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## **VIDEO WRITING: THE DOCUMENTATION TRAP, OR THE ROLE OF DOCUMENTATION IN THE PRACTICE AS RESEARCH DEBATE**

Despite its title this paper isn't really about documentation – its about the role documentation may or may not play in the broader debates concerning practice as research in performance and its academic legitimacy. Much of the anxiety around practice as research in performance seems to be concerned with the relationship between 'practice' per se, and by that I mean research that is constituted as a live performance event and other research practices or outcomes that may or may not be associated with the performance event, principally critical writing and lens-based practices of documentation (often indicated by the catch-all phrase 'digital technologies'). I do not think it would be controversial or indeed original to suggest that performance and writing are very different practices. Although both might, broadly speaking, share similar anxieties in the course of their production processes they can, and have been, constructed as two opposing ends of an axis of representational practices and neither performance nor writing could be seen as a substitute for one another. However, it is interesting to note the role that so-called 'digital technologies' are deemed to play in relation to practice as research within this performance-writing axis. Susan Melrose writes, "The role of digital technology as interface measure to both writing and performance-making might seem to offer specific opportunities for thinking differently about conventions in the higher degree context" and indeed a major strand of PARIP's own research objectives include and I quote "uses of new digital technologies for the documentation and dissemination of best practices". I believe in these, and other similar formulations, 'digital technologies' are cast as an interstitial node that sits between the horizontally opposed practices of performance and writing and acts as a bridge, a medium between one world and the next. Thus 'digital technologies' and the documents they produce are constituted as a panacea for our worries about practice as research as they are able to bring our performances from the domain of the

ineffable into the more comfortable environments of the repetitively visible without inflicting on them the more obvious shape-shifting strictures of writing. Furthermore, I would suggest that what's embedded in this rhetoric is the idea that via 'hi-tech' approaches to documentation we can move performance closer to the stabilities required by the academy for assuring research effectiveness and evaluative transparency.

I have spent 16 years working with and studying digital technologies in performance and producing performance documentation and it is my specialist area of research for the PARIP project, but, perhaps curiously, I don't think that this hoped for promise of technological delivery is ever going to happen. It's never going to happen for all the well-known and thoroughly debated reasons concerning the difference between live performance and recorded documentation, which I, amongst many superior others have given elsewhere. But just to be clear, this isn't an argument against documentation. The need to develop and extend the ways we record performance still exist, the need existed before the practice as research debate surfaced and it will continue long after practice as research is thoroughly integrated into the academy. But what I think is misplaced is the idea that documentation is an integral part of the practice as research debate. In terms of advancing our understanding of exactly what practice as research in performance might be, banning the documentation of performance work could be more productive.

Just imagine what would happen if there was no direct documentation of performance events, the academy – and by that I mean us – we would have to find other ways of engaging with performance as research work and I would argue, these ways would inevitably be more sympathetic and appropriate to the notion of practice as research in performance. I'm imagining a return to (or rather, a recognition of, because I believe they are still present and active) oral modes of analysis and address which prevailed prior to the invention of the printing press and share with performance an emphasis on the live as a

knowledge-producing encounter. 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.

In our present-day virtually virtual wired up digital world we have become doubtful of the value of time and space specific, oral, aural, unmediated, multi-sensory and in some senses un-recordable encounters which characterize the interactions which occur when groups of people meet together to partake in performance. Nevertheless, performances go on up and down the country attended by various numbers people who go because they appreciate these types of interactions and exchanges. What's shocking is that it is exactly the value of these particular live encounters that performance specialists in higher education are supposed to understand therefore, why, when it comes to identifying this work as research do we retreat from exactly the domain that characterizes our specialty? Is it only research if it can be repeated? Is its authority in doubt and can this only be assured when it has entered 'discourse' as written text?

