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Philipps Universität Marburg

Eventful Evidence

Historicizing Performance Art*

Heike Roms (Aberystwyth)

For the past four years I have been afflicted with what may be diagnosed as an acute case of archive fever. Not only have I spent much of my time in archives, an unfamiliar location for someone whose work had previously been almost exclusively concerned with contemporary performance and who had hardly ever written about any work I had not witnessed myself. I am also attempting to build an archive of sorts (although proper archivists may question whether what I am creating can really be regarded as such). Under the title *What's Welsh for Performance?* (*Beth yw 'performance' yn Gymraeg?*), I am aiming to 'uncover' (and I am using this term with caution here whilst acknowledging the immense pleasure it stands for) Wales's hitherto largely hidden history of performance art and to make it available for future interpretation through scholarly and artistic work.

The emergence in Wales of what came to be called 'performance art' dates back to the mid-1960s, when artists joined in the international movement away from the production of art objects toward the creation of events. In 1965 art instructors at Barry Summer School staged happenings to test new approaches to teaching; an early festival of Fluxus art in Britain occurred in the small Welsh university town of Aberystwyth in 1968, six months after Fluxus' most famous representative, Yoko Ono, had made a performance for Cardiff; that same year Welsh painter Ivor Davies brought *destruction in art* to Wales by responding to the era's violence with a series of timed explosions; throughout the 1970s, from their base in Swansea, sculptor Shirley Cameron and drama-graduate Roland Miller explored the field between fine art and experimental theatre; and the *National Eisteddfod*, the major Welsh-speaking cultural festival, in Wrexham 1977 included a controversial performance art programme involving European artists such as Joseph Beuys and Mario Merz, whose contributions were overshadowed by local artist Paul Davies' performative protest against the suppression of the Welsh language. A context characterized by traditions of political radicalism, a lack of art institutions, a small and multidisciplinary artistic scene and a growing activism around issues of language and identity became a breeding ground for an art form that was ephemeral, interdisciplinary, engaged and direct in its address to audiences.

Ivor Davies Adam on St Agnes Eve Swansea Abertawe 1968 (Foto: Stephen Hibbs)

In order to account for this history, *What's Welsh for Performance?* combines a number of approaches:

1. extensive archival research to reveal the range of performance work that has been presented in Wales since 1965 (by Wales-based and visiting artists);

2. the compilation of an online searchable database of events, which records information on artists, titles, dates and locations and indexes available documentary evidence, from audio-visual documentation to writing, ephemera and rumours and hearsay (published at www.performance-wales.org);

3. curatorial interventions, especially in the form of publicly staged 'oral history' conversations with key artists which explore divergences between documentation and personal recollection;

4. historical analysis, using a variety of archival and testimonial sources, in order to identify developments within this work and their relation to context; and

5. an investigation of theoretical issues that arise from the construction of a performance archive and the writing of performance histories which it is designed to support.

The issue I would like to focus on in the limited space of this essay is that of 'evidence' and of the implications it has for the construction of a performance art historiography. First, I would like to come clean about what my project is aiming to evidence. The focus on 'performance art in Wales' is not meant to imply that there is an innately different version of the art form that could be identified as 'Welsh performance art'. Rather, through this case study focus I hope to explore the ways in which performance art as an artistic movement of international reach has been realized within a specific localized cultural context, where it has both mirrored and refracted developments elsewhere. A lack of attention to performance art history is certainly not unique to Wales – Roselee Goldberg's classic study *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (first published in 1979) was for a long time the only widely available comprehensive historical survey of the art form anywhere. Such neglect can be traced back to the bias of an established art history against an avant-garde art practice that emerged as it forcefully asserted a break with some of the key tenets of traditional art historical approaches, most notably the idea of the artwork as autonomous, timeless

