

One isn't the loneliest number: on the duet-ness of Chloé Dechery's *A Duet Without You*
by Karen Christopher

It might be said that one is never truly alone. One may have the perception of being alone without having the sensation of being alone. This complicates the condition of solo work which is rarely made in isolation. Two is a particular unit, when there are only two, me and one other, it is a unit of two individuals for which there is no witness, and between whom there is no mitigating voice, no one to settle a disagreement. In *A Duet Without You*, it is not the non-existence of others that is indicated, it is their absence. In order for them to be absent they have to have been there. Chloé solves one problem of the solo (the problem of working alone, and the attendant flatness, loneliness, loss of objectivity) with two stones: 1. bring others into the process, 2. use their absence by sending them away (without erasing them). And the form of this becomes content.

Like graffiti which declares I am (or was) here, each absent voice leaves the mark of someone who knows they will not be present at the delivery of their contribution, a contribution of presence to be subtracted and understood in absentia. This is a twist, a contraction, so delicate audience members (guests to the performance) feel it before thinking it.

There are many facets to the problem of presence including that, to varying degrees of consciousness and intensity, everyone we know is present to us in any given moment. As part of discussion on perception and consciousness philosopher Alva Noë points out people are present to us even when they are not with us. We need only to think of them in order to feel their presence, but it is a specific kind of presence:

“Perceptual presence is *one kind* of availability; it is *one kind* of presence to mind. [. . .] objects can show up for consciousness without being perceived. [. . .] Consider, for example, the case of my conscious thoughts of my friend Dominic in Berlin. I don't mean the thought *that* Dominic is in Berlin. I mean something else. When I think of Dominic this way, he shows up for me in my thinking; he has a certain presence; he is present to mind. Not that he *is* present. He is in Berlin. And not that it seems to me as if he is somehow here. He is present to my thoughts, now, but not as *here*; my sense of his presence, such as it is, is a sense of his presence as far away, *there*, in Berlin. [. . .] When I think about Dominic in this way, he is present in my conscious thoughts, but he is present as absent.”¹

The absence of the three that *were* there becomes the absence of everyone who isn't. The “you” takes on a plurality. When the number of people present equals more than two, the “you” becomes multiple in the sense of me and you (the world). It seems three is distinct from two in a different way than four is distinct from three. That is, no matter how many more than two you have, a key factor is that now there is an outside eye to the relational structure. There is at least one person who witnesses the relationship between two others. Once there are more than two, a multitude is indicated. In this piece the “you” (plural) merge and they become everything not “me” and in this way, a unified other.

The result is somehow pointing out we can also be alone together. At separate tables in a café, in a rehearsal studio filled with fellow performance makers, on trains, streets, and in the seats of a theatre full of people we can also be alone together. However, given the right conditions, we can also feel ourselves aligned and we can follow a train of thought together. We can be attentive together and feel as one as we allow ourselves to be lead by the suggestions of the performance maker in front of us. And by doing this we can somehow access a resonance between ourselves and the experience we are having, and between ourselves and the collective “you” of the people around us. In this way the duet becomes *our* duet with the *performance*.

¹ Noë, A. (2012). *Varieties of Presence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 26.

As a group we can sense a cohesive factor in intimations of loneliness and isolation which ironically have the power to generate a sense of community, a kind of shared sorrow. It is always possible to feel the self shimmering between membership in the collective and the complete isolation of a separate mind which thinks and knows in a specifically individual way. It is rare that we know it as it happens and feel that we might begin to understand it.

That is one of the gifts that *A Duet Without You* offers.