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What is a Real Document Anyway?

The kinds of real documents I am referring to in my question are to be understood in the context of archival materials: records that make evidence-based claims about the past. These documents have a demonstrable impact on our perception of historical reality. Much archival content was not produced with the intention of it residing in a repository. This enables the information records contain to remain (a)live by being frequently reconfigured in order that new knowledge may be produced from it. In contrast, performance documents cannot function in this way if they are produced with the intention of being archived. The attempt to save a performance 'as it was then' will always fail if the documenter does not produce material that can be reconfigured by future artists, readers, and audiences. The failure originates from the belief that documents can only be read as historical evidence rather than as dynamic and active materials which can be translated in new contexts.

Two books to my mind neatly illustrate the flexible nature of a document's authenticity or 'realness'. The first is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The epilogue to the novel is a transcribed conference, set in hall much like this one here. The topic of the conference is the theocratic state of Gilead, which Atwood's protagonist, Ofred, is forced to live in as a handmaid with a military commander and his wife. Ofred's sole function is to bear the Commander a child, who attempts to impregnate her during ceremonial rapes. At the novel's conclusion Ofred escapes with help from the resistance movement Maydays.

The conference is set some two hundred years after the events described in the novel proper. The keynote speaker, Professor Piexioto, informs us that Ofred's story is in fact an edited version of recordings she made that were unearthed some years after Gilead fell. The professor hesitates to describe her story as a document because of the impossibility of verifying the claims Ofred makes on the cassette tapes. Moreover, the identity of the author herself

remains unknown, 'Ofred' being the name the narrator is given upon entering the home of the commander, as in the property of *Fred* or of *Warren*.

Atwood has vociferously objected to her novel being classified as sci-fi, preferring to think of it as a piece of speculative fiction. She contests that the distinction is key to understanding that the events in the novel are re-imaginings of real instances of state sanctioned female oppression against women. Although we are never compelled to read *The Handmaid's Tale* as a true historical source, the fact that Atwood asks us to consider the historical veracity of such an emotionally and intellectually affective story represents a challenge to the ways information is classified between objective facts and subjective truths. The case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, however, demonstrates the danger when artists find the past so alluring that they believe they can participate in the formulation of its public memory without a fictive artifice.

Published in 1995, *Fragments* is Wilkomirski's memoir of his childhood experiences in Auschwitz and Majdanek. Wilkomirski's claimed that at the end of the war his adoptive Swiss parents gave him a new identity and expunged his memories of the camps. After undergoing psychotherapy he was able to reconstruct incredibly visceral memories, including having his toes gnawed by rats and watching a starving baby suck its thumb to the bone.

The book was met with wide critical acclaim, receiving numerous awards and was translated into nine languages. But a few years after the book's publication Wilkomirski was interviewed by Daniel Ganzfried, a journalist and Holocaust survivor. Upon meeting the author he began to harbour serious doubts about Wilkomirski's story. Ganzfried soon discovered that Wilkomirski's was a native Swiss and not Latvian as he claimed. Following these revelations the historian Stefan Machler found evidence that entirely disproved his presence in either concentration camp. But to this day Wilkomirski maintains that *Fragments* is a truthful reflection of his memories. When asked if he deliberately set out to deceive the public, Wilkomirski stated that readers were free to read *Fragments* either as a work of literature or as a personal document.

The Wilkomirski case is an instructive example of how an historical event can be plagiarised by appropriating the identity of a first-hand voice. The Wilkomirski who wrote *Fragments* was a constructed identity but the hellish images he was able to conjure in his prose clearly had a profound effect on readers. The fact that his account is a fiction undoubtedly renders *Fragments* an inauthentic historical record, whilst also defaming seminal Holocaust memoirs such as *If This Is A Man*, but it should not be forgotten that organisations like the Holocaust Museum in New York heaped great praise on the book. This indicates that the sensory details in the text re-created a world that his readers instinctively responded to as containing an essence of authenticity.

