What's the Welsh for "performance"? [30 years of action art in Wales]

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The history of performance art in Wales has yet to be written. Over a period of more than thirty years artists have been creating performance, action or time-based art and the results of their work are now being considered and re-contexted to offer a new look at this history. The geographical and political diversity of Wales has meant that performance art has been undertaken in all parts of the country, from the west coast to the east, from the mountains to the valleys. It has been a performance art practice as a means for its cultural and political expression. As a result, the term 'performance' in Wales today describes a fluid field of innovative practices originating in a variety of disciplines, including performance art, sonic art, experimental theatre, movement work, and performance poetry. It is this interdisciplinary quality and the 'situated' nature of Welsh performance in an international field of highly nomadic practices that distinguish the performance scene in Wales.

Y Maes – The Field

The title of the whole event and the nature of the performance was suggested by an impromptu happening after Mario MERZ had completed his piece for piano, lara (sic) beam, rose and coal sacks. He moved towards Paul DAVIES who at that moment was holding something he referred to the punishment for speaking Welsh in school and enforced within living memory. As it happened the chorus of the Welsh Arts Council's Performance Pavilion at the 1999 Eisteddfod in Wrexham in 1977 can be regarded as a seminal event for performance art in Wales. A Shocking Waste of Money" as well as the Daily Telegraph's more conservative party had produced better performances than those at Wrexham. But performance art has often been called 'England's first colony', inspired in equal measure by the movement of the international avant-garde toward a dematerialization of art practice and by the local reaffirmation of a distinct cultural identity that manifests itself primarily as performance (above all at the celebration of the Welsh language). This was accompanied by a political activism that too gathered pace in the sixties through harnessing performance's radical potential for direct political action in the struggle for the survival of the language. Wales has been often called 'England's first colony' - a marginalized cultural history turned to a marginal art practice as a means for its cultural and political expression. As a consequence the division between different artistic disciplines has been of lesser importance than the question of where these disciplines situate themselves in the cultural and political landscape of Wales. In its quest to develop a distinctive form that could provide an alternative to the dominant English mainstream, for example, Welsh experimental theatre from early on embraced artistic strategies that we have come to know from performance art, such as site-specificity, duration and active audience involvement. As a result, the term 'performance' in Wales today describes a fluid field of innovative practices originating in a variety of disciplines, including performance art, sonic art, experimental theatre, movement work, and performance poetry. It is this interdisciplinary quality and the 'situated' nature of Welsh performance in an international field of highly nomadic practices that distinguish the performance scene in Wales.

In ways more than one, Paul DAVIES' and Mario MERZ' appearance at the National Eisteddfod in Wrexham in 1977 can be regarded as a seminal event for performance art in Wales. The history of performance art in Wales has yet to be written. Over a period of more than thirty years artists have been creating performance, action or time-based art and the results of their work are now being considered and re-contexted to offer a new look at this history. The geographical and political diversity of Wales has meant that performance art has been undertaken in all parts of the country, from the west coast to the east, from the mountains to the valleys. It has been a performance art practice as a means for its cultural and political expression. As a result, the term 'performance' in Wales today describes a fluid field of innovative practices originating in a variety of disciplines, including performance art, sonic art, experimental theatre, movement work, and performance poetry. It is this interdisciplinary quality and the 'situated' nature of Welsh performance in an international field of highly nomadic practices that distinguish the performance scene in Wales.

