

Panel Paper DRHA 2007

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Introduction

Defining the nature of performances is at the root of all difficulties regarding their representation and preservation. Performances are not objects, they are live events, the enactment of which does not endure through time. I am going to talk briefly about the nature of representations of performance in the context of academic study before we hear from Sarah about the issues surrounding the creation and appraisal of performance records, and finally Hannah will discuss the somewhat problematic notion of authenticity when it comes to representations of performance. We hope to pose a few questions which we'll then open up to the floor for what I hope to be a very stimulating discussion.

Whilst it is usually accepted that performance is ephemeral and as Peggy Phelan states “becomes itself through disappearance”, it is worth, when we work with representations of performance, giving thought to the multiple discourses surrounding the theory of representations and archiving in order to fully understand the opportunities for performance study and to make explicit the different subjectivities encoded into representations.

In July this year, AHDS Performing Arts ran a three-day conference on digital representations of performance which highlighted a lot of tremendously interesting research in this area.¹ As part of our discussions there, a question arose regarding to what extent it is useful to think of performances as actually ephemeral. This avenue of discussion was initially seen as surprising to a group of people familiar with performance (and documentation) theory which accepts as inevitable the notion of disappearance. However, when one considers the continuation of embodied knowledge and performers' signature practices, each enactment can itself be thought of as simply one part of an ongoing creative process and experience. This idea tied in with a discussion about the practicality of separating an individual instantiation of a performance from the process of its creation; treating it as a discrete performance ‘text’. I would point out that textuality can be a useful model for rationalising work that is primarily emotional or abstract, however there is a danger of enforcing a dominant literary model on work to which it has little relevance.

Performances are described by Diana Taylor in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* as “vital acts of transfer” which are usually bracketed off from other events (for example, a theatrical performance can be framed by the physical raising and lowering of the stage curtain). However she points out that the defining of something as a performance in the first place is an ontological decision and that performance studies functions as a specific ‘lens’ to allow us to study events.

Therefore, in approaching the study of a single instantiation of a performance work, it might be useful to consider our approach as existing on a theoretical scale: at one end we could consider the performance as a single discrete entity, a standalone event. It is after all unique and can never be adequately captured by any recording system. It exists and disappears simultaneously and has (reasonably) clearly defined borders.

¹ A detailed report of the Summer School can be found at <http://www.ahds.ac.uk/performingarts/pubs/summerschool07/summer-school-07.htm>

At the other end of the scale we could approach a performance event as one part of an ongoing performance process: both performer and audience are influenced by their lives before the curtain goes up, and carry their experiences away with them after the show has ended. In other words, performance is inseparable from its context.

The theoretical and methodological strategies of both of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages in terms of the type of performance study being undertaken. Speaking about the remains of a dance performance (costumes, photographs, programmes, and recordings) Mindy Aloff stated: “While such leavings constitute a husk of dancing, they are also the kernels of dance history.” It is clear that both approaches, while I rather simplistically align with the ‘arts’ and the ‘humanities’ scholarly contexts, have validity, however when dealing with representations or traces of performance, it is important to make explicit our own particular perspectives on the material to which we have access.

This theoretical scale of ephemerality that I have described is one aspect of our possible approach to performance studies, however I would like to mention another point which was made at July’s conference, namely that spectatorship has dominated performance studies in the past. In recent years, more importance has been placed on performance making (or performance practice) and of representing the creative processes which lead to a single instantiation of a performance. However, we must acknowledge that the pedagogical framework surrounding spectatorship is still very different from approaching performance as ongoing creative practice and the current ‘practice as research’ debate.

Objects vs. experience, the archive vs the repertoire

I will now talk a little about the traces that performance leaves behind, drawing further on Taylor’s book *The Archive and the Repertoire*. These include both objects and experiences, deliberately constructed representations and accidental ‘detritus’, the memory of things that have disappeared as well as inevitable imprints on minds, bodies, and spaces. Taylor makes a distinction between material representations and immaterial experience, where material objects (such as paper programmes) make up the ‘archive’ and the immaterial (such as a performer’s embodied knowledge) forms the ‘repertoire’.

