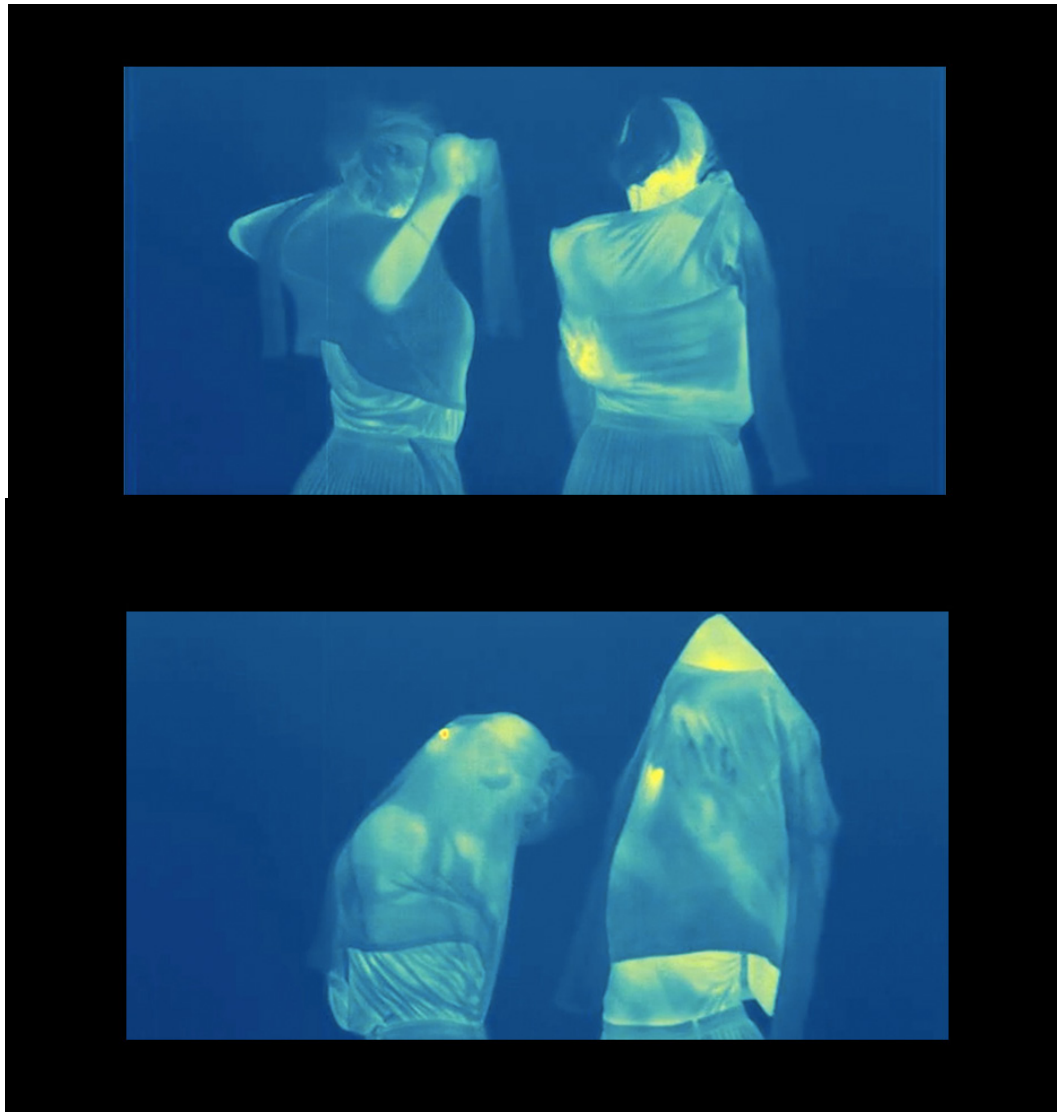
In rehearsal the question of understanding how the tasks played out on the camera in respect of heat trace challenged the dancers' somatic response. While there may have been a strong sensorial quality in the exhalation of breath, for example, the redness of trace on the other body may not have been visible to the camera; it was this balance between the felt and the resulting record of heat that became a key aspect, tuning visceral nature to effect. This difference between the felt and the visual effect created an intangible gap that caused an interesting tension in the necessity to close it. Equally the heat reading of the different bodies such as the strong blue veins apparent on Labant and less so on Conti (*Shroud*) became a guide to the construction of the image.

