

Be here now: some thoughts on archaeologies of performance

Angela Piccini, April 2005

Background

Firstly, apologies for my absence — although this seems somehow apt in the context of this symposium. Disseminating this fixed, if informal, text for you to read, without the opportunity for discussion echoes some of the issues that we face with regard to engaging with mixed-mode research practices.

It continues to surprise me that despite the voiced acknowledgement that we cannot access event through document so many members of the practitioner communities use documentation — particularly camera-based documentation — as an unproblematic given. This has been evident at a range of conferences and symposia that I have attended. I keep hearing casual turns of phrase: as you can see here; what you see from this, etc. While there is mnemonic value to documents for those who did witness the event, for the rest of us such statements merely collapse the crucial difference between event and artefact.

Adding to this intellectual confusion are the assertions by some that the ontology of performance has been radically shifted due to the rise of digital technologies, that there is no longer a divide between the live and the mediatized. But I think this sidesteps the temporal-(non)spatial (*pace* Marc Augé) specific elements of the performance event and fails to acknowledge that no matter what the technology, we operate as though performance ‘happens’ and that there is a shared sense of an ‘after’. There remains a distinction between the multi-sited webcast dance piece and the subsequent de/recontextualized dissemination of the digital artefacts of that work. The medium is most certainly not the message.

As we know, during the past decade mixed-mode research has gained momentum in the research cultures of the creative and performing arts. In the last RAE, 32% of submissions to Panel 66 were ‘practice-led’. The five highest scoring institutions all submitted practice as a foundation of their research outputs. Again, as the aim of this symposium makes clear, the challenge presented by ‘practice as research’ is one of access to the event. Peer review has relied on secondary sources of information about performance, from video documentation through to the infamous sheet of A4.

Despite the impressive number of mixed-mode submissions, Panel 66 reported that the quality of these projects was very variable and there was a lack of clarity for a significant number of researchers about what constitutes practice as research. The panel concluded that there was an urgent need for continued national debate about practices and criteria. The Panel also pointed out that while some submissions provided excellent documentation / supporting evidence

for practice as research, overall the level of presentation was not strong. The 300-word statements were not seen clearly to indicate research content, suggesting 'some lack of awareness that, *through appropriate documentation and other discourses*, practice as research requires its own versions of scholarly apparatus for self-validation' (my emphasis; 2002, RAE 2001: UoA66 Drama, Dance and Performing Arts — Overview Report, <http://www.hero.ac.uk/rae/overview/>).

What troubled me in this report was the seeming resistance to acknowledging that traditional forms of research are not required to present such process-based information, not to mention an ongoing commonsensical belief in the transparency and common currency of the written word – *pace* Susan Melrose — the gold standard of the scriptural economy. RAE 2001 did not take on board the important differences between these suggested modes of documentation and the practice as research 'itself'. It may be that the artist-scholar will wish to engage in a range of documentation practices; however, to insist that it is only through the document (whether photographic or textual) that the research can be seen, disseminated and institutionally validated undermines the philosophical rationale for much PaR in the first place — although the political imperatives behind this are understandable.

But I do not wish to pursue this aspect of the documentation argument further as I prefer to leave that in the hands of my colleague, Caroline Rye. While she also absent from this event, her paper 'Video writing' presents a strong argument for a return to the older academic tradition of orality in the quest to disseminate mixed-mode research.

Nodes and networks

Given that we remain doubting Thomases and that it is unlikely our paymasters will invest enough trust in our activities to accept simply that our work 'happened' what do we do? One potential mode of intervention requires further technocracy. But what distinguishes it is that it is a digital, electronic solution that has at its heart the primacy of the event.

First, a bit of background. The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) is a grouping of sixteen research-led institutions who have come together to create a worldwide research partnership. In the UK, Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Southampton and York are all member institutions. WUN is driven by the recognition that in order to meet the challenges of research in rapidly developing, often interdisciplinary, areas of global significance it is necessary to draw upon the increased capability, diverse expertise, creativity and the wide range of techniques that come from international collaboration. Experienced researchers in these fields are often scarce and widely distributed; also they are often highly specialized, so it is rarely the case that their research covers the entire field.

