

Dialogic Evidence: Documentation of Ephemeral Events

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This presentation will explore a range of perspectives on the relationship between performance and documentation practices, specifically reflecting on the primary outcomes of my recent 10-month research project *Dialogic Evidence: Documentation of Ephemeral Events*. The project was active from mid September 2006 to mid July 2007, and was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Small Grants in the Creative and Performing Arts Scheme.

Historically, performance documentation has commonly been characterised as an unfaithful representation of the ephemeral art experience. However, in recent years the relationship between documentation and live performance practices has moved towards reconciliation. The reasons for such a shift are many, possibly including the validation of new methods in performance research, the use of new digital technologies within performance, anxieties over disappearing legacies, the reconfiguration of the preservation-oriented nature of archives as potential sites for new events, and the widespread acceptance of the personal and cultural value of mediated memories. Yet not all are encouraged by the promises of digital technologies, or the increasing demands for reproducible evidence by funding bodies and archive-oriented institutions. The role that documentation plays in the recording of performance continues in certain arenas to be described as negative or destructive towards the knowledges embodied in live events. It may be that this oppositional view is a reaction to the misuse of positivistic imperatives in the context of performative research (i.e. knowledge must be quantifiably measurable, repeatable, transcultural, and objective, leading towards generalized theories), or to economic values that emphasise the need for reproducible products. Such values are discernable in forms of academic assessment and validation that privilege documents of performance over performance per se. In reaction to this state of affairs, several researchers have made the case for replacing performance documentation with older forms of oral dissemination, which as Caroline Rye has suggested, 'share with performance an emphasis on the live as a knowledge-producing encounter' (2003:2-3).

In response to this current climate, the *Dialogic Evidence* project aimed to explore the possibility (and the limits) of a productive co-existence between

performance and documentation practices. Furthermore, the project set out to discover ways in which documentation practices can remain sensitive to the (often undervalued) provisional nature of performance. Such an endeavour remains a significant challenge in the move towards the wider acceptance by the academy of provisional forms of knowledge resulting from so-called 'practice-led' research activities.

Before I begin my discussion of the possibilities and limitations of a productive co-existence between the areas of epistemic practice represented by the words performance and documentation, I would first like to question what these two terms might mean in this context, and to what extent such terms signify different actions. Let me start with performance. Although the word performance is made use of in a wide variety of contexts, ranging from 'measurable behaviour' in Psychology to 'profitability' in Business, in the Arts the word is commonly associated with creative activities that are made present to an audience over a limited duration through the action of live bodies. Thus the subject areas of Dance, Drama and Music are often grouped together as *performing* Arts, such as in the case of PALATINE (the UK Higher Education Academic Subject Centre for these disciplines). However, Performance is at times referred to as a distinct discipline, as in the RAE 2008 Unit of Assessment 65 Dance, Drama and Performing Arts. In other instances, such as the PARIP website, 'performance is defined... as performance media: [which includes the areas of] theatre, dance, film, video, and television.' Where in the case of the AHDS Performing Arts website we see the subtraction of Video and the addition of Music and Radio to the list provided by PARIP, as well as the re-emergence of Performance as a discipline in its own right. Notably, additional terms which are absent from the above classifications, yet are popular in performing artistic contexts in the UK, include Performance Art, Live Art(s), and Sonic Art(s) (this list could be much longer). In light of such diversity, I would be hesitant to define Performance either as only a distinct discipline or as only an umbrella term for several related disciplines. Further, this situation points to problems with categorising terminology that is often politically charged and/or utilised differently by separate communities, an issue that I will return to later in this presentation.

Moving beyond the notion of performance as a clearly defined subject area, it does however seem apparent (to return to my previous definition) that the term performance, when used in an artistic context, is associated with the notion of

liveness, that this involves the presence of performers (human and/or otherwise), and that one witnesses or takes part in a performance over a limited duration. The implications resulting from the association of live performing bodies with performance will be addressed following my description of the term documentation. If we can for the moment, against my better judgement, divide space and time, I will now briefly attend to the implications resulting from the temporal quality of liveness.

