

Representations of performance

I have to admit that when preparing this talk I created more questions than answers. The definition of authenticity – like the definition of most terms – is not fixed and is used in different contexts by different communities in different ways. My aim in this brief talk is then to provide a starting point and to create a space between the archival and performing arts communities in which to begin to discuss the notion of authenticity.

[I should also add that I am a doctoral student interested in notions of authenticity in reference to genealogical uses of the archive and I should state that my thinking and research is in progress and is not exhaustive or definitive.]

The three main questions that I will briefly expand upon are:

- 1) What makes an authentic performance?
- 2) What makes an authentic document?
- 3) How dissimilar/similar are these two concerns and how can they be reconciled when documenting performance?

Before going on to explore these questions, I should point out that the question, ‘What makes...’ implies that both authentic performances and documents are made, i.e. that something or someone with a will has created them, so in a way I will be arguing that both (making documents and performance) are creative processes and somehow, the notion of authenticity is part of this.

Arguably, the prime concern when creating a performance is not authenticity – it is to communicate something to an audience. Furthermore, it can be argued that the nature of performance itself is ephemeral; it is a kind of vanishing act, which is experienced in the present and then vanishes into the past to become memory.

So, what and who judges whether a performance is authentic, and in what sense it is deemed to be so?

It can be argued that the performance exists through the experience of the audience. The extent to which something is authentic could be judged by the audience's belief in that what they have experienced bore some resemblance to what the creator(s) intended; another criteria might be in the ability of the audience to suspend their disbelief; or the extent to which the performance represented reality or was perceived to have some element of truth value.

The first aspect (that a performance's authenticity could be judged by its relation to what the creator(s) intended) is perhaps most closely related to documentary authenticity, as authenticity in this sense implies the notion of authorship and processes of authentication.

This correlates to the OED's definition of authenticity, '*as being what it professes in origin or authorship*' or referring to the Society of American Archivists notes on authenticity: '*Authenticity is closely associated with the creator (or creators) of a record. First and foremost, an authentic record must have been created by the individual represented as the creator. The presence of a signature serves as a fundamental test for authenticity; the signature identifies the creator and establishes the relationship between the creator and the record.*'

Within the arts this concern with provenance is most evident in the area of fine arts – particularly painting. There is a strong legal and commercial investment in intellectual property, well established through the practice of copyright law and despite Roland Barthes' claims that the 'author is dead', no doubt he made money and a reputation out of selling this book which did bear his name. The link between authenticity and provenance is probably one of the most common understandings of the term.

However, aside from the legal implications, there is perhaps another sense to do with the extent to which a performance authentically reflects or resembles the creator's intentions on an aesthetic level. The creator's intentions are usually linked to the idea of the original.

The original can be understood in several ways: as the original first work or as the perfect work (i.e. as complete and enforceable), which is distinct from drafts or copies; and secondly, it can be understood as originality.

The first or original performance no longer exists – it has passed, but evidence of the performance can exist in a variety of forms, either through

intentionally recorded documents or serendipitous traces of the event. Arguably a more authentic performance can be judged on a careful study of this documentation and deviation from it. For example, a more authentic musical performance might be finding an authenticated score, using the original instruments, playing to the style known to be in vogue contemporaneous to the piece, playing in the first place where it was documented as being performed – even playing by candlelight.

For some creators and creative bodies, the iterative act of recording (even archiving) is part of the creative, authorial process, the editing decisions (perhaps even appraisal) decisions they make along the way contribute to ‘the piece’ as an original perfection, and help to create and control the performances’ further recreations.

However, there is another way in which performances are original – in the sense that every performance is an original act. No one performance is exactly the same because, as I mentioned before, performance can only exist in the present. In addition, each audience is different. On the level of being unique, original acts which cannot be exactly repeated, each performance can be said to be authentic.

Another sense of authenticity lies in its link with evidence, truth and reality. To what extent is a performance ‘real’ or ‘true’? One of the strengths of performance is its ability to satirize, to make the audience suspend their disbelief, to mask, unmask and dissemble. Every genre of performance brings its own rules and expectations of dissemblance and also has its own - often playful- traditions of transgression.

[One year I saw the Jerry Springer Opera, which was shown at the Edinburgh festival. What made it unique was that Jerry Springer (as well as Ether Ransom) were part of the audience. It was rumored that Springer was there to check whether the show was libelous. During the parts of the show which were particularly cutting, I kept on looking at Springer to see if I could ascertain his reaction. At the end, he alone rose to his feet and gave the show a standing ovation. That was a unique performance – could it be said to be more ‘authentic’? Certainly the satire was perhaps sharper because I was made more aware of Springer’s position as – like me- he was a member of the audience.

