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

Numéro 88, automne 2004
URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/45846ac

Citer cet article
which many current art projects aspire to; this is more than a matter of delivering open-ended performance in the intimate realm of another person's senses or one's gesture 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'MARA 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 ANDREÉ-T. strung between the side walls pre-echoed a similar line in Zbiegiew WARPCHOWSKI’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 potentially 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. Dempsey’s, 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 2003 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 its inception been 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.

There is a danger in exchanges of this kind to interpret the work on show as simply representative of the Welsh arts initiatives mentioned above find themselves engaged in a multitude of exchange processes in both Wales and Québec (Cymru, and Chapter, the event took place in the context of Experimentica. This allowed for a very direct comparison between the performances 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, is not so. 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, performance, 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 diversity, colonial legacies or political independence that interested these Québécois 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.

"[Prana] ... is nothing less than the onsets, the leading edge, of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination - not yet bindingly fine, but at least connected, and perhaps a route in ...".

Thomas INCHON, Gravty'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 legitimate 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 in the way that is most obvious. On the level of the individual, however, as Patricia PARTAIK 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 (as, for example, 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 exert on individuals and societies were investigated in a recent 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 radioactivex, 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 detail of what they considered as their plight – the aunt lying 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 prevent them, of someone listening in and observing them. And they pleaded to us listeners to write letters to the pathetic enemies of their absent partner.

There was also a touching humanity in their futile desire to make an indifferent world receive 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. That performance lead to a fine arts-like line here, never doubting their stories, for there were 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.

The performance took its format in that it was different. But what must once have been smart, formal attire was now soiled with many relational works of this kind, the question remains whether the expansion of structures for surveillance and 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 take on unexpected meaning, that COTTON fashions her performance practice. She prefers the term 'manoeuvre', an aesthetic concept which is not (yet) part of the British critical vocabulary. A manoeuvre appears to share the interactive ethos of relational aesthetics but rejects 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 'manoeuvre' describes perfectly the temporary and ill-defined nature of their plight – the real 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 help her.

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 HARRIETS). COTTON had prepared woolen 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. As the mood and softness of the piece it offered to us only in fragments, in bits of audio and video footage which we were made to place 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, resonant voice from a loudspeaker. Simultaneously, 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 the magnetic tape again the voices of the women emerged. He fixed the tape to the wall as if a map and projected the stars that he stuck behind 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 Quebec. 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 its target, the image moved to the right 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 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, resonant voice from a loudspeaker. Simultaneously, 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 the magnetic tape again the voices of the women emerged. He fixed the tape to the wall as if a map and projected the stars that he stuck behind 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 Quebec. 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 its target, the image moved to the right 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...
an atmosphere of defiance and obstinacy, due to the child-like quality of the simple 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 that was intended to undermine the strictly regimented formation.

A deliberate air of antifrice and夸张ization 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 complicity with political aggression, expressed through a combination of masculine reglementation and feminine hysteria. Some people mistook their angry feminism for sexual aggressiveness – a local review called Les Fermières Obsédées (ironically) 'tawdry and salacious'. I didn'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 re-invention of the traditional woman's needlework circle. And they all combine a firm sense of the burlesque with a postfeminist concern for the need of collective, sexuality and beauty.

A touch of vaudeville also surrounded the performance of Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFRAÎNE. 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 DUFRAÎNE appeared, both wearing the shorts and shirts of gymnasts – one had the word ‘docile’ written on his back, the other the word ‘guillible’. 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 tick 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 DUFRAÎNE’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 enthusiasm 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 DUFRAÎNE seem to warn us that an art form that was once a critique of 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, is in danger of re-evolving and becoming the critic of spectator’s engagement.

The day following their performance, BOUCHARD and DUFRAÎNE 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 silvery 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 formality 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, 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 something’, and ’jumping with a chair’. Real actions were thus alternating with ‘pretended’ actions. Each of these