object. Therefore, by making itself literally of (its) time, performance art was long deemed unworthy of historical attention. This situation has changed somewhat: over the past ten years, a number of important studies on performance art have appeared, both in art history and performance studies [see, for example, Jones 1998, O'Dell 1998, Schimmel 1998], that attest to the greater critical attention the art form is enjoying. Yet, any historical account of performance art runs the risk of contributing to a certain canonization of (often well-documented) performance pieces, implicitly reiterating an art historical privileging of 'significant' artworks that overlooks work or scenes that have been created outside of the centres of art production. In focussing on Wales' history of performance art I wish to call attention to the manner in which an innovative and non-institutional art form such as performance art too has generated a certain genealogy and canon in its own efforts at historiography.

A project such as this must, evidently, confront the issue of 'evidence' on several levels. Its critical and political agenda demands that it must establish certain access points that may allow an insight into *what happened*, or possibly what *we imagine may have happened*, when artists created performance work in Wales, whilst its scholarly agenda must address the question that animates all historiography, namely how we may identify and construct these access points. In performance studies, 'evidence' is not a term that has received much explicit attention or application. One might relate this to the field's long-standing commitment to an ontology of presence which leads to a deep-seated scepticism concerning critical concepts – such as 'evidence' – that arise principally out of the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of writing histories (a scepticism that is no doubt also a response to the traditional scholarly dismissal of ephemeral practices for lacking 'proper proof', see [Muñoz 1996]). Nonetheless, the issue of 'evidence' is implicit in a number of debates that have been central to performance studies, namely the long-standing discussion about the role of documentation [see, for example, Phelan 1993, Auslander 2006 and many others] and the more recent discourse on performance and archiving [see, for example, Schneider 2001, Roms and Gough 2002, Taylor 2003].

The debate on documentation has concentrated largely on the *ontological* dimension of evidence. By raising the question of whether (and how) a piece of performance documentation constitutes 'proof' for the reality of the event it refers to, it also raises the question of what defines this reality, what constitutes an ontology of performance. If the absence of performance art from traditionalist art history has frequently been justified with reference to the 'unreliable' nature of the documentary evidence that performance art leaves behind, so performance theory could be said to have implicitly validated this notion by declaring documentation not just to be inadequate, but outright incompatible with this ontology. Peggy Phelan's succinct formulation of this proposition in *Unmarked* has become a cornerstone for performance studies:

'Performance's life is only in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance.' [Phelan 1993: 146]

By suggesting that '[p]erformance's being […] becomes itself through disappearance' (ibid.), Phelan has contributed significantly to making performance art the paradigmatic performance genre of the last decade, distinguished by its resistance to a culture driven by the principles of visual reproduction and commodification. At the same time, however, an ontology of disappearance risks colluding in the omission of performance from the history books.

A differentiated engagement with the role of performance documentation has first come from historians of performance art such as Kathy O'Dell (1998) and Amelia Jones (1998), in recognition of the fact that performance artists have, from the outset, engaged in a variety of documentary practices. Photography as the form of documentation most intimately linked to conceptions of evidence has received the most attention here. Jones challenges the common assumption that the live performance takes ontological priority over the document by pointing to the manner in which

in the case of body art the photographic document and the performance event are codependent in their mutual investment in the construction of evidence – in her words, '[t]he body art event needs the photograph to confirm it having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological 'anchor' of its indexicality.' [Jones 1998: 37]. And, as Philip Auslander [2006: 2] has noted, the historian still needs [or desires] the photograph to be an access point for the reality of the performance it refers to if she is to engage with past performance practice. Not being particularly concerned with historiography himself, Auslander goes on to declare it irrelevant whether or not a performance photograph references an actual event in the past. Instead, he defines performance documentation itself as an event that engages an audience in the present. Its authority, he proposes, is thus 'phenomenological rather than ontological' [Auslander 2006: 9].