Designing movement and imagining the consequence of the effect called for a double layer of seeing, the real and the hoped for. Guided by what could be seen through the camera required many takes of the same moment to get the right effect. This practicality of to and from, discussions, re-imagining, tuned us into an imaginative space. Noticing and exploring more detail was central to defining the aesthetic of the films driven by a desire to create a hypersensitivity in and of the moment.

In the following section we explore each of the videos as to their specific details highlighting the unique and shared aspects.



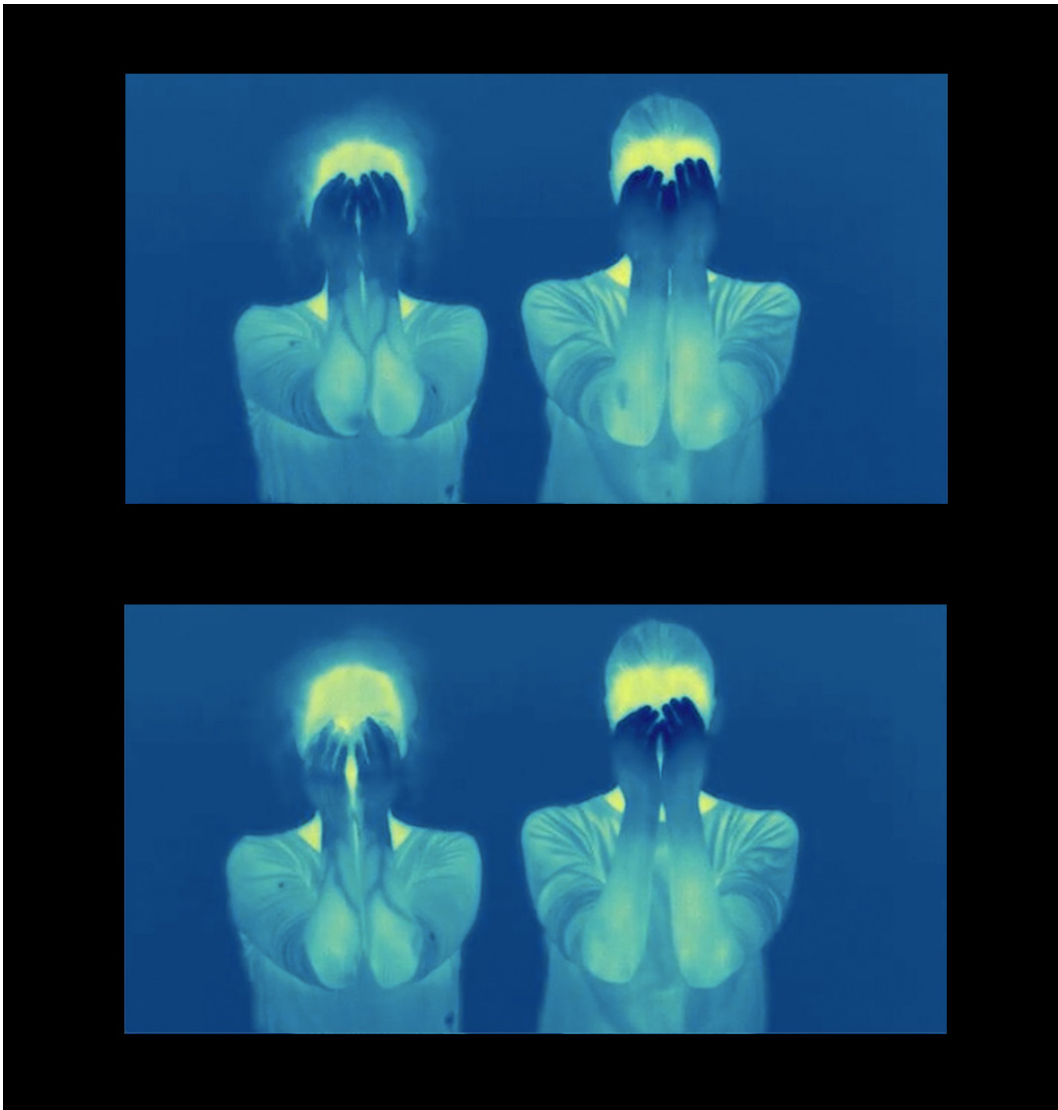
*Shed*



Figs. 2 and 3: *Thermal Duets (Shed)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

*Shed* plays with the shift of garments around the body as the dancers slowly peel them off. Through a series of sculptural pauses in which the body heat penetrates the fabric the texture or pattern becomes more apparent. Views of the face, the red breath, the elbows, and hands emerge from and disappear into the abstract shapes that the encased and wrapped body has become. There is a form of double life, balancing the natural action of taking off a garment with the ‘unnatural’ bleed of parts of the body, cooling and fading to dark blue, as the body shifts to another point.

