

The Ghosts of Nothing: the world of a work of performance-framed-as-art

(Sean Lowry and Ilmar Taimre), 2015

The Ghosts of Nothing, a collaboration between Australian artists Sean Lowry and Ilmar Taimre, recently generated a series of imagined and mime-based performances within the conceptual architecture of a ‘world tour of abandoned music venues’. This ‘tour’ formed part of an ongoing project titled *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* (2014-). Through mimed street performances and other performative iterations such as a radio play, The Ghosts of Nothing have continually and radically re-medialised the original ‘rock opera’ that launched the project to form an unpredictably ‘open’ work, to use Umberto Eco’s well-known label.¹

From a literal viewpoint, the ‘work’ *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* exists nowhere at all. But that is not the same as suggesting that it might exist everywhere all at once. On the contrary, The Ghosts of Nothing seek to articulate a ‘work’ that is both highly individuated and unfolding over unspecified spans of time and space. To be sure, the ‘work’ is performative, as we elaborate below. If it exists anywhere at all, it is located—if that is the right term—within the differentiated cognitive worlds of individually idiosyncratic interpretations, memories and meanings as embodied in members of its audience.

At its core, *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* is a conceptual work. Yet, unlike much conceptual art, it is far from minimal or dematerialised. Instead, its apprehension is dependent upon an encounter by one or more individuals with at least one perceptual object or event drawn from an exuberant—indeed, deliberately extravagant—proliferation of actions, events and objects. In this context, the ‘world tour of abandoned music venues’ is only one of several presentational modes available for the understanding of *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode*.

Before we proceed further, it is useful to examine our use of key terms. Performance, a term that Richard Schechner has usefully broadened to concern all human doings (actions, behaviours and events)ⁱⁱ can be understood as referring to a universal quality potentially applicable to all socio-culturally perceivable human phenomena and with ‘no historically or culturally fixable limit.’ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, to persevere with Arthur Danto’s term^{iv}, the ‘artworld’ is also so expansively omnivorous as to be capable of literally accommodating anything and everything within its ambit. As Pamela Lee has declared, we now encounter the impossibility of ‘ignoring or standing outside it [the artworld], as if one could lay claim to a space beyond its imperial reach by wandering just far enough afield.’^v Lee’s response to this intractable unboundedness is to shift focus from the ‘global art world’ itself to the ‘work of art’s world’. For, as she puts it, ‘to speak of the “the work of art’s world” is to retain a sense of the activity performed by the object as utterly continuous with the world it at once inhabits and creates’.^{vi}

The Ghosts of Nothing seek to illustrate that the omnivorous voraciousness inherent in the world of a work of art is also evident in the world of a rock band. From trashed motel rooms to legendary music venues and fictional mythologies, the conceptual complex of a rock band is clearly capable of accommodating an entire universe of non-musical objects, events and places.^{vii} It is against this backdrop of

three distinct but analogously limitless definitional horizons that *The Ghosts of Nothing* present the world of *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode*. Within this project, still (and perpetually) in progress, a pseudo-‘rock band’ becomes the vehicle through which activities performed by a diverse range of perceptual objects (including embodied events) enable the ‘work’ to be experienced and conceived of as coterminous with its own constantly evolving world—a world of material/immaterial relationships, intermedial translations, deliberate mistranslations, and accidents of circumstance.^{viii}

The generative spark at the core of this album of ‘expanded cover versions’^{ix} is—as announced by the title—an allegorical repurposing of pop cultural icon Johnny B. Goode, a fictional figure with only the sketchiest of a back-story brought to life in the well-known Chuck Berry song of the same name in 1958. *The Ghosts of Nothing* have anachronistically re-cast Johnny as a contemporary emblem of the alienated artist. He is then equated with the tragicomic clown, Pierrot, a theatrical cipher that emerged from the *commedia dell’arte* in the sixteenth century.^x



Figure 1. *The Ghosts of Nothing, In Memory of Johnny B. Goode*, CD cover image, 2014. Design by Ilmar Taimre based on found postcard ca. 1903, original photographer/artist unknown. Copyright © *The Ghosts of Nothing* 2014.