Whilst Auslander deconstructs the relationship between event and evidence by identifying documentation as eventful rather than evidentiary, scholars such as Diana Taylor (2003) and Rebecca Schneider (2001) have addressed this relationship from the reverse angle, by calling attention to the manner in which the performance itself can be regarded as evidence. They do so in light of a new interest in the ways in which histories (particularly marginalized histories) are constituted in the continual reappearance of performance. To quote Schneider: 'Performance remains – but remains differently ([…] history is not lost through body-to-body transmission).' [2001: 105] Schneider and Taylor both contrast such an embodied, performative manner of historical transmission ('i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual' [Taylor 2003: 19]) – what Taylor usefully terms 'the repertoire' – with the 'archive' as the realm of what we conventionally regard as historical evidence ('i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones' [Taylor 2003: 19]). The shift from 'documentation' to 'archive' as the central critical term in this debate denotes a shift from a concern with *how* performance is evidenced to a critical address to how performance itself *is* evidence for certain lived experiences. In an early essay, one of the few in performance studies to address explicitly the question of evidence, José Muñoz (1996) argues that by thus calling upon the ephemeral *as* evidence, performance scholarship 'queers' traditionalist scholarly methodologies and the ideology of 'proper' proof on which they are built. Schneider and Taylor too consider the recognition of performance *as* evidence to be an epistemological challenge to what Taylor identifies as the 'preponderance of writing in Western epistemologies' [2003: 16] and what Schneider calls the 'patrilineal, West-identified […] logic of the Archive' [2001: 100].

The discussion about performance documentation as evidence with its ontological implications for our understanding of what defines performance, and the debate on performance as evidence with its epistemological implications for how we construct our knowledge of and through performance have, evidently, wide-ranging implications for any scholarly project in the area of performance that follows a historiographic agenda. I have derived from it an interest in the way in which documentation is constitutive to performance art, which has led to a desire to index and archive such documentation; and an interest in developing repertoire-based practices such as oral history accounts and re-enactments as valid methods for a performance art historiography. I would like to add to these debates an additional aspect which emerges from what I would consider to be the 'archival' agenda of my project, and that is an attention to the performance *of* evidence – in other words, how evidence is figured and made evident in the various acts of my own research undertaking. I would like to refer here briefly to recent scholarship in a discipline from where one might least expect such a turn to the performative, archive studies. According to archive theorists such as Terry Cook [2000, see also Meehan 2006 & 2008 and F.X. Blouin Jr. and W. G. Rosenberg 2006], the capacity of documents to serve as evidence is not inherent within them, but derives from acts that identity and construct them as such – the processes whereby it is selected, classified and presented, or, as archivists might put it, appraised, described and recorded – and such acts include the labour of the archivist. For Cook too, this has implications for our understanding of the nature of scholarship: to recognize that archivists do not merely safeguard

but actually construct records as evidence also affects how we perceive the work of the historian which is so dependent upon it. Whilst acknowledging that archival and historiographic work are highly specialized professions, it moves them closer together in their mutual engagement in the process of evidence creation. This is of great interest to me, who, whilst being neither a historian nor an archivist, am nonetheless engaged in both archival and historiographic practices, in trying not just to interpret evidence, but to gather, collate and organise it through practices such as database construction and oral history interviews.

What such practices do, of course, is not just to produce evidence, but also to figure and represent it as such. This figurative and performative dimension is already inherent in the very idea of 'evidence': as recent German and French philosophical debates [Lévy & Pernot 1997; Peters & Schäfer 2006] have pointed out, the word 'evidence' refers at once to a notion of proof and to its (re-)presentation. This terminological ambiguity, manifested in English in the semantic slippage between the noun and the verb, is the result of its twin roots in philosophy and classical rhetoric: whilst in philosophy 'evidentia' since Cicero refers to self-evidence and certainty, in the rhetorical and literary spheres it denotes a compelling form of affective presentation. This is the performative conundrum of 'evidence' [Peters & Schäfer 2006] – it needs to be figured as 'self-evident' to be persuasive as a form of proof, but through this figuration also reveals its constructed and conjectural nature.