Therefore, there is significant value from bringing these complementary foci across institutions and nations together.

Crucial to the success of such collaboration is the development of an effective framework that provides coherence and a supportive organizational environment, utilizing innovative methods of working and emphasizing rapidly developing web-based technologies, to support long-term (and long-distance) interactions and relationships. Faculty from WUN member institutions have already participated in a series of colloquia to support the development of research that could not easily be delivered by institutions alone and WUN already has already achieved a number of successes including video-internet research seminars to create live and interactive fora. These are commonly known as Grid technologies.

Grid technologies (eg Access Grid and inSORS Grid) are an ensemble of resources including multimedia large-format displays, presentation and interactive environments, and interfaces to Grid middleware and to visualization environments. These resources are used to support group-to-group interactions across the Grid. For example, Grid technologies have been used for large-scale distributed meetings, collaborative work sessions, seminars, lectures, tutorials, and training. What differentiates Grid technologies from video conferencing is its serving multiple, flexible audio-visual feeds to other nodes in 'real' time.

Community Performance

In 2004, Caroline Rye and I attended a WUN/Access Grid event at the University of Southampton. We 'conferenced' with the University of Urbana Illinois, USA to share ideas about generating appropriate content. While most Grid applications have focused on networked meetings, or delivering pre-prepared teaching and learning materials, what immediately became apparent is the suitability of the live interaction provided by the Grid to performing arts content.

Access Grid and other similar platforms provide real-time, interactive environments for performance and assessment on an international scale. To date there is no such specifically networked performance environment in a UK HEI, although networked performance spaces are currently being developed in the US, Australia and Canada. Whereas most of the participants at the WUN event we attended saw its use mainly in distance teaching and learning, we were keen to harness its interactivity. As a result, the 'tech' side of the initiative recognized that the performing arts provide what they term 'rich content', which pushes the technology on and takes full advantage of the live communication.

Associated with its involvement with the development of Grid technologies, PARIP is also an end-user partner in the MEMETIC project, developing new ways to record, index, replay and analyse the resulting audio-visual material. In this way, the documentation remains associated with the live event and retains its mnemonic use. MEMETIC is a Virtual Research Environment project

[www.memetic-vre.net] working on improving the Access Grid to support virtual meetings, or in the case of PARIP, performances which are watched by remote participants (or possibly replayed), and then analysed.

We are in the process of inviting HEIs with Grid nodes to discuss collaboration with Bristol in a post-PARIP environment in order to provide a testbed for us to evaluate the project's technologies as they relate to performance and subsequent review. Two software platforms appear particularly relevant. Compendium allows for real-time annotation of material served through a Grid node. In other words, peer reviewers watching a live performance remotely could begin to map review concepts and share their views via the Grid as the performance takes place. Another software platform is Meeting Replay. This would interface with the archived audio-visual content of the Grid event and allow reviewers to use the documentation as a mnemonic, importing their original Compendium notes to develop key themes through a review process.

When we first started in PARIP we raised the possibility of a peer review college that might attend events and contribute reviews grounded in the event experience. At the time we were dismissed as naïve due to the projected costs involved. But the fallout after RAE 2001 brought to light the immense expense incurred through the distribution and reading of those A4 sheets and the difficulty reviewers had in making judgements. Use of Grid technologies could go some way towards facilitating peer review of event, rather than review of the artist-scholar's ability to name-check the 'right' intellectual justifications for her research.

But...

I accept that this does not move us away from camera-based technologies and the limit of point of view. And I am certainly not interested in advocating a single solution to this problematic. However, the specific event-context provided by the Grid and its potential global reach is in the spirit of our concern with documentation. The purpose of presenting mixed-mode research in a networked performance space is not primarily that of excavation; it is not grounded in a narrative of material remains. Furthermore, potential end users of any archived material would not be delivered a decontextualized audio-visual record of the performance. Rather, what would be accessible are the audience interventions, their responses to the performance. Yes, this is another layer of event that is documented, but there is an interesting argument to be made for translating the experiential contract between performer and audience. Rather than documenting performance, per se, there is the potential to materialize the dissemination itself, the creation of bodies of knowledge in the relationship between the bodies of performer and audience member.