Inter
Art actuel

Review
"RHWNT" Wales — Québec performance exhange 2003-2004

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Number 88, Fall 2004

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/45846ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Les Éditions Intervention

ISSN

0825-8708 (print)
1923-2764 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Roms, H. (2004). Review: "RHWNT" Wales — Québec performance exhange 2003-2004. *Inter*, (88), 25–27.

which many current art projects aspire to; this is more than a matter of delivering opinion; in the intimate realm of another one senses ones own gestures and accordingly responsibility. It is this presence that underlies Trace. [...]' (BACON 2001).

And to those of us who pay a monthly visit to trace, the remains of past performances are always present. There is the perfect circle that Morgan O'HARA drew on the back wall by swirling her arm around her body; there is the time capsule that Brian CONNOLLY filled with the remnants of his audience's actions and buried in the floor – the one since painted over, the other now concreted over, but both still there, physically and in our memory. Each performance resonates with those that have been and those that are yet to come: the line that Julie Andrée-T. strung between the side walls pre-echoed a similar line in Zbieqniew WARPECHOWSKI's performance. Two artists of different nationalities, genders, generations, aesthetics and politics become part of the same history, a history of performance that is being created as a series of performative explorations of the same limited space.

Postscript: Y Rhwydwaith – The Network

'It is this isolation of everything not on the map that so potently naturalizes what's on it.' (WOOD 1992, 87)

No map is complete without a consideration of that which remains unmapped, in this case the increasing number of artists' collectives and networks in Wales. The Artists' Project (one of the longest-established of the groups), the Umbrella Group and Trailerpark are all artist-run collectives that organise collaborative exhibitions and performance events. Dempseys, an old Cardiff pub, has become the venue for a regular meeting of experimental music and sonic art, The Quarter. Other networks are devoted to discourse rather than display: Bloc is a virtual forum for art and technology, which organises seminars and conferences to raise the profile of digital media in Wales. The 2nd Wednesday Group, which meets on the second Wednesday of every month at Chapter for presentations and debate, is a loose network of around eighty artists, writers, teachers and students with an interest in performance, cross-disciplinary, live and time-based art in Wales. It was founded in December 2001 as a forum for discussion, to share information and to develop advocacy in an area of artistic practice that in this country has notoriously lacked sustained critical attention and incisive theoretical reflection, a lack that has often hindered its development.

Some of this reflection is provided by *Performance Research*, a peer-reviewed academic journal that aims to promote innovative connections between scholarship and practice in the field of contemporary performance. Although published in England by Taylor and Francis and international in scope, the journal maintains close links with Wales through one of its editors, Richard GOUGH. GOUGH is Artistic Director of the Aberystwyth-based CPR Centre for Performance Research, at its roots a theatre organisation devoted to training and the reflection of practice, which organises workshops, festivals and symposia, publishes theatre books and runs a multi-cultural performance resource centre. The CPR's decidedly intercultural approach to theatrical performance has from very early on brought it into contact with the emerging academic discipline of Performance Studies, which it has helped to promote in Britain through a range of international conferences. The CPR assisted in establishing the Performance Studies network PSi Performance Studies international, a world-wide membership association for scholars and artists working in the field of performance, and co-hosted the 5th Performance Studies Conference in Aberystwyth in 1999, which brought several hundred artists and scholars to West-Wales, among them Peggy PHELAN, Richard SCHECHNER, Rebecca SCHNEIDER and Guillermo GOMEZ-PEÑA, for an exploration of the rapidly shifting definitions at play within the field.

These networks may take temporal possession of a site, but otherwise remain largely virtual, nomadic and decentralized. Yet even the most 'sited' of the Welsh arts initiatives mentioned above find themselves engaged in a multitude of networks, acting locally as much as internationally, putting collaboration and exchange at the heart of their activities. It is thus Y Rhwydwaith (The Network) that emerges as the true heterotopia of Welsh performance art.