To illustrate what I mean by such a performative figuration of evidence, I would like to refer to an example from my own research project. Earlier in 2008 I completed a two-year series of oral history interviews, entitled *An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales*, which took place between myself as interviewer and a number of key artists who have shaped the development of performance art in Wales since 1968, a generation of artists that is gradually disappearing. Oral history has of late instituted itself in performance scholarship as a primary mode for establishing evidence of non-mainstream performance art and experimental theatre of the past 40 years. The method of the interview is seen as particularly appropriate for performance historiography as it itself is performative [Finnegan 1992, Pollock 2005] and thus a mode of the repertoire. What distinguishes my oral history from other, similar projects is that the conversations were all staged as public events in front of a live audience, often involving witnesses of the works in question, as in the case of performance, its histories are, of course, already shared. But by doing so, I also wanted to call attention to the particular manner in which oral history produces historical evidence, and how it performs itself as a scene of evidence.

The first conversation in the series was with Welsh painter Ivor Davies, whose *Adam on St Agnes' Eve* in Swansea in 1968 was one of the first (known) Performance Art events to take place in Wales. The interview introduced an approach that I developed further over the course of the series. It featured the extensive use of documentary material, recovered through archival research, as a 'prompt' to the memory of the artist. Here Davies talks about his *Adam on St Agnes' Eve* performance from 1968 in response to some ephemera, the score and a 5 minute long, 8mm silent black-and-white film that was made of the event:

Ivor Davies: The performance was called Adam on St Agnes Eve because it was done on Sunday 21st January 1968 and prepared during the winter of 1967. I generally used to prepare performances quite carefully. I've kept all sorts of things from that event, even the tickets, an obsessive sort of collection of things. Here is a score which lists the sound, the cues, the explosions and the timing of the explosions, the lighting, the projections, the performers, the actions and props, other objects that were used, and then times it exactly. 7.30 it began and 8.05 it was supposed to finish. What I tried to do was to remove myself from the performance physically. I wonder if it would work if I said what was happening in the film while we are watching it, oh yes … This is the beginning. 7.30. Recording of birdsong, which I'd taken from the Ornithological Society, and red and green spotlights on the floor, which give this feeling of a forest. [In response to a performer appearing on screen] I really don't remember inviting him …

HR: Who was he, do you know?

ID: I don't know who he was.

HR: But is he in it? I mean, he's naked and painted.

ID: Well he's in it, yes, but I didn't ask him to do it. That kept happening – when you tried to organise something very precisely, things like that happen…

[reprinted in an edited version in: Roms 2008]

Ivor Davies talks to Heike Roms (Cardiff 12 October 2006. © Phil Babot)

