the encircling of a shadow  Newlyn Art Gallery 2001

costal geographies of loss and return, physical and social transition
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Context responsive work made over six months of engagement with the location – a process of detection or looking for clues.

Newlyn is a fishing community on southern tip of Cornwall where the coast is generally very rocky. Located at the meeting point of land and sea, home and ‘away’, nature and culture, centre and periphery, coastal/tidal landscapes might be ‘read’ as liminal spaces where the lines of various dualisms are both drawn and at the same time become materially, culturally and symbolically porous.

Coastal communities are also ones which have been split historically along lines of gender - women at home men at sea - circumstances requiring that each at the same time adopt in the absence of the other roles normally ascribed to the opposite sex

They might therefore be thought of as spaces of difference.
My immediate starting point was the work of the Newlyn School of Painters, a group of plein air painters – active in area from 1880s until the early twentieth century and in particular the number of their works that depict women in door ways, at windows or on the shoreline. Walter Langley - *The Greeting* 1904
The underpinnings of which lie in an earlier body of performative works, made in response to this painting by Casper David Fredrick of his wife, Woman at a Window 1822.

In which she is seen poised between interior and exterior - the large sky / masts outside the window suggesting the possibility of both mobility and wider horizons - which she can only observe from the edge.
In many of the Newlyn School works, the position of woman as ‘attendant’, in the sense of ‘watcher from the sidelines’, is extended to that of keeper of a vigil.

Walter Langley *Touch of a vanished hand* 1888
Walter Langley: Never Morning Wore to Evening but Some Heart Did Break, 1894
In the downstairs gallery an original Newlyn School painting *In a Cornish Fishing Village - Departure of the Fleet for the North* - Walter Langley (1886) was returned to the gallery (which was originally built to house works by the Newlyn School.)
Opposite, a list of 90 women’s names, each that a boat in the contemporary fishing fleet was placed on the wall, evidencing an ongoing association between women home and safe return, simultaneously offsetting the figurative register of the paintings and their positioning of women as sign.
In the upper gallery a projected video loop of a lighthouse, its beam reversed from light to dark, was sequenced with a second projected loop of a silhouetted female figure.
In part this idea was prompted by the story of the Penlee lifeboat disaster. In December 1981 The Penlee Lifeboat, from Mousehole, a fishing community close to Newlyn, went to the aid of the merchant vessel Union Star after its engines failed in heavy seas.
After the lifeboat had managed to rescue four people, both vessels were lost with all hands; in all, sixteen people died including eight volunteer lifeboat men from the village of Mousehole
The memory of the tragedy remains very present within the community and as part of my research I interviewed Nigel Broxman, coxswain of the lifeboat, one of three generations of the same family to serve in the lifeboat, whose father Neil died in the disaster.
Paul Virilo has suggested that invention of the ship is simultaneously that of the shipwreck. Highlighting the extent to which the modernist project of technological expansionism simultaneously contains its fault lines.

The immediacy of death for those living around the coast of the UK is evidenced by this shipwreck map, which vividly illustrates at the same time the extent to which the waters closest to home are the most dangerous - crossing or passing over is then a risky business.
In an attempt to view the spot where the disaster occurred I walked at dusk along the coast path to Tater Du lighthouse, which is unusually set below the path, allowing it to be viewed from above.
Going down the steps towards it I became aware of the rotating beam of the light illuminating the landscape and of my own shadow cast onto it. On the following day foot and mouth restrictions closed the footpaths and I was unable to return to the spot again until after the exhibition opened.
Together these works seek to trace a wider cycle of revelation and concealment, ebb and flow, absence and presence, departure and return. The direction in which the silhouetted figure faces is equivocal, as is her position - sentinel, guard or siren - creating an ambiguity about the position of boundary keeper, echoed in the projection of the lighthouse, whose uncanny emission of a dark beam emphasises warning over welcome.
Signalling as a motif for transmission / transition underpins two other elements of the work.

Inspired by the discovery of a 1960’s photograph, held in the Morrab Photographic Archive, of a woman signalling in semaphore, from the window of her house on the mainland to her husband, the keeper of the Longships Lighthouse a mile out at sea. Sadly I couldn’t find a reproduction of the actual image but this gives something of its flavour – marking a significant difference in terms of its depiction of an ‘active’ female figure from the Newlyn School works.
At Penlee House, Penzance, which now houses a large collection of Newlyn School works, a video was installed in place of the Langley painting, in which the ninety women’s names were tapped out in Morse code.

Morse is in essence a form of binary code – on off / positive negative. Here, in addition to hearing the sound, we see the arching and faltering impulse of the electrical discharge generated as a by product of the signal. Arching between two poles - making and then dropping the connection - it offers the possibility - albeit dangerous and tenuous of a momentary meeting.
I had thought I might learn Morse so as to signal the ninety names out to sea myself, in connection with which I visited Porthcurno Submarine Telegraphy Centre just along coast from Newlyn.

Now a museum it was formerly the hub of an international communications network and the site from which in 1870 the first transatlantic undersea telegraphic cables were laid linking America and the UK. A moment in which Jennifer J. Sorensen Emery-Peck suggests (in Modernism’s Material Forms) data becomes decoupled from transportation and communication from proximity. Rendering the world a smaller and more tractable space.
Morse is an obsolete – or dead - form of communication. A casualty of the modernist project it once pioneered.

A situation mirrored by the retired status of the former telegraphic engineers who agreed to signal the names, out to sea at sunset from the foreshore outside the gallery, accompanied by the singing of the Marazion Male Voice Choir. Their unanswered call into the twilight, from the shore on which their sweethearts might previously have stood, acting as a poignant reminder of the twilight of age and of redundancy – not only their own - but also the world of empire of which they were a part.