The idea that performance is a momentary act, one that (as Peggy Phelan famously stated) ‘becomes itself through disappearance’ (1993:146), has provided both contributors to performance discourse and performance makers with the notion that participation in these areas amounts to a form of socio-political resistance to dominant ideologies such as neo-liberalism. To this end Phelan has stated, ‘Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital’ (1993:148). Although such an ontological understanding of performance has been widely critiqued within the academy (here one frequently references Philip Auslander and his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*), many acts of performance remain a patent socio-political force, and one that continues to motivate and influence the work of artists young and old. The existence of this quite tangible political attitude will be evident to anyone who has attended or taken part in artist-led discussions at events such as the National Review of Live Art or the Sonic Arts Network Expo. With this said, performances which are defined as such through disappearance do not only clog the reproductive machinery of capitalism (which notably not all artists understand to be a positive occurrence, particularly when this is the disappearance of one’s legacy or one’s funding for future work); likewise, ephemeral events do not sit well in the current research assessment machines at work within the academy. Recently, some progress has been made in the area of PhD examination, where the thesis includes a performance element (and on this I can speak from first hand experience having completed my PhD in 2004 under such circumstances). Many UK universities’ regulations currently allow for External Examiners to be present at performances, and for this experience to form part of the PhD assessment process. This is a positive state of affairs. However, no established mechanism exists to support this form of review at post-doctoral level in the UK. For what has been claimed to be insurmountable pragmatic and/or economic barriers, major research grant awarding bodies such as the AHRC, and significant research selectivity exercises such as the RAE, make peer review assessments of performance

research exclusively via artefacts or documents of performance. This circumstance begs the obvious questions: when the performance is not seen ‘in the flesh’, what exactly is being reviewed and to what extent is it exchangeable for the performance itself?

This brings us back to my primary concern here, the issue of performance documentation, a frequently discussed dilemma that has become a significant area of research in its own right. Although documentation, like performance, is a word which is utilised in many varying contexts, it generally refers to evidence of something other than itself. In many areas of research, documentation provides evidence of the researcher’s findings, which in turn functions to validate or prove the researcher’s claims to the production of new knowledge. In such a case, documentation does not merely state that a research project occurred, nor does it simply present a record of what took place, but rather it is both the action of assigning meaning or value to past observations and recordings, as well as the resulting inscription (e.g. journal article, DVD documentary, etc). The notion that documentation is both a process and an object, is widely accepted. The OED defines documentation as, ‘The accumulation, classification, and dissemination of information... [and] the material so collected’ (3b). What is missing from this definition is the role of interpretation, a crucial step which distances documentation from the documented. Many disciplines have well established methods for capturing, interpreting and disseminating evidence. Researchers in these areas frequently make use of such methods to create experimental situations that generate results which can be documented and reproduced, thus making the act of interpretation as straightforward as possible. The aims of researchers operating in artistic contexts are often quite different. In the book *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco describes a similar variation in intention as follows:

When I write a theoretical text I try to reach, from a disconnected lump of experiences, a coherent conclusion and I propose this conclusion to my readers. If they don’t agree with it, or if I have the impression that they have misinterpreted it, I react by challenging the reader’s interpretation. When I write a novel, on the contrary, even though starting (probably) from the same lump of experiences, I realize that I am not trying to impose a conclusion: I stage a play of contradictions (1992:140).