To date, this episodic series of expanded cover versions have been transpositions from a ‘rock opera’,^{xi} into a ‘radio play’,^{xii} and a global ‘tour of abandoned music venues’,^{xiii} both projected in the mind and performed in mime. Through a dedicated website and printed booklet accompanying a physical CD package, the foundational components of a story are suggested through mutant reinterpretations of iconic songs, most altered well beyond recognition. Each stage of the story is then linked to a sequence of found images, all drawn from the iconography of the Pierrot/clown cultural constellation. In both the street performance and radio play versions, most prototypical ‘cover song’ associations are obliterated and sublimated to spoken texts made up of deliberately clichéd narrative fragments and thirteen ‘rondels’ drawn from *Pierrot Lunaire* by Albert Giraud (1860-1929),^{xiv} presented in both their original French and in loose English (mis)translations by Ilmar Taimre.

Significantly, each manifestation of *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode* relies on the same basic schema—or structure, to revive a much-maligned term—of presenting one or more public perceptual objects within an artworld context to at least one perceiving subject.^{xv} Importantly, the ‘work’ is not identifiably interchangeable with any one or all of its available perceptual objects or events. Or, to put it another way, the work is presented via an evolving array of public perceptual objects, each of which entails a performative dimension simply by virtue of being made available for public perception in various artworld contexts.

As contested histories so often remind us, the line between fact and fiction in performance art is easily blurred.^{xvi} Certainly, the presence of an embodied audience at a real event, or even the historical occurrence of a purported performance event, are not mandatory. All that is residually essential is the existence of some type of documentation—whether fictional or factual, or both—that is presented, at some point, as a public perceptual object to an audience primed to interpret this documentation in an artworld context. As Philip Auslander puts it –

[The] pleasures are available from the documentation and therefore do not depend on whether an audience witnessed the original event. The more radical possibility is that they may not even depend on whether the event actually happened. It may well be that our sense of the presence, power, and authenticity of these pieces derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself *as a performance* that directly reflects an artist’s aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience.^{xvii}

The Ghosts of Nothing conspicuously exploit the fact that aesthetic experience is produced both *within* and *beyond* direct sense perception. Their partly imaginary, partly realised, and partly digitally documented *In Memory Of Johnny B. Goode – World Tour Of Abandoned Music Venues 2014/2015* began with nothing but a listing of 18 ‘dates’ at historically famous abandoned or discontinued live music venues in various international locations advertised on a full page in the Italian art magazine *Mousse* #45 (October-November 2014).

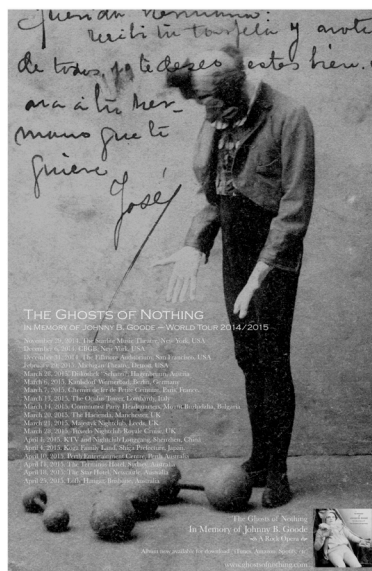


Figure 2. The Ghosts of Nothing, *In Memory of Johnny B. Goode – World Tour 2014/2015*, full page advertisement, *Mousse* #45 (October-November 2014). Design by Ilmar Taimre based on found postcard ca. 1904, original photographer/artist unknown. Copyright © The Ghosts of Nothing 2014.

Of these 18 listed dates, only four dates were actually realised as physical performances.^{xviii} Moreover, The Ghosts of Nothing did not perform as ‘the band,’ in the sense that both members were physically present. Documentation of these performances was captured on video and projected into the digital realm via YouTube and a dedicated website.^{xix}