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Review: RHWNT Wales - Québec performance exhange2003-2004

1st phase: October 2003, Cardiff

James PARTAIK, Claudine COTTON, Les Fermières Obsédées, Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFRASNE, Christian MESSIER [Trace: installaction art space and Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff]

Heike ROMS

What exactly gets exchanged in an international performance exchange?

Exchange presumes equivalence between those who partake in it. And indeed, the cultural and political similarities between Québec and Wales (Cymru), and those of their capital cities, Québec City and Cardiff, have often been highlighted: a bilingual country with a strong sense of cultural identity (against an Anglophone dominance) and a long-running campaign for political independence (although the presence of First Nations peoples in Québec disturbs this neat picture and reminds us that French, unlike Welsh, is itself a colonial language); a historical city in the process of remodelling itself for the global economic market; and an arts scene in the shadow of a dominant neighbouring metropole that sets the cultural agenda.

These parallels have inspired a long-standing cultural exchange programme between the two countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized art projects (including the recent *RHWNT* Québec/Cymru exchange programme, festivals, residencies and translation support) and on the more informal level of individual artistic collaborations (performer Simon WHITEHEAD, for example, has been involved in an exchange with Boréal Art/Nature for a number of years; and most recently Welsh movement artist Marc REES invited Québecois artist Michael TOPPINGS to restage his *House Project* in Cardiff). The latter form of exchange is driven by a similarly vibrant scene of artist-run centres and initiatives in both Québec City and Cardiff.

But the differences are as significant as the similarities. Seen from the outside, it appears that the Québecois performance scene has experienced a sustained development over the past thirty years, assisted by the patronage of such organisations as *Inter* magazine and Le Lieu and similar artist-run initiatives throughout the differents regions of Québec. Performance art in Québec is supported, promoted, documented and critically reflected upon in festivals, archives and journals. As a result, on the evidence of the work presented at *RHWNT*, the performance practice that comes from Québec is accompanied by a highly developed sense of its history and a sophisticated critical vocabulary (which was introduced in Cardiff in a lecture-performance by critic Guy SIOUI DURAND): concepts such as 'relational aesthetics' (N. BOURRIAUD, Paris, 2000) and 'manœuvre' (*Inter* #47, Québec, 1989) are (as yet) little known in Wales. In this country, the history of performance art is far more fragmentary, and the theoretical debates surrounding it are more unsystematic. There are no archives, no publications, and barely any festivals devoted to this still marginalized art practice.

This situation is improving, however. With the establishment of Trace: installaction artspace* in 2000, Cardiff now has a gallery space exclusively devoted to the presentation of performance, which maintains strong links with the international artist community. And Chapter Arts Centre, the city's main venue for contemporary art, increasingly hosts time-based art practice. Chapter's annual *Experimentica* festival is solely dedicated to a presentation of emerging work in this area, primarily from Wales itself. *RHWNT* was evidence for this change : initiated by Trace in collaboration with Le Lieu and staged at both Trace and Chapter, the event took place in the context of *Experimentica*. This allowed for a very direct comparison between the performance work currently originating from Wales and Québec.

There is a danger in exchanges of this kind to interpret the work on show as somewhat 'representative' for the entire artistic practice of a particular place. This, of course, it is not. For *RHWNT*, Richard MARTEL had chosen emerging artists as well as more established artists who are in the course of making their mark internationally. Their formal approaches were highly diverse: multimedia installaction, manœuvre, body art, action art, relational intervention... What linked them all, however, was the highly politicised nature of the work. It was in this case not so much 'local' questions of cultural difference, linguistic diversity, colonial legacies or political independence that interested these Québecois artists, but concerns with a wider global resonance: the nature of collective aggression, individual responsibility, human competitive behaviour, and the all pervading sense of paranoia in our post-'9/11' world.

"[P]aranoia . . . is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination – not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In ...".