A common intention held by most (if not all) researchers across the disciplines is to contribute to the advancement of practice in their area of research. In the broad area of the creative arts, works are often valued for their ability to raise questions or provide provisional and nuanced perspectives. These values are not shared, for example, by researchers documenting the effectiveness of a new airplane wing design, where the aim is to reduce uncertainty (in regards to safety) to a minimum. In the case of performance research, researchers must often contend with the fact that the experimental situation to be documented has been wilfully created to make singular interpretations difficult, and that such expertly executed ambiguity can be a positive contribution to the area of research. This is not to suggest that facilitating multivocality reduces such work to interpretive relativism, or, as Eco has put it, ‘...I accept that [an open] text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense’ (1992:141). Of course, performance can also be valued for its clarity of articulation, its ability to veraciously demonstrate where descriptive communication falters; but even in this instance the goal is not to provide clear and reproducible data or rational arguments (other disciplines are better suited for these tasks); rather performance is able to confront one with the full realm of human modes of experience at its disposal, alive in its contingency and messiness even when the performing artist’s intention is clear. With this said, the obvious questions still remain: how and why (or why not) should one struggle to interpret acts of performance through documentation?

At this point, it may be useful to briefly attend to the question of why, in the broad sense, is performance documentation produced, leaving aside for the moment the obvious motivation of promotion and marketing. Although research in the performing arts is rarely concerned with empirical verification, logical proofs, or the unambiguous resolution of social or technical issues, academics in this area frequently claim that they are documenting performance as an epistemic practice. With the academy’s increasing acceptance of performance as both a means of researching, and as a form of research output in itself, comes the implicit (or at times clearly argued) belief that performance can be an activity which generates new and useful knowledge. Yet without a stable form of dissemination, it remains difficult for performance to integrate effectively within the academy’s knowledge economy. Notwithstanding the significant role which performance plays in the UK’s so called ‘cultural industry’, it is only through documentation that performance can contribute to the foundation of

cultural authority, that is *the archive*. Jacques Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever*, reminds us that the etymology of the word ‘archive’ reveals its longstanding role as a primary vehicle for socio-political dominance, forming the basis of law and order. As many of us are likely aware, documents and their archives also form the basis for academic authority. In this context, the role of an academic is similar to the Greek *archons* described by Derrida:

The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law (1996:2).

This understanding of the drive to archive performance shifts the discussion away from the all too familiar dichotomy of preservation and disappearance, towards of an understanding of documentation’s active (and at times hegemonic) role, one that is often performative in nature. My proposal here, as was the case throughout the *Dialogic Evidence* project, is the continual exploration of the performative possibilities of documentation, an effort in which I suspect many performance makers, curators, writers and archivists are actively (yet frequently in a non-reflective pre-conscious manner) taking part in. The key agenda in this exploration, from which the term ‘dialogic’ is an obvious clue, is to attempt to move the role of documentation away from repressive and monologic forms of authority which often obscure the knowledge embodied in performance events, towards an approach that embraces multiple (and even at times apparently contradictory) perspectives. I am strongly in agreement with the following statement by Caroline Rye in her *paper VIDEO WRITING: The documentation trap, or the role of documentation in the practice as research debate*:

I would like to see more attention given to the live exchange, the spontaneous, reactive, evolutionary, provisional exchanges of ideas and opinions which formed, and still form, the basis for much information gathering, judgments and policy-making today (2003:3).

However, unlike Rye (at least in this paper), I feel that documentation should have an important role in the exchange of provisional forms of knowledge resulting from

performance. Yet, I am equally aware, as I have previously stated, that documentation is too frequently used in exchange for performance, thus continuing to giving some merit to documentation resistance strategies. These were the motivating factors behind my use of the term *Convivencia* as a title for a symposium that I ran as part of the Dialogic Evidence project in February 2007. *Convivencia* signifies a somewhat utopian type of tense but productive dialogue between performance and documentation practices taking place in a common community, a place where the longstanding dominant role of documents and their archives (and archons) may be reconfigured, and where exclusive ontological differences can be questioned (even if they are later found to be intrinsic).