The Eisteddfod. Paul Davies had already had an argument with Mario MERZ does not understand Welsh he gave out phonetic improvisations completed his piece for piano, lara (sic) beam, rose and coal sacks. He moved towards Paul DAVIES who at that moment was holding something he referred to the punishment for speaking Welsh in school and enforced within living memory. As it happened the chorus of the Welsh Arts Council's Performance Pavilion at the 1999 Eisteddfod in Wrexham in 1977 can be regarded as a seminal event for performance art in Wales. The history of performance art in Wales has yet to be written. Over a period of more than thirty years artists have been creating performance, action or time-based art and the results of their work are now being considered and re-contexted to offer a new look at this history. The geographical and political diversity of Wales has meant that performance art has been undertaken in all parts of the country, from the west coast to the east, from the mountains to the valleys. It has been a performance art practice as a means for its cultural and political expression. As a result, the term 'performance' in Wales today describes a fluid field of innovative practices originating in a variety of disciplines, including performance art, sonic art, experimental theatre, movement work, and performance poetry. It is this interdisciplinary quality and the 'situated' nature of Welsh performance in an international field of highly nomadic practices that distinguish the performance scene in Wales.
The mountain range appears, white and gleaming, against the fading light at dusk. The rusted iron foundation in the middle of the valley looks as if it is approaching. The glowing red ball of the sun vanishes slowly behind the peaks, bathing them for a moment in its orange beam. We are witness to a glorious sunset in the uplands of the Llyn peninsula in North Wales. Only we are sitting, neatly packed in rows, inside the black-box auditorium of a theatre space. The mountains are formed from crumpled strips of white paper. Moments ago movement artist Simon WHITEHEAD had used them to scribble down memories of a walk across the landscape of the peninsula. Now he is standing next to the paper panorama, moving a red light bulb slowly from one side to the other to illuminate the scenery, whilst his collaborator, sound artist Barnaby OLIVER, mixes the sounds of nature with those of technology.

WHITEHEAD's felt-tand from 1997, subtitled The long times project - A landscape re-ensioned, was one of the first of a growing body of work by a new generation of artists working in Wales today who create performances from their physical, sensual and emotional responses to the Welsh landscape. This is the work of LADD, whose performances are as much shaped by contemporary political and social questions of land use and ownership, or on personal matters as by its local economy. Performer Eddie LADD, who comes from a Welsh-speaking community, on political issues of land use and ownership, or on personal matters are a number of those whose work has centred instead on social questions of Wales, which is run by artists who attempt to reconcile the making of art with nature. WHITEHEAD has created a series of 'mapping' performances based on long solitary walks through the Welsh landscape, informed by a sense of sensual and emotional response to the Welsh landscape. Their work is located as Peter PRENDERGAST, Iwan BALA and Catrin WEBSTER, who aim to reclaim the sensibility and emotional response to the Welsh landscape. As dusk sets in. A thunderous rumble in the far distance warns of a storm approaching. The glowing red ball of the sun vanishes slowly behind the peaks, bathing them for a moment in its orange beam. We are witness to a glorious sunset in the uplands of the Llyn peninsula in North Wales. Only we are sitting, neatly packed in rows, inside the black-box auditorium of a theatre space. The mountains are formed from crumpled strips of white paper. Moments ago movement artist Simon WHITEHEAD had used them to scribble down memories of a walk across the landscape of the peninsula. Now he is standing next to the paper panorama, moving a red light bulb slowly from one side to the other to illuminate the scenery, whilst his collaborator, sound artist Barnaby OLIVER, mixes the sounds of nature with those of technology.

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The Cardiff School of Art and Design (or Howard Gardens as it is commonly known) has for many years offered students the opportunity to specialize in time-based art practice (i.e., performance, video, sonic and installation art) as part of their fine art degree. Teachers and students affiliated with the school have consequently occupied a central position in the performance art scene of the city, the development of which has been led by poet, performance artist Anthony HOWELL, founder of the influential Theatre of Mistakes, with whom in the 1970s he performed Fluxus-inspired minimalist 'conceptual performances' based on rules and instructions. During his time at Howard Gardens, the school housed Cardiff Art in Time (CAT), a performance art and video festival, which took place in 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2004 and featured student and professional work from around the world. Stuart SHERMAN, Gary STEVENS, Seiji SHIMODA, Aaron WILLIAMSON, Hayley NEWMAN, Station House Opera, Mark JEFFERY (Goat Island) and Jeremy DELLER all presented live work at the festival, while leading British artists such as CHRISTO, Gary NILSSON and Aleksande SOKIRSKY were represented by video works. CAT fulfilled an important role in the development of performance art in Wales, not so much because of its spectacular event character, but by providing a forum for the documentation and dissemination of contemporary performance art practice, a form of performative publication in the shape of a festival. This function was further enhanced by HOWELL, who filmed much of the first festival as a contribution to his Grey Suites: Video for Art & Literature, a performance art magazine distributed on videotape, which was intended as an innovative approach to the recording of live art practice and remains to this day the only publication originating in Wales and solely devoted to performance art.

