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

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Wales - Québec performance exchange 2003-2004

1st phase: October 2003, Cardiff

James PARTAÏK, Claudine COTTON, Les Fermières Obsédées, Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFRAINE, 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 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 RHWT/Québec/Cymru exchange programme, festivals, residencies and translation support) and on the more informal level of individual and collective collaboration (performers, writers, critics). There 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 seemingly spontaneous 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 organizations as Inter magazine and Le Lieu and similar artist-run initiatives throughout the different 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 SOUIL DURAND): concepts such as ‘relational aesthetics’ (N. BOURRIAUD) and ‘manouver’ (INTER #41, Québec, 1989) are (as yet) little known in Wales.

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This situation is improving, however. With the establishment of Trace; installation 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. RHWT 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 RHWT, 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, mixed media, installation, 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 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.

[Francia] . . . 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 blissfully fine, 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 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 recurring motifs: 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 with the aunt and her daughter, played variously as audio recordings or as video extracts. The voices of the two women gave voice to the rhythm of what they censored as their plight — the residue of 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 to resist the pathological extension of their abject positions. 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. This performance had a fine aesthetic line there, never of shocking the two women to ridicule. Instead it rendered them anonymous (by distorting their images and their voices) and thus related their individual obsession to a more widespread social paranoia.

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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 thereby conforming to the strictly regimented formation.

A deliberate air of antifitice and exaggeration characterized this work, which took on 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 masochistic manipulation and feminine hysteria. Some people mistook their angry femininity 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 often glorified 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 intervention 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 collective, sexuality and beauty.

A touch of vaudevilliana also surrounded the performance of Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFARSE. 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 planned on a cliff at the back, in front of which stood a beam (as in gymnastics) made from an untreated tree trunk. BOUCHARD and DUFARSE 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 with a layer of 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 DUFARSE’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 DUFARSE 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 DUFARSE 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 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 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 ‘Hurtling 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 Québécois 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.