One such popular ontological claim, which I would now like to return to, is that liveness is necessarily tied to the presence of live bodies. This is a claim that I have questioned elsewhere as follows, ‘can a document, even in the absence of its source, emphasise “the authority of what is live and provisional” (Rye 2003:6)’ (Stapleton 2006:81)? Must a live experience consist of the physical co-presence of human beings, thus excluding temporally immediate encounters with mediatised forms of human presence and interaction? As Philip Auslander pointed out in a recent interview, cultural understandings of liveness shift over time:

[T]he idea of a live broadcast constituted a redefinition of liveness such that performers and spectators no longer had to be physically co-present for an event to count as live. What had been a physico-temporal relationship thus became a purely temporal one. The use of the phrase ‘go live’ (originally a broadcasting term) to describe the initiation of websites suggests that we are now prepared to extend the concept of liveness to non-human entities (websites) with which we nevertheless interact in real time. The idea that liveness is a fundamental mode of performance remains unchanged over this history even as the definition of what counts as a live event changes in response to technological innovation (2005:97-98).

Several others have argued in favour of the notion that we (as makers, writers, archivists and curators of performance) need to be open to what liveness can be. Extracts from an online report by Tagny Duff on the *Convivencia* Symposium highlight this concern:

[Simon] Ellis stated the importance of thinking through the philosophical and artistic implications of liveness in relation to digital and web based media... The dad.project, among other projects on his site, intend to subtly undermine the deeply embedded hierarchy in which the live body is considered to be the acme of performance practice.

Duff called for a re-assessment of creative lying, error and authorial hoax as a form of ontogenesis; a necessary movement that generates anomaly and mutation, often wittingly and unwittingly employed in documentation and conservation practices.

Wright explored how indexing, as a form of taxonomy, betrays its own lie- as the stable and complete mapping of meaning is in constant flux... Wright called for embodying both betrayal and fidelity as a form of liveness - a sentiment that was echoed in the previous two presentations.

Michael Mayhew ended the event with a presentation of an archive of objects from his coat pockets. He recalled stories associated with each object emphasizing the lapses and unexpected recall of memories... Mayhew reminded us that oral tradition, as a mode of documentation, is a large part of performance/live art practices that must also be acknowledged in archiving practices (<http://www.docam.ca/techwatch/fiche2.php?id=91> Accessed on 11 July 2007).

From Duff's account it would seem that liveness is understood to not only be established by the presence of physical bodies, but also by performativity and acts of memory or *rememberings* (Ellis' suggested alternative to the term documentation). Furthermore, an awareness of one's performative actions is not only essential for individuals in the conventionally understood role of performer, but also for those engaged in documentary practices. (as Phelan and others have suggested). This understanding is echoed in an online report by Sarah Jones on the Convivencia Symposium:

Tagny Duff cleverly called into question our assumptions of what constitutes an authentic and reliable document by portraying herself in the conference documentation and for the most part of her presentation as Robin Feeny, a fictitious artist-curator currently doing a retrospective on Tagny Duff, before revealing her true identity. She also questioned the effects of time and lag, considering how documents shape and shift meaning, and recommending that curators consider their own performativity in processes such as migration and emulation.

Pausing for a moment on the topic of the archivist's and curator's performative potential (a key concern here to which I shall return to in a moment), the

Dialogic *Evidence* project also set out to explore the performative possibilities afforded by various recording technologies. In the project *collision interventions and performed archive*, theybreakinpieces (a UK-based cross-disciplinary performance group of which I am a co-director and performer) set out to engage in a series of site-specific interventions at the Collision Symposium 2006 on Inter-Arts and Research Practices at the University of Victoria, Canada. The term ‘interventions’ here refers to a range of environmental interactions conducted through the media of conversation, improvised performance, and audio-visual recording technologies. These interventions took place on and around the University of Victoria Campus, providing us an opportunity to explore the collision of ‘Collision’ with its localized academic, social and geographical settings. Perspectives on (and memories of) these interventions contributed towards an evolving archive, which was made available to conference delegates in one location throughout the symposium. The archive itself physically contain recorded images, texts, artefacts, audio and video, which was updated daily. This collection of documents form the site of a short performance which took place on the final day of the symposium. [play clip - theybreakinpieces]

A similar explicitly performative use of technology has been the topic of continual investigation in theybreakinpieces’ binaural improvisational performances in collaboration with composer and researcher Jon Aveyard. Aveyard has described the unique possibilities afforded by binaural recording technologies as follows:

Binaural recordings are made using in-ear microphones worn like earphones...