Thomas PYNCHON, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973

*ndlr, voir www.tracegallery.org/

Paranoia and conspiracy are among the major pathologies of modernity, the flip sides of the workings of capitalism and democracy on which our Western societies are based. For the modern state they have always helped to legitimize the expansion of structures for surveillance and control – '9/11' and the 'war against terrorism' may have recently made the issue more urgent, but perhaps not fundamentally different. On the level of the individual, however, as PYNCHON explores in much of his writing, paranoia can grow out of a deeply felt need for an underlying order. Immersed in late capitalism we turn to conspiracy theory to make sense of the alienating, commodified political realities which surround us – FREUD has remarked that paranoid delusions are like philosophical systems or scientific theories (or, as PYNCHON may add, religious doctrines or artistic creations) in that they all endeavour to understand the world and our place within it.

The many faces of paranoia, its place within current politics and the hold it can have over individual lives were investigated by James PARTAIK in a rich and complex performance presented at Trace, entitled *America's Most Wanted*, which, true to the hybrid nature of PARTAIK's practice, utilized sound, video, action and site-specific installation. The work's concerns were rooted in the intimacy of a family story, which the artist managed to connect to its wider political implications. PARTAIK opened the performance by approaching a photograph on the wall of a middle-aged woman, whom he introduced to us as his aunt. He explained that in order to protect her skin from exposure to radioactivity, she attempted to make a shield of lead. For this she used newspaper because ink contains lead, but the gaps between the letters let radiation through and caused her skin to come out in a rash. What followed was a series of actions structured around excerpts from an interview with the aunt and her daughter, played variously as audio recordings or as video extracts. The voices of the two women gave detailed descriptions of what they considered as their plight – their life in a caravan on the run from an unspecified threat, stories of electricity that may harm them, of steel rods and water puddles placed close to their vehicle to conduct electrical waves that would hurt them, of drug labs producing heroin to poison them, of someone listening in and observing them. And they pled to us listeners for help. Despite the pathetic earnestness of their absurd paranoia there was also a touching humanity in their futile desire to make an indifferent world revolve around them, an almost religious need for the events with which they are confronted to be the result of someone's intention, no matter how malevolent. The performance trod a fine and gentle line here, never exposing the two women to ridicule. Instead it rendered them anonymous (by distorting their image and their voices) and thus related their individual obsession to a more widespread social paranoia.

Their story was offered to us only in fragments, in bits of audio and video footage which we were made to piece together. The recordings were activated by a number of actions that trigger their playing. These actions were composed around a set of recurrent motives: ink, electricity, stars and constellations. To begin with, PARTAIK knelt down in front of a bowl filled with ink, covered his shaven head with Vaseline and moved forward to place it in the bowl. As he withdrew again, the ink had stained the skin except for the spots where the Vaseline protected it. PARTAIK's movement forward and back set off two alternate sound recordings – an extract from the interview and the sound of a deep, resonating tone, emerging from a loudspeaker placed in second bowl of ink, which created waves that splattered the ink all around the bowl, making a constellation of dots on the floor. The artist then took a tape machine, loosened the tape and moved the machine along it, carefully adjusting his speed so that from the magnetic tape again the voices of the two women emerged. He fixed the tape to the wall to produce the stripes of the Star-spangled Banner. In the left-hand corner where the flag normally displays the stars a white space was left onto which PARTAIK went on to project a real-time computer simulation of the night sky over Québec. Stars moved slowly across the horizon and a satellite flew past. PARTAIK threw darts at the satellite, which left little holes in the wall. When he finally hit his target, the image moved to the night sky over Cardiff and then to a view from a satellite down on a nocturnal Wales. At the end PARTAIK fetched a small red, blue and white toy rocket that had been waiting in an alcove in the room, and took us outside the gallery to an adjacent field where he launched the missile. As it exploded it releases hundreds of tiny messages, containing the photo of PARTAIK's aunt and the words 'If you know anything about this photo please contact www.amw.com' - the website address for John WALSH's notorious 'America's Most Wanted' show, epithet of the US's rampant culture of suspicion.