But it might be less authentic in that the performers might have altered their performance style or deviated from the script because they were aware that Springer was in the audience – for all I know they might have even toned things down at the risk of causing offence. This seems unlikely to me, but who knows?]

2) Now what makes a document authentic?

Most documents within an archive are presumed to be authentic because they rest within the trusted custody of an archive. Authenticity through trusted custodianship means that they have not been tampered with. This is not all: within archival science there is what is known as the discipline of diplomatics. Diplomatic authenticity can be separated from legal authenticity or historical authenticity. According to the rules of diplomatics, there are several intrinsic and extrinsic elements that can be tested to check and verify a document's authenticity – its medium, script, seals, notary marks, annotations, its internal forms of language, protocol etc.

This kind of authenticity is not the same as historical authenticity and within archival science historical authenticity is often distinguished from diplomatic authenticity and referred to as reliability or genuineness. While the two are closely related they are not dependent on the other. It is possible to have a judicial and diplomatically authentic document that is historically false and unreliable. An example would be a modern birth certificate accidentally bearing an incorrect date of birth. (it would still be legally authentic at time of creation even if the certificate was later annulled). Conversely it would be possible to have a reliable record that was not authentic in the legal or strictly diplomatic sense, (e.g. a note of a birth written in a family bible.)

This shows a bias inherent in the words document, archive and records. The definition of the archive is linked to its original meaning as the *archivum* or *archium* (Latin), *arkheion* (Greek) – the home of the magistrate. The records or documents are also deemed attest to judicial facts, or to documents created or received by a physical or juridical person in the course of practical activity. As such, documents or records are powerful, and part of this power derives from the archive itself. It is significant whether something is officially 'on record' and whether it is legally admissible or not.

There is a sense in which documents perform: they can be dispositive in that in their creation they constitute juridical acts, such as Acts or Wills. They can also be probative in that they stand as written evidence of an act which was complete before being documented.

Such definitions are not unproblematic: archival documents are usually made by the ruling authorities and exist in a culture that arguably privileges text over speech and certain kinds of texts, i.e. documents and records over others.

I want to finish by describing a different kind of archival performance, archival memory or epistemological framework.

I was watching a Ray Mears television programme. The aim of his show was to find out what people ate in prehistoric Britain. To do so, he went to Australia to meet and learn from some aboriginal women. He argued that this was useful because the aboriginals were one of the few cultures in the world who still knew how to live off a landscape that had barely been touched. They retained part of this knowledge through the performance of a sacred dance, a dance which required permission to be performed from the elders of the tribe. The dance invoked the spirit of the ancestors and was a holy ritual. It also included a chant and actions that mimicked the movement needed to dig up a particular edible root.

This was not performance for its own sake – it had important cultural religious significance as well as being a practical form of teaching.

Why have I mentioned this?

Firstly, I was struck that they had retained this embodied knowledge of living off the land whilst we had lost it in this country. To find out about a rare plant, instead of visiting the elder or being initiated into a dance, we would have to be initiated into a different way of knowing – that of the Western archive. We would have to be literate, to sign up as a reader, to navigate catalogues, to learn particular terminology etc.

To think that documents alone can authentically stand for themselves is a bit of a myth. Like the tribal elder, archives are sacred in that access is restricted and that the knowledge is guarded. The value of authenticity is created and

invested in the socio-cultural and political relationships and standing of the archive as it is invested in the documents themselves.

It also got me thinking about writing. Plato argued in *Phaedrus* that once you write something down you forget it and that you can only remember by reference to external marks. [If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows. 275 a-b]

There is the notion that once something is documented, it is fixed and you can't do it again as a reflex of your knowledge and memory, you are reliant on an external instrument to remember. It can be argued that the document replaces the performance – and perhaps this is what Derrida means when he writes about the destructive nature of the archive, the 'Archive fever'. It has stopped the creative process and is a form of forgetting.

And now to come back to the idea of authenticity and performance. I have no way of verifying that what I saw on television was an authentic dance. It is taken on trust that what I saw on the television was an authentic display that was not made up for the cameras. The experience was mediated. To know if the dance was authentic would be to live as an aboriginal, to be initiated into their culture and to learn, but even then because I was not born an aboriginal would I always be a fraud? This opens up larger philosophical questions to do with the authenticity of the self and to do with the knowledge of the audience.

I would like to finish that the root of document is *doceo*, which means to teach. Rather than see the motive of documenting performance solely as a way of verifying and fixing authenticity, we might see documents as teaching acts and as tools for learning different types of embodied knowledge.

Questions:

How would you define authenticity?

What is the value of authenticity for performance?

Does documentation, or the process of 'archivization', destroy or support performance?