Binaural recordings heard over headphones are capturing the sounds at entry to the recordist’s inner ears and playing them back at the equivalent position for the listener. Consequently, the sounds on the playback are externalized – that is, they are heard to originate outside the listener’s head, a reproduction of the immersive soundscape that has been recorded (2007:2).

[discuss the following: theybreakinpieces, MAP LIVE 2007, Source Café, Carlisle / show photos]

Non-Web Case Studies

It may be worth briefly mentioning a few notable case-studies which have informed the *Dialogic Evidence* project. Although intentionally removed from the

domain of digital resources, *Shattered Anatomies: Traces of the Body in Performance* (edited by Adrian Heathfield with Fiona Templeton and Andrew Quick, and published by Arnolfini Live), demonstrates what Laurie Anderson once wrote about another noteworthy collection of documents: 'In this book, the images and text are presented in the spirit of the work itself: ever evolving and reinventing' (2004:7). Such is my experience of this collection of fragments described on the cover as 'A limited edition box containing artefacts, documents and critical theory from an international field of performance artists, theatre makers and writers.' The process of (literally) uncovering meaning while engaging with *Shattered Anatomies* clearly implicates me in my role as performative reader. And my readings continually change, not only resulting from the deterioration of the material caused by each encounter due to the fragility of the contents found in this box.

Another performance archive which attempts to do more than merely describe previous work, while simultaneously adopting similar strategies to the work itself, is Forced Entertainment's *Imaginary Evidence* CD-ROM. Mathew Reason, in his book *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, identifies two categories of performance documentation: pragmatic and artists. Forced Entertainment's website is described as an example of pragmatic documentation. Reason states:

The website meets many demands: from audiences wanting to know about tour schedules, promoters wanting information and contact details for the company, journalists wanting background information, and (not least) students wanting to research previous productions (2006:58).

Contrastively, *Imaginary Evidence* is seen by Reason as being an example of artistic documentation, which he describes as follows:

These representations, therefore, seek a way of speaking about the work that is more akin to the aesthetics of the original piece. Often this involves mixing genres, using anecdote and conflating or expanding ideas and times and events to subvert conventional chronologies (2006:60).

In the case of this CD-ROM, the overriding theme is one of fragmentation. This, as Reason also points out, is made evident by the non-linear and considerably messy

navigation menu on the main page of the document, as well as by the detached nature of each individual page, which nevertheless are stylistically coherent, seemingly acting as a trigger to playful and fictitious memories. The digital format of the CD-ROM is well suited for such non-linear and fragmentary narratives, although the static nature of the disc requires one's participation to be largely reactive. Even so, many other notable contributions to performance documentation have been constructed for disc formats including: Desperate Optimists' *Stalking Memory* CD-ROM; Bodies in Flight's *Flesh and Text* CD-ROM; and PARIP's *Mnemosyne Dreams* multi-viewpoint DVD.

Web-Based Case Studies

[Discuss the following]

Dialogic Evidence Pilot Study

<http://www.LiveArchives.org/>

(WordPress – open source)

Other Related Case Studies

- <http://parip.ilrt.org/>
- <http://www.NewWorkNetwork.org.uk/>
- <http://www.pdoca.ca/>
- <http://www.skellis.net/dad.project/>
- <http://www.bris.ac.uk/theatrecollecion/liveart/liveart-archivesmain.html/>
(Performing the Archive: the future of the past)
- <http://www.rhizome.org/>
- <http://ccMixer.org/> (ccHost)
- <http://Me.dium.com/> (potential in LiveArchives context)

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