CAT also brought André STITT to Cardiff, who presented three of his intensely visceral and cathartic 'skishuns' at the festival. The themes of the Belfast born-artist's original experiences, freedom, universality, practice and abstraction from and appropriation of culture, resonate strongly with the concerns of many political artists in Wales. STITT took over from HOWELL as subject leader of the time-based department in 1999, which he now runs in collaboration with Paul GRANJOY, a French artist working in robotics, whose playful performances and installations take a personal view at the relationship between human and machine.

Recent performances by students from Howard Gardens include Kira ORELLY, Richard DEDOMENICI and Matt COOK. COOK in particular creates works that directly reflect on their urban environment. His sound work, "Pendulum Electronica", an extension of Steve REICH's famous Pendulum Music, featured swinging torches and light sensors that triggered a series of sound samples collected from around Cardiff, which produced an increasingly dense aural portrait of the city. On the other side of town from Howard Gardens is Chapter Arts Centre, Wales's most important centre for contemporary art. A former school, the building was opened as an arts centre in 1971 by local artists Christine KINSEY and Jacqui JONES with journalist Rick FLOOD. Their vision was to establish a place that would serve the local community as well as provide an environment in which all creative disciplines could be housed under one roof. More than thirty years on, Chapter has developed into an extensive complex of artists' studios, performance spaces, galleries, cinemas, and premises for various cultural enterprises. It now presents over a thousand events a year and works with partners from all over the world. It also still functions as a meeting place for community initiatives, mother and baby groups, the local Buddhist congregation or weekly Yoga classes, although the programme has become more diverse and exciting.

For a long time Howard Gardens in the east and Chapter in the west of the city presented the main two sites where performance practice in Cardiff was created, but in between which there was surprisingly little exchange. Howard Gardens is essentially oriented to performance art and the traditions of visual art, while Chapter championed work coming from experimental theatre, multimedia performance and new dance. This separation has changed in recent years - the two scenes today are much more interconnected. The reasons for this development are manifold: in the UK generally an increasing blurring of the boundaries between theatre and performance art has taken place, which manifests itself in the widespread use of the term 'live art' for practices emerging from both. In Wales specifically, a recent crisis in arts funding has led to the abolition of most of the ensembles and companies working in the experimental theatre sector. What has emerged in the wake of this crisis is a new generation of solo performers (Eddie LADD, Simon WHITEMEAD, Marc REEES), often working in highly conceptual ways, whose practice owes as much to the tradition of performance art as it does to that of theatre. Under its theatre programmes, James TYSON, Chapter has in the past few years organised a number of festivals (12 Days of Risk in 2000 and Experimenta in 2001-3) which have been devoted to the presentation and discussion of innovative time-based work, including performance, video, sonic and installation art, and which have acted as key catalysts for the development of emerging artists working in this field in Wales.

By opening itself up to the support of young local artists practicing time-based art, Chapter has managed to reassert its position within the contemporary art scene in Cardiff. But in this it has been joined by an increasing number of artists in Cardiff, and even internationally, moving from the theatrical context to the experimental theatre sector. What has emerged in the wake of this crisis is a new generation of solo performers (Eddie LADD, Simon WHITEMEAD, Marc REEES), often working in highly conceptual ways, whose practice owes as much to the tradition of performance art as it does to that of theatre. Under its theatre programmes, James TYSON, Chapter has in the past few years organised a number of festivals (12 Days of Risk in 2000 and Experimenta in 2001-3) which have been devoted to the presentation and discussion of innovative time-based work, including performance, video, sonic and installation art, and which have acted as key catalysts for the development of emerging artists working in this field in Wales.