Personal fear is here linked to social paranoia, individual mistrust to public systems of surveillance. The effectiveness of the performance lies in the fact that it not merely commented on the mode of surveillance, but actually performed it, opening up the creative act of making performance itself to reveal what is invisible or potential within it: the tracing of the tape, the careful attempt to catch the voices on it, evoked the techniques of professional stakeouts as well as reminded us of the struggle for comprehension. This was replicated in the installation which PARTAIK subsequently created out of the traces of the performances and which was exhibited in Trace gallery for the remainder of the month: the holes in the wall made by the impact of the darts were linked up by cables to create a stellar constellation. There were cables everywhere – the space was buzzing with the invisible power of electricity made visible through the use of fluids, which refered back to the phobia of the two women. Again, in order to hear their story, one had to move, lean in, contort one's body to activate a system of triggers that played extracts from the interview. Here we were observing, listening, keeping under surveillance, connecting, interpreting – prompting us to consider how in art itself we desire to look for order, to make sense. PARTAIK has expressed paranoia's implications for the individual, the political and the artistic in his own description of the piece: "Everything is possible. That's the problem. From what do we construct reality? This piece explores the nature of the ambient paranoia which presently dominates North America. In a delirium of interpretation, things possess potential links. Insofar as they can be perceived, objects appear or disappear, establishing identity. At the time when the object is able to appear clearly, there is a moment of recognition and the object holds meaning for us."

At one point in PARTAIK's performance the artist handed the tape machine to a member of the audience whilst enveloping himself in the magnetic tape – a small "relational" gesture which prompted PARTAIK to quite literally lose control, spinning and stumbling, knocking over the bowl of ink in front of him, spilling the black fluid all over the previously created delicate spray of dots on the floor. It is from these moments of unpredictability, when the artist relinquishes control over the work and the work itself threatens to spill out of its own framing and take on unexpected meaning, that Claudine COTTON fashions her performance practice. She prefers the term 'manœuvre', an aesthetic concept which is not (yet) part of the British critical vocabulary. A manœuvre appears to share the interactive ethos of relational aesthetics but relocates it away from the gallery to non-art contexts, where it engages with a largely accidental and unsuspecting audience, more temporary and provisional than the 'community' that is the object of much of what the British call 'socially-engaged' art practice. The emphasis on movement, a tactical approach and a planned but ultimately indeterminable outcome implied in the term 'manœuvre' describes perfectly the open manner of COTTON's gentle and poetic interventions into the realm of inter-human encounters. She creates occasions for such encounters by using everyday situations or materials taken from the private sphere of domesticity and placing them into public spaces as a kind of friendly lure, which helps her to establish connections with her inadvertent audience and persuade them to interact.

In Cardiff, she chose the most British of locales, the male-dominated environment of the pub, home to beer, bar-room politics and all-day football broadcasts. Into this she brought an action that is traditionally associated with femininity: that of knitting (for which she collaborated with Cardiff-based textile artist, Annie HARRIES). COTTON had prepared woollen blue berets, which she slowly unravelled to make small baby shoes from its wool. She involved the afternoon drinkers by letting them wear the hats or let the wool pass through their fingers. The warmth and softness of the material, the familiar nature of the act itself, and COTTON's stuttering attempts at speaking English all helped to break down communication barriers. During the course of the day, the mainly middle-aged men changed their mood from initial hostility and ridicule to a hesitant form of engagement, slowly opening up to talk about personal reminiscences of their mothers and grandmothers knitting at home.

With the lightest of touches COTTON thus created a situation of conviviality which helped to raise more profound questions in a subtle and slightly subversive way. The title of the piece, *Se couvrir*, hinted at this double nature. In French, the expression 'se couvrir' ('to cover oneself') can have two meanings: 'to wrap oneself in something in order to keep warm' or 'to shield oneself against all accusations or responsibilities'. COTTON simultaneously alluded to both these meanings, combining the reassuring warmth of the wool (and the personal and intimate nature of the memories it helped to generate) with the more unsettling political connotations of the symbols she had chosen. The literal conversion from blue beret, an obvious reference to the UN peace-keeping force, to baby shoes suggested in its metaphorical nature other occasions of change: from head to foot, from thought to action, from present to future generation. COTTON's manoeuvre thereby optimistically asserted the utopian potential of the act of transformation, a potential that is at the very heart of the concept of the manoeuvre itself. Like with many relational works of this kind, the question remains whether the interpersonal 'warmth' it provided did not in fact help to distract from its political content. But how subtly subversive the work operated was confirmed when the artist eventually got thrown out of the pub because her work was 'bad for business' as it detracted from the live football broadcast that was playing on a monitor in the corner of the room.