I'm sure that one of the reasons for the insistence, from some quarters, that writing can be the only reasonable form research can take, comes from the close association of the term research with that of dissemination and subsequently from a particularly modern notion of dissemination. Research prefigures dissemination and dissemination necessarily involves repetition, which has most widely been achieved for the past 550 years via mechanically reproducible writing. In the specific context of the practice as research in performance debate you will notice, however, that the word disseminate is often closely followed by the word document e.g. "uses of new digital technologies for the documentation and dissemination of best practices". Here an interesting shift has occurred, writing is no longer the primary means of documenting and dissemination but this power has been transferred to the domain of 'digital technologies'. More

particularly, for those who wish to make a case for practice as research, we know that writing and performance are in no way commensurate but because we have also associated research with repetitious dissemination we have no alternative but to transfer those reproductive necessities from text to the photographic image, or in more contemporary language the digital image, the product of 'digital technologies'. In the field of visual cultural studies there has been a parallel deconstruction of the mechanical image which, in terms of the axis of representation, places photographic and film practices much closer to those of writing than performance but we are reluctant to embrace the consequences of this because it would leave us without a mechanism for the repetitive dissemination of our practice as research work and therefore, in some configurations, outside the bounds of research. This is one of the reasons that I am wary of involving documentation in the practice as research debate because it invokes the notion of repetitive dissemination and blinds us to the dissemination that already occurs at the level of the performance practice itself. By associating documentation and dissemination we leap ahead of ourselves and forget the dissemination that occurs every time a performance is performed. Just because that dissemination is time and space specific and not infinitely repetitious does that necessarily make it any less effective? If we were to align the accumulation of knowledge or knowledges about performance with certain qualities and types of experience I would argue that some performances I have seen or made have been far more productive than my reading of some more conventional forms of written research. And once again I am surprised by the failure of some of my colleagues to appreciate the productive power of these performance moments given our professed expertise in this area.

In other parts of our practice in higher education as performance educators we are less uncertain about the value, even the quality of, the performance moment. We teach undergraduates how to make good performances, we award marks and give reasons for our judgments about their performances without requiring our students to produce accompanying written work books, fulsome video

documentation or written critical appraisals of their work. Why can't this confidence transfer to our own research in performance? Now really I know the answer to this question and it's not about our inability to recognize good performance research practice when we see it. I think it's about assessment, criteria and transparency, about quality and standards, parity and equivalence, ultimately it's about maintaining the authority of the academy. Hence our preoccupation with the document of the performance in practice as research because it provides us with an object (in the face of performance's lack) that can be returned to against which these criteria and preconditions can be, supposedly, measured. Only when a performance has been stilled, when the operations of 'digital technology' have produced a documenting object can it be subjected to proper scrutiny and then deemed a fit subject for academia. This is a position that assumes that judgments and scrutiny aren't and can't be applied to performances. It is also a position which assumes that judgments made about more conventional paper-based research are subject to some rigorous system of quality control other than the more partial, ad hoc system by which the academy actually operates. That is the opaque academic system in which case by case, institution-by-institution, decisions and judgments are made by educated groups and individuals and their direct experience of research outputs. As a system it can never be completely transparent, it is nebulous, limited and contingent. However, I do not believe that these terms describe inadequate procedures: to me they indicate a healthy, functioning, dynamic system based on peer-recognition and consensual negotiation, which has always maintained academic standards.

This is the second reason that I'm wary of the insertion of the documentation imperative into the practice as research debate; not only is it there in order to disseminate what has already been disseminated but also to produce a writing-like object which can then be subject to criteria where none have ever existed. The academy can function perfectly well without objects, many of its processes are ancient and ad hoc and therefore well suited to the live practices of debate

and exchange. Perhaps all that is needed is to formalize or make more visible and robust the dialogic mechanisms that sustain academic authority to ensure practice as research in performance's legitimacy. Steve Dixon, again ironically a documentation expert, has called for a network of receiving houses in institutions throughout the UK for practice as research work and applications to the PARIP conference demonstrate there certainly seems to be a need for more opportunities to show practice as research work and a means by which to promote opinion forming debate and feedback about this work. In addition, we could take more notice of the public performances and after-show discussions that already occur. Such a network or forum would emphasize all those oral modes of address I referred to earlier and emphasize the authority of what is live and provisional. If there is a problem with the dissemination and assessment of practice as research work let's not be seduced by the promise of so-called digital technologies because any document cannot be concerned with the dissemination and assessment of research work in performance — document for document's sake but perform for performances.