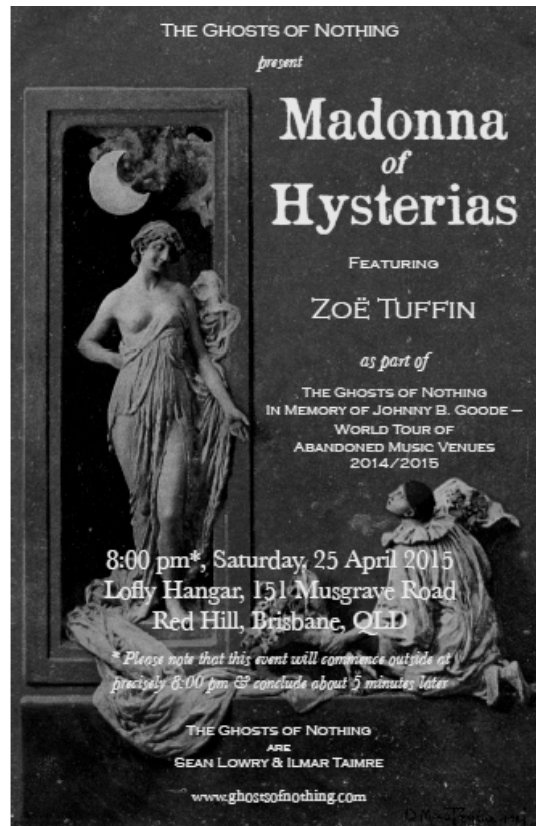


Figure 3. The Ghosts of Nothing, *Madonna of Hysterias*, publicity flyer, 2015. Design by Ilmar Taimre based on found postcard ca. 1918, original artist Domenico Mastroianni, Copyright © The Ghosts of Nothing 2015.



Figure 4. The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Charles Famous), *Betrayal*, video still, 2015. Copyright © The Ghosts of Nothing and Charles Famous 2015.



Figure 5. The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Zoë Tuffin), *Madonna of Hysterias*, video still, 2015. Copyright © The Ghosts of Nothing and Zoë Tuffin 2015.

In conclusion, *The Ghosts of Nothing – World Tour of Abandoned Music Venues 2014/2015* included both performances that were nothing other than their conceptual nomination and performances within which physical actions took place. Clearly, irrespective as to whether these performances were obtained by choice, through direct experience, or as a result of documentation, they add ‘something’ to an experience of the world of the work. In a similar way, this present text adds one more publicly accessible object to the (critical) world of the work, evoking notions of montage and post-criticism as developed in Gregory Ulmer’s much-cited interpretation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*.^{xxv} The most important innovation in Derrida’s practice of montage is a ‘new mimesis’ in which the text mimes its object of study.^{xxvi}

The Ghosts of Nothing will continue to test the outer limits of a sense of performance-framed-as-art that is indivisible from and continuous with the world it simultaneously inhabits and creates. At the time of writing, The Ghosts of Nothing are in pre-production for the *In Memory Of Johnny B. Goode – World Tour Of Remote Wildernesses 2015/2016*. In keeping with Auslander’s sense of the experiential potential of perceiving documentation as performance, this tour of physical and imagined performances will be advertised in conjunction with documentation of the first mime-based performance by occasional Ghosts of Nothing guest vocalist Lee Devaney in a remote Arctic location in the Troms Region of Norway, and for which a direct unmediated experience will only be accessible to the sole performer.

ⁱ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989

ⁱⁱ For Richard Schechner, *performance* is now understood in relationship to *being, doing, showing doing* and explaining 'showing doing'. See: Richard Schechner, *Performance studies: an introduction*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p.28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Schechner, 'What is performance studies?' *Rupkatha journal on interdisciplinary studies in humanities*, Vol. V, No. 2, 2013, p. 3.

^{iv} Arthur Danto, 'The artworld,' *Journal of philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, 1964, pp. 571-584.

^v Pamela Lee, *Forgetting the art world*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012, p. 2

^{vi} Lee, *op cit*, p. 8, italics in original

^{vii} To cite an obvious example, the world of The Beatles (particularly at the zenith of popularity), expanded to encompass an extraordinarily rich array of non-musical public perceptual objects. Dolls, plastic wigs, fanzines, well-publicised events with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Lennon and Yoko Ono, and much more besides became a part of 'The Beatles' without depleting their 'bandness'—and, more to our point, potentially amplifying what 'bandness' might mean at a particular point in history. See: Sean Lowry and Ilmar Taimre, 'Are we a band?' unpublished paper, 2015.