The Handmaid's Tale and *Fragments* are real documents in the sense that both evoke imaginative worlds that connect readers to history. Live performance can take this process a stage further by physicalizing past events, creating a sensorial connection between the audience and history. The success of this process is not contingent upon mimesis but on a reconfiguration of the documentary evidence.

Performing documents has become a popular way to describe this trope and was the title of a major AHRC funded project housed at the University of Bristol. In this mode of practice the past is explicitly treated as material that is made to re-live in the present. A consistent thread in these pieces is the emphasis on the ways performance processes transform archival records into embodied acts, in order to produce new knowledge claims about the originary pieces. The following pieces were all attached to Performing Documents and were shown at the Redux Symposium in December 2012 and the Performing Documents in April 2013.

SLIDE

“We [performed] a live replay of the video footage...Event joins with its image and its commentary in...*9 Beginnings*”

(Goulish and Hixson, 2013 [unpublished])

Every House Has a Door's took the beginnings of nine recorded performances from the Live Art archive and “reimagined them as a new composition” (2013 [unpublished]) in their devised performance *9 Beginnings*. Artistic directors Lin Hixson and Matthew Goulish were inspired by Pierre Hugghe's statement that the “re-play” (ibid) of live events had come to possess a greater authority than the original. The theory goes that any recording of events is always accompanied by a commentary, to the degree that events are not *experienced* separately from their mediatiation. In this sense *9 Beginnings* was not a re-enactment of the past performances but was instead a live replay of the documentary footage.

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Make the Mix Volatile, and the Volatile Mixed exhibition as part of Do the Wild Thing! Redux at the Arnolfini Arts Centre, December 2012



Jog Shuttler at the Arnolfini Arts Centre, April 2013

Although instigated from a similar refrain as *9 Beginnings*, Bodies in Flight's 2013 *Do the Wild Thing! Redux* had a significantly different form. The piece was based upon the company's 1996 show *Do the Wild Thing!* and was composed of photographs, a video, written text, and a dance, all of which were created as a response to the documentation taken from the original piece. Likewise, Blast Theory used video footage from their archive to create the *Jog Shuttler* installation. In an effort to re-purpose the extensive collection the company had accumulated, the footage was edited and looped into fifteen-minute clips. Nine televisions were connected to their own VCR. Participants were invited to sit in a chair facing a mixing desk and choose from sixty videocassettes, which they were free to play in any order or in any combination they chose to.

All of these artists used existing collections to create these pieces, which while offering potential methodological models to work with archival material they do not express in their form the processual aspects of documentation. By this I am referring to how knowledge changes each time it is transmitted through the accession and reading of documents, as well as in the teaching of a performing arts corpus.

In an attempt to push this work in a new direction I am considering how a performing document can be distinguished from what I term a live archive.

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I am currently collaborating with Anna Makrzanowska as part of Rose Bruford's Kantor is Here project. The project examines how Tsadeuz Kantor's practice is transmitted pedagogically. Part of this study examines how the European Theatre Arts students study Kantor by working with Circot-2 theatre company. We will explore what mechanisms are employed to transmit techniques and performance histories, which in turn will allow us to address what ways students' can act out a legacy of practice.

One strand of the project will be an installation entitled *The Live Archive – Poor Traces of the Room*. Anna and I will be creating the installation with alumni of the college who worked with the artistic directors of Circot-2 Teresa and Andrej Welminski during their studies. Anka and I will explore two different approaches to how a live archive can be created to determine what aesthetic choices are required to make the transmission of past practices live. The purpose is not to re-enact or re-embody the characters the actors performed whilst they were students, but rather to use these as triggers to perform these characters as traces.

The dramaturgical choices we have made are intended to accentuate a transformative process from practice to transmission to performance. Making the live archive an installation will immerse the audience in an environment where information is transmitted from multiple sources, including living bodies and objects. This is cognizant with much immersive theatre, which Josephine Machon claims is popular amongst audiences because it deepens human connection in the artistic sphere (2013). Immersive qualities can be detected when one enters into an archive. Being surrounded by documents creates an atmosphere of potential discovery. For it to be successful the installation must give a performative form to the mechanisms that are at play when knowledge is transmitted in the classroom. This will be realized by embracing the lacunae of memory, treating the gaps as transcendental spaces to work in.