A very different, overtly confrontational (rather than relational) take on femininity and the theme of political responsibility was presented by Les Fermières Obsédées (Annie BAILLARGEON, Mélissa CHAREST, Eugénie CLICHE and Catherine PLAISANCE) in their performance, *Dollies*. We could hear them before we could see them – a loud rhythmic stomping announced their arrival. They appeared, dressed in the same clothes – part school uniform, part executive outfit: white blouse, grey skirt, high heels, only the colour of each of their wigs was different. But what must once have been smart, formal attire was now soiled by a palimpsest of traces left by previous performances – red and pink paint stains, and slogans such as 'Happy Canada Day' or 'Why do you guys do that?' covered them all over. A degenerate and increasingly degenerating image of young femininity.

The four marched around the room in unison as if they were following some secret command. Sometimes they separated into pairs, only in the next moment to be reintegrated back into the group – the different formations were merely mathematical permutations of the same order. There was no sense of individuality, no attempt to break free from the control of the collective. But there was also

an atmosphere of defiance and obstinacy, due to the child-like quality of the small repertoire of gestures that the performers used –they lifted their skirts to cover their faces or attempted to take a peek under each other's skirts. They rolled around on the floor, or smashed small balloons filled with pink paint that were hidden underneath their clothing. Accompanied by a series of high-pitched screams, these same gestures were performed over and over, in their messiness threatening to undermine the strictly regimented formation.

A deliberate air of artifice and exaggeration characterized this work, which took our obsession with social conformity to its absurd conclusion. The performance had a comically absurd, almost vaudevillian quality to it. But underneath it lay a passionate anger at our collective compliance with political aggression, expressed through a combination of masculine regimentation and feminine hysteria. Some people mistook their angry femininity for sexual aggressiveness – a local review called Les Fermières Obsédées (ironically) 'tawdry and salacious'. I couldn't help but read their feminine collective energy also as a comment on the genre of performance art, a form dominated by the solo artist, which in the past has often glamorized a certain macho emphasis on extreme physicality and endurance. Les Fermières Obsédées belong to a new generation of female performance groups that are beginning to make an impact on the international scene – like the Icelandic Love Corporation or the High Heel Sisters, they are part pop band, part reinvention of the traditional woman's needlework circle. And they all combine a firm sense of the burlesque with a postfeminist concern for the nature of collectivity, sexuality and beauty.

A touch of vaudeville also surrounded the performance of Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFRASNE. The duo, like Les Fermières Obsédées, performed in the black box theatre space of Chapter Arts Centre, and the spectacular and theatrical character of performance was very much at the heart of their witty and beautifully executed piece. Their work, entitled *Self-esteem – Test-instruments 2*, was one in a series of performances which each are based on a game plan – they are always staged as real competitions between the two performers with an unknown outcome. This one, subtitled 'a confrontation between two obstinates', was inspired by a fable by Jean de La FONTAINE about two goats which, crossing a bridge in a quest for freedom, stubbornly refuse to make way for each other and both end up in the water.

The title of the piece was pinned on a curtain at the back, in front of which stood a beam (as in gymnastics) made from an untreated tree trunk. BOUCHARD and DUFRASNE appeared, both wearing the shorts and shirts of gymnasts– one had the word 'docile' written on his back, the other the word 'gullible'. They weighed themselves on scales placed on either side of the beam and announce their weight in French and English. Then they asked for an audience volunteer who 'wished to become rich and famous'. They placed her behind the centre of the beam with her hand stretched out and covered the hand first in honey and then in gold leaf. Next they handed out disposable cameras to the audience and passed a large bucket of popcorn around the room. The two performers then placed horn-shaped crowns on their heads and stood on either side of the beam. On a whistle, they jumped onto it. In the flickering light of many camera flashlights they locked horns and tried to lick the gold off the volunteer's hand until one of them fell off the beam, making the other one the triumphant winner.