FIELDING and MITCHELL have built a reputation for establishing international exchanges between artists and galleries from a host of countries, bringing together a wide range of work into Wales for their "ridiculously large international multi-media exhibitions" and in return raise the profile of Welsh art abroad. TactileBOSCH's 'carnivalesque' curatorial approach (described by local critic Debbie SAVAGE as 'as though people into the mix as possible and see what happens') often favours performance work of a vaudeville nature that is able to withstand the legendary party atmosphere of its opening nights. Among the artists who regularly present work at the venue is MITCHELL himself. His work is task-based, including such actions as attempting to grab a pint of beer repeatedly knocked back by an elastic band. His performances confront clichés of macho masculinity from a very British perspective; whoever has found himself in a bar in Cardiff, the drinking capital of Britain, on a Friday night will recognize the images of aggression and violence with which MITCHELL plays.

The most striking architectural feature of Cardiff, as of many other Welsh towns, is the extent of its terraced houses, which crowd like sturdy snails up and down its many streets. In one such ordinary terraced house in October 2000, André STITT opened Trace: Installation space. The gallery is housed in the front room of his home, and it is this domestic context which is central to its functioning.

Trace is the only venue in Britain that focuses exclusively on time-based art and work that emerges from this field - i.e., performance, video, sonic, interactive and installation arts. Every month, a different artist presents a live performance, with the Trace elements of his or her activity exhibited on the following weekends. The combination of performance and installation is hereby programmatic: "Within absence there may be a material counterpart to presence. It is through trace and memory that we find absence revealed, and both of these are core processes of our culture. Here, your experience and memory can be written, and you witness the assurances of ontological security in existence." (Roddy Hunter as quoted in trace's catalogue for its first season).

So far, Trace has presented 32 artists from 12 countries - among them some of the doyens of the scene - but what has its reputation been based on? What are the "trace" elements of his or her activity exhibited on the following weekends. The programme has afforded an unparalleled insight into the richness of current performance art practice, an insight previously only available through the spectacularized format of a festival. Trace exists such spectacularisation, its programme is based on STITT's extensive networks, developed through making performance work for over 25 years in many locations in the world, and sustained by the principles of hospitality and generosity (STITT's and that of the visiting artists). At the heart of Trace is the idea of encounter of contact and exchange that is so central to much performance art practice, and which has led trace to explore for formalized international exchanges with other spaces devoted to performance art (e.g., with Le Lieu in Quebec - RWM 2003/4; and with Surge in Tokyo 2003). Even among these artist-run spaces, however, trace seems to have a unique energy and "something immediately engaging about being present in the psycho-geographic sense" in one of a dense, sprawling mass of residences, waiting to see a performance in an ordinary house - 26 Moira Place to be precise - directly opposite an abandoned shop where, they tell me, someone used to run a pizza place next door and a fish and chip shop. And the most interesting thing is that these "trace-eran" can mean. It presents a different model for "housing" performance art, where such art is made public in a private space, and its liveness quite literally penetrates the realm of everyday life. Fellow performer artist JULES BACON, who came to trace's opening performance by Anni MaCLennan, describes the impact the event made: "the domestic setting seemed to make for a diminished sense of territory and heightened sense of responsibility. By this I mean that the occasional sophistry of art audience which allows a kind of unfulfilled knowing before the event begins is left unfulfilled. As the codes are mixed. I felt a recognition of a shared context and overlapping reality.
1st phase: October 2003, Cardiff
James PARTAIX, Claudine COTTON, Les Fermières Obsédées, Carl BOUCHARD and Christian MESSIER [Trace: installation 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 Quebec and Wales (Cyfru), and those of their capital cities, Quebec 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 Quebec 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 art scene in the shadow of a dominant neighbouring metropole that sets the cultural agenda.
These parallels have led to a long-standing cultural exchange programme between the two countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized art projects (including the recent RHWWNT Quebec/Cymru exchange programme, festivals, residencies and translation support) and on the more informal level of individuals (performer Simon WHITEHEAD, for example, has been involved in an exchange with Boreal Art/Nature for a number of years; and most recently Welsh movement artist Marc REES invited Quebecois artist Michael TOPPINGS to restage his House Project in Cardiff). The latter form of exchange is driven by a small group of artists who are committed to the transformation of the arts sector in both countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized cultural exchange programmes, and on the more informal level of personal contacts and collaborations.

