

# Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence

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Traveling Exhibition Project Description



Rosângela Rennó, *Experiencing Cinema*, 2004

**Curated by José Roca**

**Co-organized by iCI (Independent Curators International), New York and  
the Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia**

Tour Dates: March 2007 through April 2009

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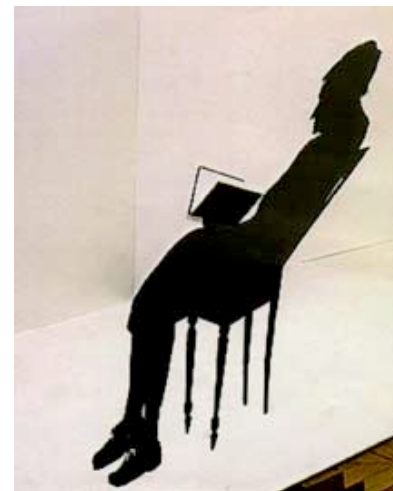


Jeppe Hein, *Smoking Bench*, 2003

Long before large art exhibitions and blockbuster shows, crowds were awed by traveling shows called “phantasmagoria” in which stories were performed with the use of magic lanterns and rear projections, creating dancing shadows and frightening theatrical effects. These lively, interactive events incorporated narrative, mythology, and theater in a single art form that entertained while providing a space for thinking about the otherworldly—playing with the viewers’ anxieties regarding death and the afterlife. Although the term now suggests phenomena descending both from optics and psychology, its atavistic meaning still has currency in contemporary visual production. The artists in *Phantasmagoria*:

*Specters of Absence* draw on forms of representation linked with the tradition of fantasy and magic used by phantasmagoria and reframe them around contemporary issues. Their works create ghostly images that reflect on notions of absence and loss, sometimes using spectral effects and immaterial mediums such as shadows, fog, mist, and breath. These artists’ approaches range from the festive to the ironic, counterbalancing the emotionally charged, often somber implications of their subject matter.

Although the representation of shadows has always been present in art, the use of actual shadows as an integral part of the artwork is a rather recent phenomenon. The shadow—literally, the absence of light—represents something that is beyond the object yet inseparable from it. In many of the works included in *Phantasmagoria*, shadows are used to allude to death, the obscure, and the unnamable, and to construct allegories of loss and disappearance. In several of these pieces, the artists evoke performances of shadow theater, as in William Kentridge’s political tales, or Christian Boltanski’s shadows from a rotating figurine, recalling imagery from the carnival as well as figurines used to celebrate the Mexican day of the dead. In the works of Brazilian artist Regina Silveira and Danish artist Julie Nord, subjects project paradoxical images that do not correspond to their referent and often contradict or complement their meaning. Some of these works reference an absent body, present only by its cast shadow. By using contemporary means of “illusion,” the work *Sustained Coincidence (Subsculpture 8)* by Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer directly invokes the eighteenth century



Regina Silveira,  
*Transitorio/Durevole*, 1997

*phantasmagoric* shows. It actively engages viewers in the construction of their own shadows by moving around an empty room, where light from 36 incandescent bulbs are controlled by a computerized surveillance system that generates an interactive environment of overlapping shadows. In the words of the artist, “confrontation with one's own shadow has a very uncanny effect, as the perspective is updated in real time to match our movement, contrary to our natural expectation of a predictable incidence of light either by the position of the sun or static artificial lights.”



Michel Delacroix, *Lisetta, Ferdinand, Saverio, Edward*, 1995

in a similar way, but inverting the relationship with the reflected self, visitors to Jeppe Hein's *Smoking Bench* see themselves disappear in a cloud of fog that is released when they sit down on a small bench. Laurent Grasso's arresting video, *Untitled*, creates a strange space and temporality in which an ominous cloud of fog traverses the streets of a seemingly deserted city and ultimately engulfs the camera itself. In Jim Campbell's *Library*, bodies of passersby are turned into diffuse shadows that recall ominous specters, set in relation to the monumentality of architecture. Michel Delacroix's sculptures reflect spectral images on the walls, which are blurred and distorted when the visitor approaches them. To denounce the problem of violent disappearance in her own country, Teresa Margolles' installation *Aire (Air)* uses a series of humidifiers that emit a thin column of fog produced by water mixed with miniscule parts of organic material obtained from the morgues of Mexico City and Ciudad Juarez; experiencing the piece implies inscribing the traces of the absent body in the body of the spectator, creating a different kind of specter detached from mere visual experience.

Mist, breath, and fog are often associated with mystery; in their double status as perceptible yet almost nonexistent phenomena, they suggest evanescence or absence. In Brazilian artist Rosângela Rennó's arresting installation *Experiencing Cinema*, fog is employed as a curtain onto which family photos are projected, addressing the fleeting nature of memories and the images that attempt to record them. In Oscar Muñoz's *Aliento*, the viewer's breath on a series of mirrors reveals—albeit briefly—the image of someone who disappeared in violent circumstances in the artist's native country Colombia. In a



Teresa Margolles, *Aire (Air)*, 2002

Throughout the twelve works—installations, videos, objects, and drawings—presented in *Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence*, artists from four continents refer in their own ways to absence, disappearance and loss through the use of shadows and/or actual fog and mist, evoking the alluring enigma and magic of *Phantasmagoria*. The exhibition aims to demonstrate how traditional forms that dealt with

anxiety as a way of counterbalancing its negative effects, can be recalled by contemporary artists to signify and deal with today's own anxieties.

**About the guest curator, José Roca:**

*Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence* is curated by José Roca, Director of Arts at the Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia. Among the recent shows curated by José Roca are: *Define "Context"* at Apex Art in New York, *Carlos Garaicoa: Ruins; Utopia* at the Bronx Museum for the Arts; *Traces of Friday* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; *Botánica Política* at the Sala Montcada, La Caixa Foundation, Barcelona. He co-curated the *San Juan International Print Triennial* in Puerto Rico, and was part of the Curatorial team of the recent Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil. He has been appointed Artistic Director/Curator of Philagrafika, a quadrennial event on contemporary graphics, scheduled to take place in several venues in Philadelphia in 2010.

**About the exhibition catalogue:**

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with a text by curator José Roca.

**Artists in the exhibition:**

Christian Boltanski  
Jim Campbell  
Michel Delacroix  
Laurent Grasso  
Jeppe Hein  
William Kentridge  
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer  
Teresa Margolles  
Oscar Muñoz  
Julie Nord  
Rosângela Rennó  
Regina Silveira

**Basic facts:**

Participation fee: \$11,000 for 10 weeks, plus incoming shipping (Institutions outside the continental United States must also pay customs fees as well as outgoing shipping charges to the U.S. border.)

Number of artists or artist groups: 12

Number of works: 12

Space required: approximately 3,500 square feet

Tour dates: March 2007 through April 2009

Wall texts, press, and education materials will be provided. Five complimentary catalogues are provided; additional copies are available at a 40% discount off retail price.

*iCI is a dynamic non-profit organization committed to enhancing the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art through its innovative traveling exhibitions and publications. iCI brings challenging artworks to a wide range of museums, giving diverse audiences in the United States and abroad the opportunity to experience new art.*