BOUCHARD's and DUFRASNE's piece was not merely a witty and playful study of stubborn, unyielding human behaviour. They also addressed and challenged the spectacular nature of performance itself, and the glamorisation of the artist in the quest to become 'rich and famous'. The composition of their piece was carefully put together – the roughness of the beam's bark, the red and white candy-stripes of the popcorn buckets created an attractive and highly photogenic environment. In this, the audience was assigned the role of both passive spectator (encouraged in their consumerist attitude by the eating of popcorn) and active documenter (equipped with their disposable cameras). The performance was thus also a mocking commentary on today's obsession with documenting performance art. At many performance events these days there are an increasing number of spectators whose encounter with the work is restricted to the viewfinders of their digital cameras. BOUCHARD and DUFRASNE seem to warn us that an art form that was once a critique of reification is in danger of reducing its creations to camera-friendly spectacles.

The day following their performance, BOUCHARD and DUFRASNE staged a small impromptu performance in the city, carrying the beam around the streets of Cardiff. Christian MESSIER too had a few days earlier taken the opportunity to present an action outside of the regular programme of the festival. In the entrance lobby of Chapter Arts Centre he was sitting amidst an increasing pile of silver masks, made from covering his face in aluminium foil, breathing in, and pressing the foil around his nose and into his eye sockets. His actual piece for the festival, entitled *45 Minutes*, was for me not as successful in combining such simple formalism with an evocative symbolism. It is interesting to see someone of MESSIER's generation engage with the performance vocabulary of classic 1960's performance art – physical risk-taking, pain, endurance – in order to re-evaluate its significance for our time. But for Cardiff, he had conceived a piece that seemed merely gesturing at the intensity of these acts and their ethical integrity. MESSIER's performance was based on a series of instructions, using a number of objects such as a table, chair, kettle, tea, teacup and sieve, hammer and bucket. The artist took off his shoes and emptied his pockets. He then put the kettle on. Whilst waiting for the water to boil, he drew a large chalk circle on the floor and wrote on the wall a series of instructions, including 'infusing tea', 'pretending to cry', 'pretending to think about stopping', and 'jumping with a chair'. Real actions were thus alternating with 'pretended' actions. Each of these actions was precisely five minutes long (the duration was indicated by an alarm clock) and carried out whilst walking along the circle. They were obviously conceptualized to increase in complexity and extremity – for 'Being Cold' MESSIER first dunked his trousers and t-shirt in a bucket full of water, then put the wet clothes back on and moved around the circle shivering. In 'Hurting My Face', he was crawling on the floor, hands behind his back, face dragging along the ground. Inspired by the environment of Chapter theatre, our attention was drawn to the difference between a reality of experience and its mere pretence through a juxtaposition of theatrical gesture and performative act, a high-risk strategy which on this occasion failed to pay off because the shift between 'pretending' to be doing something and actually doing it was not clearly enough articulated. As a result, few of these actions managed to register any response in me. And rarely did MESSIER himself give the sense that he was really experiencing the cold, pain and exhaustion that his actions were supposed to evoke. Thus, instead of reaffirming an authenticity of physical experience, the performance appeared like a form of pretended intensity, an endurance fake.

Still, what impressed me about the Québecois performers, including MESSIER, despite the diversity of their formal approaches, was that they all displayed a sophisticated understanding of the workings of performance itself, its political positioning and its ethical potential. This was a great testament to the continuing efforts of Le Lieu and *Inter* to develop a mature theory and practice of performance art. If a 'commodity' was exchanged in the alternative economy of the international performance exchange, it was this sense of a sustained commitment which inspired those of us working in performance in Wales.