But the differences are as significant as the similarities. Seen from the outside, it appears that the Quebecois performance scene has experienced a sustained development over the past thirty years, assisted by the patronage of public institutions and the growth of cultural policy in Quebec. Performance art in Quebec is supported, promoted, documented and critically reflected upon in festivals, archives and journals. As a result, the evidence of the work presented at RHWWNT was challenging to those who are (as yet) little known in Wales. In this case the flipside of performance art is far more fragmented, 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: installation art space in 2000, Cardiff now has a gallery space exclusively devoted to the presentation of performance art, which maintains strong links with the international art community. And Chapter Arts Centre, the city's main venue for contemporary art, increasingly hosts time-based art practice. Chapter's annual Art/Nature festival is solely dedicated to a presentation of emerging work in this area, primarily from Wales itself. RHWWNT 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 Art/Nature. This allowed for a very direct comparison between the performance work currently originating from Wales and Quebec.

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 installation, movement, body art, action art, relational Intervention... What linked them all, however, was the highly politicized nature of the work. It was in this case not so much 'local' questions of cultural identity, but the profound diversity, colonial legacies or political independence that interested these Quebecois artists, but concerns with a wider global resonance: the nature of collective aggression, individual responsibility, human competitive behaviour, and all pervading sense of paranoia in our post-9/11 world.

"[...] to those of us who pay a monthly visit to trace, the remains of past performances are always present. There is the circle of phosphorescent glue that Morgan O'HARA drew on the back wall by swirling his 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 André-T. strung between the side walls pre-echoed a similar line in Zbiegniew WARPICHSKI'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.

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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.

These parallels have led to a long-standing cultural exchange programme between the two countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized art projects (including the recent RHWWNT Quebec/Cymru exchange programme, festivals, residencies and translation support) and on the more informal level of individuals (performer Simon WHITEHEAD, for example, has been involved in an exchange with Boreal Art/Nature for a number of years; and most recently Welsh movement artist Marc REES invited Quebecois artist Michael TOPPINGS to restage his House Project in Cardiff). The latter form of exchange is driven by a small group of artists who are committed to the transformation of the arts sector in both countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized cultural exchange programmes, and on the more informal level of personal contacts and collaborations.

But the differences are as significant as the similarities. Seen from the outside, it appears that the Quebecois performance scene has experienced a sustained development over the past thirty years, assisted by the patronage of public institutions and the growth of cultural policy in Quebec. Performance art in Quebec is supported, promoted, documented and critically reflected upon in festivals, archives and journals. As a result, the evidence of the work presented at RHWWNT was challenging to those who are (as yet) little known in Wales. In this case the flipside of performance art is far more fragmented, 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: installation art space in 2000, Cardiff now has a gallery space exclusively devoted to the presentation of performance art, which maintains strong links with the international art community. And Chapter Arts Centre, the city's main venue for contemporary art, increasingly hosts time-based art practice. Chapter's annual Art/Nature festival is solely dedicated to a presentation of emerging work in this area, primarily from Wales itself. RHWWNT 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 Art/Nature. This allowed for a very direct comparison between the performance work currently originating from Wales and Quebec.

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 installation, movement, body art, action art, relational Intervention... What linked them all, however, was the highly politicized nature of the work. It was in this case not so much 'local' questions of cultural identity, but the profound diversity, colonial legacies or political independence that interested these Quebecois artists, but concerns with a wider global resonance: the nature of collective aggression, individual responsibility, human competitive behaviour, and all pervading sense of paranoia in our post-9/11 world.

"[...]

Thomas PENKON, Gravity's Rainbow. 1973
...ndl; voir www.tracegallery.org/