Installing the live archive at Rose Bruford also necessitates attending to the site-specificity of the piece. Rose Bruford's campus will be excavated for

residues of these past works during the workshop. The goal is to place these residues in dialogue with the other elements to create a synthesis of materials.

Unlike Anna I did not see the pieces when they were originally performed, nor do I have a deep knowledge of Kantor. I am therefore reliant on using the video footage to gain a foothold into the work before I start working with the alumni. Like a great many documented performances they have been filmed using a static camera, creating the impression of a depthless space that does not convey the sensory experience of watching theatre. Rehearsals have also been filmed in this way, leading me to suspect that the clips were intended to be used for review purposes only. These are very common complaints that anyone working with performance documentation must confront. Digital cameras have partially mitigated the issue of filmic quality and have also enabled greater ease of storing footage. But this does not address the relative lack of filmmaking technique that is required to produce documentation that reflects the methodological choices at play during a performance process. Furthermore, *Jog Shuttler* demonstrated that analogue devices have become so arcane that they can be exhibited as objects with an historic provenance whilst simultaneously functioning as objects that can aid in the reconfiguration of past performances using recording technologies. I am therefore not using the documentation as sources of historical fact, but as fragments that must undergo a process of translation in order for them to trigger new associations for the performers.

SLIDE

*Pushed through sticky skin
and bleed between.
I couldn't see it's deep colour,
but I could taste it.
Sweet as peach, collecting beneath my spine.*

*The first noises: A quick drum in a white dome, a white dome in darkness.
Second: Quicker breath squeezed between my hairs.*

*The first light: Somehow colder,
an expansion.
Something that I grew for,
up out of the flesh.
Some joke smiling
at the lips that moved to make it.*

An example of these translations is an exercise I designed during my PhD, *If Stones Could Speak...* as part of the *Body Site Encounter* workshop. The aim was to see how memories can be translated into different forms. I recently led the workshop with a group of third year European Theatre Arts students. Walking through the campus in silence the group were instructed to stop at certain points and attend to the shifts in atmosphere they experienced at these different nodes. They were free to record the walk in any way they felt was appropriate. Before returning to the studio they selected an object from a node to work with. They then wrote a history of this remain in the first person. The goal was not to write a story or biography but to express in text the sensorial qualities of the site.

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Documents do not activate a redoing of a past performance as it was then but instead engender an unknown re-invention to occur in the future. The moment a document enters into a performance methodology the knowledge it contains enjoins with contemporary practice and thus becomes live. Richard Schechner has recently claimed that the avant-garde has been replaced by what he terms the “niche-garde”, a system that seeks to conserve and recycle as opposed to challenging existing hegemonies. He writes that the abundance of information on the web creates the impression that “there is nothing new under the sun – except new ways to access and circulate information” (2015, p.23). It would be incorrect to think that the circulation of information is a passive activity, or that with each act of sharing the information remains static. Documents, whether digital or physical, are a fundamental means to disseminate knowledge. But we should not be mistaken that this type of knowledge is limited to evidence-based claims. The reality of a performance lies in as much as what physically happened as its effect upon an audience.

In order for the live archive to sufficiently embody the transmission, absorption, and translation of practice it would need to include audience participation. I say this because a dramaturgy based upon the principles of archivalism must incorporate into its form the cyclically tangled process knowledge undergoes

when it is being performed. This is distinct from the processes of reproduction à la Walter Benjamin by negating the concept of the original object. The greatest challenge is in incorporating documentation strategies into theatre and performance studies teaching beyond existing curricula, which too often fail to address how documents can link discrete, embodied acts to performance histories. The live archive can therefore be read as a mode of archival production. By this, I mean the intermingling of the live and recorded as a means of transmitting knowledge about theatre and performance, whilst simultaneously allowing actions in the rehearsal room to enter into future discourses.

References

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