*Shroud*

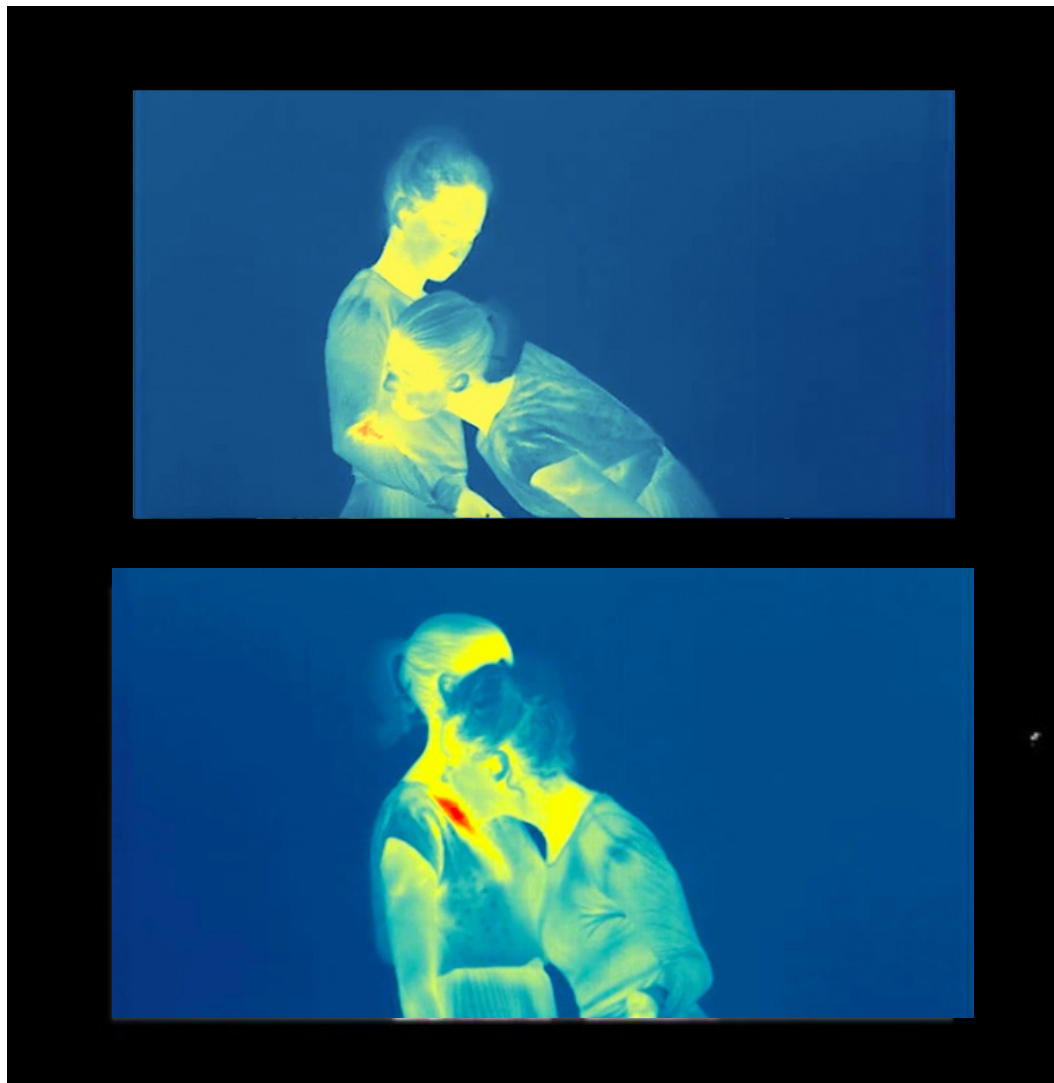


Figs. 4 and 5: *Thermal Duets (Shroud)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Shroud*, we retain the anonymity of the dancers while allowing the gradual progression of temperature change to reveal the individuality of the bodies. As the video progresses the heat from the face and its breath slowly makes small changes to the edges of the hands and the face, becoming a source of illumination. Obliterating the dancers' identity enhances the difference between them as we observe the biology of heat slowly changing the veins in the arms, becoming bluer for one more than the other.



*Exchange*



Figs. 6 and 7: *Thermal Duets (Exchange)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Exchange*, the directed action of one body breathing on another made visible as heat trace becomes a process of marking, the camera detecting the heat displaced on skin or clothing. The ambiguity of intent as either a tender or a violent action is manifested in the power and energy that creates either a hot red mark or a softer yellow. The directed breath on specific points on the body, such as the forehead or the inner elbow reverberates in consequent motion. There is a conversational tone but also an implicit sensuality, a form of kissing. The viewer is invited into this private and silent act.

*Stroke*



Figs. 8 and 9: *Thermal Duets (Stroke)*, screenshots by Caroline Broadhead.

The simple everyday gesture (a single stroke) is complicated by the painterly stroke of yellow resulting from heat being pressed into the other. The sensation of warming bodies through the tender slow action emphasises a kinship. However, the consequence is also to effectively wipe away the detail of the clothing, seeming