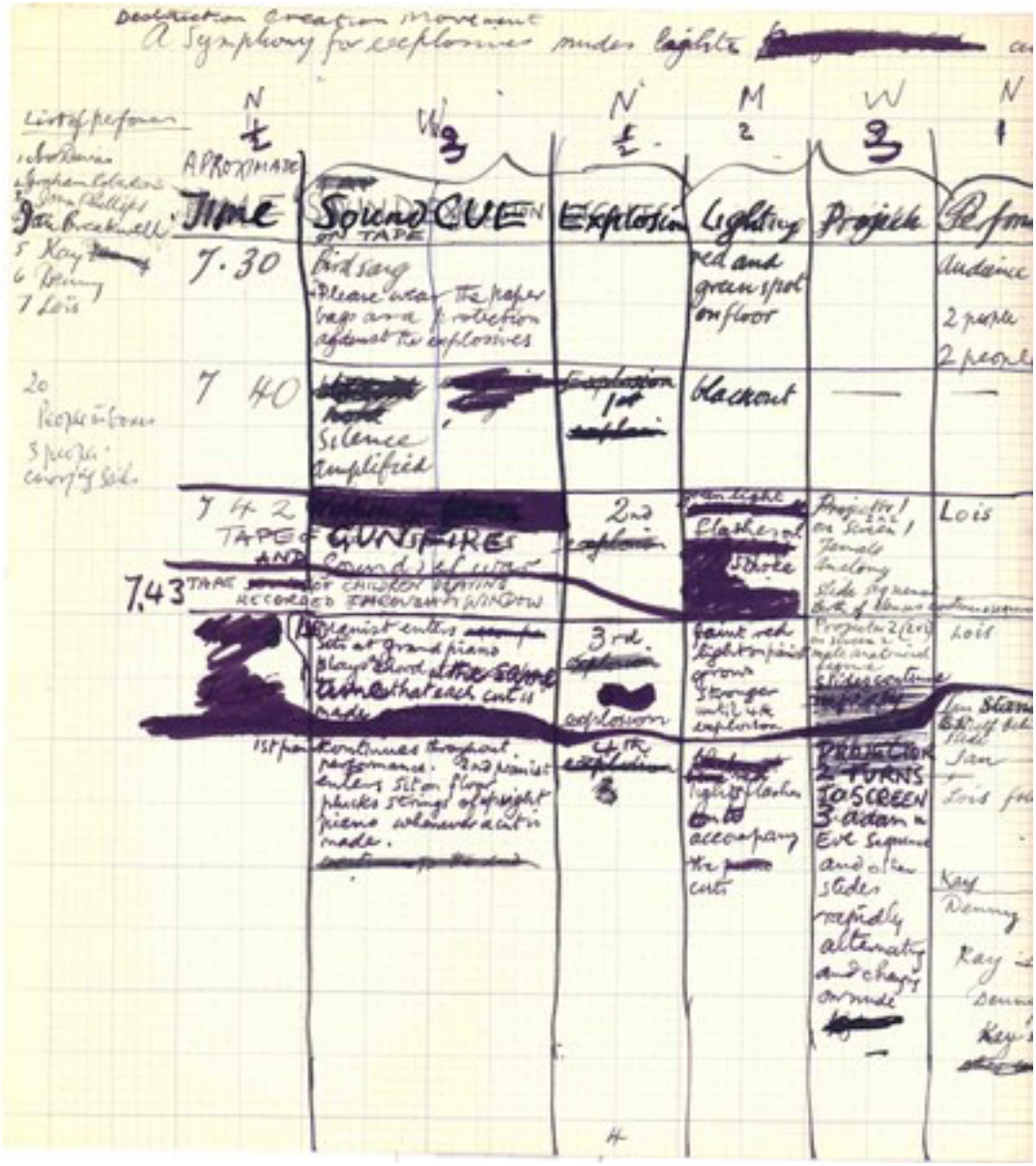
quicktime video (mov) 5:09

The artists himself here calls upon the material richness of his archive – what he terms an 'obsessive collection of things' – to open up points of access to the performance event in question. He then goes on to bring into dialogue two documents from this archive – the film and the score – and simultaneously asserts and interrogates their potential to act as evidence. As Davies suggests in the interview, the important aspect of the score is not what it prefigures will happen, but that between it and its performative execution a gap opens which allows for things to happen that are as yet unpredictable. But this also opens up a kind of 'evidence gap', as it delimits the score's potential to act as evidence for *what happened* in the event of performing it. However, as performance studies has long argued, the film recording of the event is equally limited in its ability to act as a record. Davies confirms this here by calling attention to the disparity between the starkness of the silent, black-and-white recording and the work's colours and sounds. Conventionally, we might expect the artist's memory to fill these gaps. Indeed, in any confrontation between 'the witness' and 'the archive', our mistrust of the latter often leads us to put our trust in personal testimony as a site of evidence. Yet, even though Davies here is obviously not quite sincere in his forgetting, throughout the conversations artists did frequently not remember or remembered differently certain details of their past work that are shown by the documents.