^{viii} As discussed in author Ilmar Taimre's draft University of Newcastle Ph.D. dissertation, this constantly evolving world can be usefully characterized as a *dynamic system* in endless interaction with a multitude of other systems, all existing within the total universe of semiotic systems, or the *semiosphere* (to use terminology from Yuri Lotman's model of culture). See, for example, Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the mind: a semiotic theory of culture*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1990.

^{ix} The Ghosts of Nothing describe their mutant reinterpretations of iconic songs, most altered well beyond recognition and sometimes combined with more obscure references, as 'expanded cover versions'. Most associations exist exclusively in lyrical fragments, whereas other associations are suggested only in titles. In some cases, quotational associations are obscured almost to the point of disappearance, perhaps faintly lingering in one or two partially recognizable words. In some versions, virtually all of the prototypical 'cover song' associations are obliterated. See Sean Lowry and Ilmar Taimre, 'Are we a band?' unpublished paper, 2015. The Ghosts of Nothing also employ the conceptual strategy of 'subliminal appropriation'—a process through which thousands of systematically databased music samples are carefully sliced and layered in multiple and ever-changing iterations beyond conscious recognition. This process is outlined in author Sean Lowry's PhD dissertation *The after-party: the retreat and concealment of strategic appropriation in contemporary art*, University of Sydney, 2003.

^x The Pierrot tradition, now largely forgotten except by historians of art and culture, traces its origins to the *Commedia dell'arte* of the late seventeenth century. It enjoyed huge popularity in the early twentieth century, as witnessed by the mass of references and allusions in the art, literature and music of the time. The standard studies include Martin Green and John Swain, *The triumph of Pierrot: the commedia dell'arte and the modern imagination*, New York: Macmillan, 1986; Robert F. Storey, *Pierrot: a critical history of a mask*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978; Robert F. Storey, *Pierrots on the stage of desire: nineteenth century French literary artists and the comic pantomime*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; Lynne Lawner, *Harlequin on the moon: commedia dell'arte and the visual arts*, New York: Abrams, 1998.

^{xi} The Ghosts of Nothing, *In memory of Johnny B. Goode*, The Ghosts of Nothing, CD # GON001, UPC: 5055486940499, Perfect Pitch Publishing, 2014. Also available through iTunes, Amazon and Spotify.

^{xii} *In memory of Johnny B. Goode: a radio play by The Ghosts of Nothing*, broadcast at 10pm, December 6, 2014 on Saturday Night Séance, WGXC 90.7-FM, New York and live stream at wgxc.org (see <http://wavefarm.org/archive/kw3j9q>).

^{xiii} *The Ghosts of Nothing – World Tour of Abandoned Music Venues 2014/2015* was presented as a paid full-page advertisement in *Mousse #45*, October–November 2014.

^{xiv} For the original French texts of all fifty poems and English translations see Gregory C. Richter, *Albert Giraud's Pierrot Lunaire*, Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001.

^{xv} This formulation and terminology is inspired by author Ilmar Taimre's reading of Jeffrey Strayer, *Subjects and objects: art, essentialism, and abstraction*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

^{xvi} See, for example, Jean-Paul Martinon, 'Fact or fiction?', in Adrian George (ed), *Art, lies and videotape: exposing performance*, London: Tate Publishing, 2003, pp.40-50.

^{xvii} Philip Auslander, 'The performativity of performance documentation,' *PAJ: a journal of performance and art*, Vol. 84, 2006, p.9

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- ^{xviii} 1. ‘This Is Johnny - The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Frank J. Miles),’ December 6, 2014, CBGBs, The Bowery, New York, NY, USA.
2. ‘Betrayal - The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Charles Famous),’ April 11, 2015. The Terminus Hotel, Sydney, NSW, Australia.
3. ‘An Impossible Question - The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Lyndall Johnston),’ April 18, 2015. The Star Hotel, Newcastle, NSW, Australia.
4. ‘Madonna of Hysterias - The Ghosts of Nothing (feat. Zoë Tuffin),’ April 25, 2015. Lofly Hangar, Brisbane, QLD, Australia.
- ^{xix} www.ghostsofnothing.com
- ^{xx} Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology* [1967]), translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edition, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- ^{xxi} Gregory L. Ulmer, ‘The object of post-criticism,’ in Hal Foster (ed), *The anti-aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983, p.91.