to bleed or submerge the garment into the skin, as if the detail of her is also compromised in some way; the impact of the heat of one hand ‘wipes out’ the details of another’s body. There is a balance between how we understand the autonomy of an individual and how the recording of temperature merges both dancers into one.

## *Spread*



Fig. 10: *Thermal Duets (Spread)*, screenshot by Caroline Broadhead.

In *Spread* the positioning of the dancers on the edge of the frame slices the body, slivers the presence, and in so doing gives weight to the breath. Their exhalation is read as heat vapour by the camera, a soft haze filtering from the mouth and evaporating across the empty blue space between them. In viewing you are invited to tune into the regularity breathing and to notice the differences of rhythm between each of the dancers' exhalation, falling in and out of sync. Bodily stillness draws attention to the delicate and changing balance between the visible edge of bodies and their extended boundary exemplified by the visible traces of breath.

The concluding reflection on *Thermal Duets* goes to the dancers. Here Alice notes:

Colours bring a fiction [...] yet the fact that warmth and coolness become visible and overtake the way the bodies are seen brought to me as performer a heightened sense of my volumes, multiple depths and organic aspects of the moving body.  
(Labant)

This fresh conception of being expands beyond our visible contours. The inviolability of the borders of the body is challenged, demanding a re-balancing in understanding of our relation with our surroundings that in turn foregrounds the dialogue between our exterior and interior selves.

### Works Cited

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