In these oral history conversations therefore I aim – in all seriousness – to establish evidence about past performance events. But as scenes of evidence they figure also to the possibility and impossibility of constructing such evidence. Gaps are opened between different documents, or

material document *and* verbal and embodied recollection. Recognizing the importance of such evidence gaps for the construction of history, Kathy O'Dell has proposed that 'the history of performance art is one that flickers, one that causes the historian to shuttle back and forth between that which is seen and that which is imagined [...].' [O'Dell 1998: 73–4] (and we may add, that which is remembered). I have attempt to stage this flicker as a labour undertaken not just by the historian, but also by the artist and the listening audience so that they may together construct a historiography of performance art in Wales.

Film still, Ivor Davies *Adam on St Agnes' Eve*, Swansea 21 January 1968. © Ivor Davies.



Score (extract), Ivor Davies *Adam on St Agnes' Eve*, Swansea 21 January 1968. © Ivor Davies.

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I am not merely evoking Derrida here for the sake of a pun. As Derrida's eponymous study (1994) has diagnosed, *Archive Fever* derives from a compulsion to repeat (to remember) and the simultaneous desire for a place of origin which precedes the regime of repetition. In seeking to question the established genealogies and canons of the art form, I am finding myself tempted to attribute certain art works with singularity (claiming them as 'original' works, which are 'overlooked' and need 'uncovering') to ensure their place in a future alternative history of performance art, whilst simultaneously having to identify them as representative (i.e. repetitive) of a particular cultural context.

I prefer the term 'performance art' to its (part) cognate, 'live art', because of the greater currency that the former enjoys within the context of art practice in Wales. The origins of the term 'performance art' are disputed. What is certain is that the term is in general use from at least the early 1970s,. For a brief history of the term see Goldberg 2000.

Indeed, the temptation to counter such canonization by establishing a counter-canon of 'important works' that are 'overlooked' and need 'uncovering' in order to ensure their place in a future history of performance art is hard to resist – see above.

I read the recent shift of the debate from 'documentation' to 'archiving' – admittedly against the grain of Taylor and Schneider – also as an invitation to change the focus away from an individual, intentional, often creative *documentary practice* (even if it is a practice governed, as Phelan proposes, by an economy of reproduction) to a consideration of the nature and status of *documents*. In concentrating almost exclusively on the issue of documentation, most notably on practices of photography and video recordings, the debate in performance studies has in my opinion impeded our ability to formulate a fully-fledged methodology of performance art historiography which addresses the whole range of performance remains and their different 'evidentiary' potential for understanding past performance work – scores, notebooks, proposals, correspondence, ephemera, reviews and evidence of audience responses, as well as memories, rumours and hearsay, scars, etc. Such an approach might question performance's claim to exceptionality regarding its ephemeral nature and bring performance studies in closer dialogue with new historiographic approaches to ephemerality in theatre history or indeed in history in general.

For details on other 'performative archiving' events as part of the project see http://www.performance-wales.org/english/events/index.htm. These include a 'redoing' of a *Fluxus* festival originally staged in Aberystwyth in 1968.

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These include the UK-based *Sounding Performance –Towards an Oral History of Performance and Live Art in the British Isle,* initiated by Central St. Martins & The British Library; *Unfinished Histories*, an oral history of feminist theatre of the 1970s; and *Performance Saga*, a Swiss based video interview project with American and European Women pioneers of performance art.

A video extract of the interview is available at
http://www.performance-wales.org/english/oralhistory/phase1/davies_event.htm

Such communality cannot fully escape questions of authority and authorship, however: Although I initially attempted to investigate the possibility of creating a non-authorial history of Performance Art through conversational practices, I have become increasingly aware that through these conversations I am also staging myself as an authority, an institutional site of knowledge for an art practice which has often located itself intentionally outside of institutions – even if the particular power of being an authority on Performance Art in Wales may never be particularly great!

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