

Towards an archaeology of performance

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I have been working with Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas for several years now. They are the artistic directors of one of Europe's most innovative performance art companies, Brith Gof, practicing site specific art. Mike is physical performer. Cliff architect and designer. A lot of what I am about to say I have learned from them – they embody it in their work.

Towards an archaeology of performance. Mike Pearson and I called it *Theatre/Archaeology* in our book because we see the culmination of this project as a reflexive and hybrid field – performance *in* the past and the performance *of* the past, two sides of the same currency.

Let me explain.

First. Performance – a category of social/cultural practice

This is now an established focus of anthropological thought – building on the concepts of ceremony and ritual. More generally, performance is practice heightened in some way.

The procession along the avenue, the gathering at the monument, things done with and to the bones of the dead in a prehistoric landscape. The ceremony of state – the performance of power is evidently a structural feature of many state polities. Historical conjunctures/cultural changes may imply wholesale reworkings of how people walk into a room, how they hold a figurine. Is this what the village does?

We already have well-worked up case studies, and today you will hear more.

On the one hand, a tighter definition of performance requires specific conceptual tools for its analysis and explanation. Here we might look at performance theory after Richard Schechner, more formally at theatre anthropology after Eugenio Barba.

Features of this archaeology of performance might include an analytics of staging, the preparation and manipulation of props, the orchestration/choreography of people. After Mauss's techniques of the body we might look to haptics, proxemics, bodily hexis – aspects of the physiognomy of social practice, of the social fabric. Corporeality is at the heart of an archaeology of performance.

On the other hand we can look to theorists and practitioners for insights into how we might understand the wider performative aspects of social practice.

I might refer to two great traditions of European theatre –one rooted in the body of the performer (Artaud, Grotowski), the other in dramaturgy and scenography (the director as architect). And in both the questioning of the forms of theatre takes us to issues of location and event – how things happen in certain places. After McLucas, we might look to site specific theatre's notion of place/event, to Bernard Tschumi's architectural experiment in the interpenetration of site and behavior – event/cities. Archaeologists of prehistoric Europe like John Barrett, Colin Richards, Richard Bradley, Julian Thomas, indeed myself and Mike Pearson have drawn on *human geography* in our interpretations of monumentality in the societies of early farmers.

Second. Performativity – an aspect of social being

The social actor is an old notion. Austin's speech act theory is about the performance of speech, building on notions of perlocution – it is not just what is said that matters, but the act of speaking, enunciating, and the form it takes. Judith Butler has famously articulated performativity in queer theory.

This is not just the idea that the medium is the message. Rather than transcendent and pre-existent, categories of social being, like gender and other dimensions of self identity, are here conceived as emergent in their acting out, the everyday repeated performances. Enactment produces that to which it refers. Performativity refers us to the social achievement of such taken for granted notions as sexuality and gender. (And it includes scientific knowledge – science as a social achievement.) Barbara Voss talks of some of this today.

This leads immediately to mimesis and representation, an issue at the heart of performance – is the (social) actor acting out a script? What is the relation between script and performance? Performativity challenges a representational fallacy, as I have called it – that what we are studying are representations of some other 'essential' reality (social, cultural, whatever). That the patterning in the archaeological record somehow 'represents' a past society. So performance actually takes us to site formation processes.

Three. Performance – the trauma of the 'document'

Even the script needs interpreting, working up, performing. And it is not what you see and hear. No script? – what is there then?

Mike is a physical performer. All that remains of Mike's performances in the 1970s are some photographs (negatives lost), memories, a scar above his left eye, a knee that is getting stiffer with age, some testimony of people who had been in the audiences. And it requires Mike to pull all this together for you, in a narrative, in a question and answer session with friends and strangers.

What remains after the event? This is our archaeological question, foremost too for those who refuse to reduce performance to a prewritten text. For, of course, there is no simple answer to be found in notions of record. A video is not the event.

Nor is an archaeological feature. These are complex questions about the relation of archaeological deposits to event, temporality, practice. We have a strati-graphics – the *writing* of the planar levels. Translation, transformation and metamorphosis are pivotal here. Again this is a performative twist on site formation processes.

At the heart of this archaeology is a trauma, a loss, entropy, transformation, degradation. What we have is not what was. And the trauma is one that is sometimes suppressed – we wish that there was no gap. Or the trauma is sometimes seen as problem – finding an analytics for healing the gap – middle range theory?

Ultimately perhaps, for the performer, the answer to the question of the document and ‘what remains?’ is that there can only ever be another performance. There can be no analytics of return to what was – for it never was that clear anyway – just what were Mike and his fellow performers doing as they beat hell out of each other in that room in November 1971? This can be connected to that iteration that I have already mentioned – repetition that is never quite the same because it is a *return* of the same (nothing ever happens twice because it has already happened before – as Adorno put it).

Interestingly Gavin Lucas, in his recent book about archaeological fieldwork, has proposed iteration as the core of archaeological epistemology; because excavation removes the so-called ‘record’, we can only ever aim to do it again, *differently*.

Four. Performance – a reflexive concept

Turn the concept of performance back on ourselves, if only to avoid hypocrisy. There is already an archaeology of past performance. It implies *a posteriori* an archaeology that is a performance of the past. Minimally archaeologists lecture and speak, however ineffectively! More. The concept of performance, I suggest, involves a *symmetry* between, a *continuity* through, past and present. For the performed past never began or ended at some historical moment (though we may look for its suppression and celebration).

The archaeological past is performed. It is certainly staged in the museum (and the convergent history of display and theatre is one to be written). Joseph Roach and Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett offer all sorts of insights in their studies of the performances that are cultural tourism, identity and the social memory that is heritage. Archaeologists, like many others, work on what is left of the past. They re-iterate. And this is intimately connected with social and cultural, indeed personal memory. History as a rhetorical art of (social) memory.

So an archaeology of performance asks us to look to our own practices. Indeed, we might well ask whether archaeology is primarily an epistemological project at all.

Is performance an epistemological project? Brecht's epic theatre, and similar forms after, foregrounded a *didactic* purpose in offering information, interrupting the conventional devices of emplotment, the audience's identification with character.

Is archaeology really about knowing the past? It is that and so much more. Here are links with recent science studies, ethnographies of science which explore the rich cultural milieu that is the epistemological grasp on things. My favorite are those of Bruno Latour. Science in action is more than natural philosophy. Think of the importance to us of the field, of the material itself, of the engagement, the articulations at the heart of what Randy McGuire and I called the craft of archaeology. Archaeology itself is process and event. Archaeologists do legitimately aim for the achievement of an epistemological closure with the past (for example, reconciling hypothesis with observations through some kind of causal, systemic or narrative linkage). *And* in an embodied, performed archaeology we might *also* think of manifestation and disclosure as its purposes. I am not talking about description. Is the performer describing? Well, yes and no. These are issues of mimesis again! Maybe it could be called an *heretical* empirics, de-description that asserts non-identity. Manifestation and disclosure are the forging of links in and around past, present and trace. They sometimes exist as real-time event. They have those components of scenography and dramaturgy, the *mis en scène* that is fieldwork, the trauma of record/document – the performance that is archaeology.