The archive transmits meaning via stored objects whereas the repertoire simultaneously stores and transforms meaning through the enacting of embodied memory. Enduring material (the archive) has traditionally been given more academic authority than the so-called ephemeral ‘immaterial’ (the repertoire). In fact, the tangible archival representations of performances are often used to stand in for the performance itself, a strategy prone to misunderstanding by inexperienced scholars. Matthew Reason notes that the archive has the power to supplement but also supplant memory as the site of the performance record, as it is assumed to be more valid than the anecdotal, subjective, and ultimately ‘unreliable’ nature of personal experience.

One possible reason for the dominance of archival representations over the repertoire is that objects which can endure over time separate the source of knowledge from the ‘reader’ in space and time, whereas the repertoire requires presence for the transmission of meaning, and is therefore perceived as both inaccessible and subjective. However, even though the signifiers of archival material are stable, the interpretation of these objects is not. (It is also worth noting that archives are not unmediated or in any way objective, and the objects they hold may not be as stable or enduring as we might think! This raises the question of how should we – in fact how **can** we – approach performances for which no material representation remains, especially if direct experience of the performance has also disappeared?)

Memory and embodied knowledge exceed the archive's ability to capture them but that does not mean that the performance **behaviour** disappears. In fact, the knowledge which allows us to participate in performance as either audience or performer is always present (for example, knowing when to clap), albeit in a constant state of re-presentation. Rebecca Schneider in her article *Performance Remains* calls performances "repeatedly live" which, in my opinion, is a more useful way of thinking about performance than that of it disappearing. She suggests that it is precisely the logic of the archive which accuses performances of disappearing, and that if the results of an act are immaterial, this does not necessarily mean that performance itself disappears.

The archive and the repertoire each exceed the limitations of the other – they work in tandem and are not binary (especially in digital representations which tread an ambiguous line between materiality and immateriality, for example, the performing nature of software and algorithms in a digital art installation but there is no time to go into this here.)

Archival theory is a well-established discipline, however, when we talk about preserving the repertoire, we tend to impose upon it the language and strategies of the archive, transferring the immaterial signifiers of the repertoire into easily managed objects, by for example, making a video recording of a storyteller. Of course, the performance itself is not captured, the recording of it becomes as Peggy Phelan states "something other than performance". Rebecca Schneider asserts that performance is itself a way of keeping memory alive – it is "both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance".

Currently, our methodologies and theoretical tools are dominated by the archive, specifically text, and whilst attempts to capture and preserve the intangible traces of performance are laudable, they are not acts of representation but of transformation. Therefore, we need to consider alternatives for preservation of the repertoire.

Representations of performances

Matthew Reason states in his article *Archive or Memory? The Detritus of Live Performance* that the discourses of transience and documentation are complementary, yet contradictory. So, if we consider that traces of performance can form part of either the archive or the repertoire, can there be such a thing as a representation of repertoire which avoids becoming archival? Would an interactive learning tool which aimed to transmit embodied knowledge of, for example, musical techniques be an appropriate way of representing the repertoire? Or do the material aspects of this example transform the representation into the realm of the archive? In other words, is it practical to enforce the preservation of repertoire by producing representations, as opposed to re-presenting the performance behaviour? These questions tie in with another strand from the conference on representations of performance which was: How do we document those aspects of performance which are invisible – memory, mental and physical experience, and interpretation?

Phelan notes that there is pressure to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy. However, performance reproductions are merely a spur to memory or a point of access to the transmission of knowledge, which validates both the archive and the repertoire. According to Judith Butler, "representations become a reproduction and consolidation of the real". Each representation relies on and reproduces one aspect or logic of the reality of the performance event, and the proliferation of discourses means that there can be no single reality.

Lately, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the need to accept non-archival representations as valid points of access to performance works, and at the same time, a redefinition

of what can constitute a performance archive, moving towards more evolving forms of representation (for example those used in the Live Archives website). If we accept that both the archive and the repertoire are subjective and transformative in their construction and transmission of meaning about performances, is there a concept that will address both? And if so, how might it be used?

References

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