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RESPONSE

Oral/Response

ANGELA BARTRAM AND MARY O'NEILL

This work in four parts offers the practice of Bartram O'Neill, a collaborative partnership between an artist (Angela Bartram), and an artist/writer (Mary O'Neill), as an alternative creative strategy to the binaries of theory and practice, academic and artistic, event and text. To borrow and extend Wallace Bacon's shore metaphor from his canonical publication, "The Dangerous Shore: From Elocution to Interpretation" (1960), this essay in four documents represents an amphibious practice in which different stages of its life cycle require different media.¹ The four parts are: a score written during the performance *Oral/Response* that forms part of the event; images of the collaborative performance of the same title at Greestone Gallery, Lincoln (2011); a prose piece written in response to the performance; and questions and answers that discuss the concerns of the artists and the collaborative relationship. Each mode has informed the others and is a response to different sites. A gallery, an academic journal, an artist's statement – these are all "sites" not only defined by a physical location, but they consist of dynamic ensembles that also include the artists' bodies, the anticipated audience, any objects being used, and the atmosphere. Bacon categorized the relationship between the text and the performance as a negotiation between polarized opposites using the metaphor of travelling through waterways. This negotiation exists in the territory where the distinction between land and sea is blurred, the alluvial plains where rather than prioritizing one form over another, each manifestation generates potential for further responses. The result is an ongoing work.

¹ Wallace Bacon, "The Dangerous Shores: From Elocution to Interpretation." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 46, Issue 2 (1960): 148 – 152.

Document I

ORAL/RESPONSE

Site - gallery floor

Tools - a mortar and pestle

Material - charcoal, paper, masking tape

Performers crouching on the floor

black

places a piece of tape on the floor to align paper

paper is put in place

grinds charcoal with the mortar and pestle

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

grinds second stick of charcoal

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

lifts paper, gathers dust in fold

tips pile of dust on floor to right of ghost image of paper

moves backwards one paper length

dark grey

places a piece of tape on the floor to align paper

paper is put in place

grinds charcoal with the mortar and pestle

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

grinds second stick of charcoal

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

lifts paper, gathers dust in fold

tips pile of dust on floor to right of ghost image of paper

moves backwards one paper length

mid grey

places a piece of tape on the floor to align paper

paper is put in place

grinds charcoal with the mortar and pestle

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales
grinds second stick of charcoal
pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper
places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper
exhales on the charcoal dust
dust fans out on the paper
inhales
pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper
exhales
lifts paper, gathers dust in fold
tips pile of dust on floor to right of ghost image of paper
moves backwards one paper length

light grey

places a piece of tape on the floor to align paper
paper is put in place
grinds charcoal with the mortar and pestle
pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper
places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper
exhales on the charcoal dust
dust fans out on the paper
inhales
pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper
exhales
grinds second stick of charcoal
pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper
places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper
exhales on the charcoal dust
dust fans out on the paper
inhales
pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper
exhales
lifts paper, gathers dust in fold
tips pile of dust on floor to right of ghost image of paper

moves backwards one paper length

white

places a piece of tape on the floor to align paper

paper is put in place

grinds charcoal with the mortar and pestle

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

grinds second stick of charcoal

pinches a small amount of charcoal dust and places it on the paper

places her hands flat on the ground on either side of the paper

exhales on the charcoal dust

dust fans out on the paper

inhales

pinches another piece of dust and places it on the paper

exhales

lifts paper, gathers dust in fold

tips pile of dust on floor to right of ghost image of paper

moves backwards one paper length

stands up

walks away.

Document II





Document III

A corridor, polished parquet.

The pent up energy of charcoal, the carbon remains of millennia of waiting are released in a breath and soon will be swept away. Like a miner with red-rimmed, irritated eyes peering out from a dust-masked face, the performer stands up.

The performance is over.

On the floor is the evidence of the event, the evidence of effort, the evidence of existence. Not just the image left by the breath of the performer but the memory of coal dust, itself the trace of existence beyond a single lifetime, that unimaginable existence of a planet. Here we see the slightness of a breath, the slightness of our presence.

Ashes to ashes

Dust to dust

Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.

Document IV

Q: HOW IS THE COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP OF ANGELA BARTRAM AND MARY O'NEILL NEGOTIATED? WHAT IS THE AIM? WHO INITIATES, AND WHO IS THE INSTIGATOR IN DEVELOPING THE WORK? DOES IT MATTER?

BARTRAM

The collaboration transcends the boundaries between performance and its legacy, between the performer and observer, between author and interpreter. Rather than the documentation being produced by an on-looker outside the performance, the generation of an accompanying text becomes integral to the performance itself. Thereby creating a text that is embedded in the physical experience of the performance. In the case of *Oral/Response*, the repetition and rhythm of the action of crushing the sticks of charcoal and blowing the dust is echoed in the tat-tat-tat thud of inscribing the text on the shared surface.

O'NEILL

Communication and development are negotiated through a dialogue. The partnership is equal in its response to the varying methods and processes that make up its sum parts. Integral to this performance is the distinction between cooperation and collaboration as defined by Pierre Dillenbourg (1996). According to Dillenbourg, “cooperative work is accomplished by the division of labour among participants, as an activity where each person is responsible for a portion of the problem solving...” whereas collaboration involves the “mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together.”² In collaboration, the disciplinary ghettos of performance and documentation are abandoned in favour of a mode of practice that allows for a greater level of mutual critique. Performers work together towards a shared goal – the success of the performance – rather than focus on the individual contributions. To this end, auto/ethnography enhances the processes of give and take, self-critique, and improvement that enhance the collaborative synergy.

BARTRAM

Oral/Response is a conversation that adapts to progressive elements within both collaborative and individual research. The piece is modified, as it is re-staged and over time, and developed to respond to current thinking and research within the collaboration. For example, we are now considering the document and how it can be activated before the actual performance and what this does to more conventional strategies that represent thinking and ideas.

Q: THE ORAL?

BARTRAM

I have worked with the oral since 2003 to explore communication without words. The performative aspects of *Oral/Response* expand this further to include text as a method by which to “tell” a story without a verbal voice. O’Neill’s simultaneous textual documentations of *Oral/Response* are as integral to the performance as the processes they document. The document in this sense is as much a part of the performance

² P. Dillenbourg, M. Baker, A. Blay, C. O'Malley “The Evolution of Research on Collaborative Learning,” *Learning in Humans and Machine: Towards an interdisciplinary learning science*, edited by E. Spada and P. Reiman (Oxford: Elsevier, 1996): 189-211. Last accessed online on July 17, 2012: <http://tecfa.unige.ch/tecfa/publicat/dil-papers-2/Dil.7.1.10.pdf>.

as the action it seeks to represent. The collaboration is performatively demonstrated as non-verbal dialogue, a process that is reflexive and conversational.

O'NEILL

The oral referred to in the title is not limited to the potential of the mouth to communicate verbally but alludes to the wider capacity of the mouth to tell stories in the broadest sense. Here the mouth is used as a drawing tool to blow pigment on the floor. In everyday communication the mouth can communicate through expression; for example it can express happiness through smiling, tenderness through kissing and licking, or hate through spitting.

Q: HOW IS THE WORK TEXT AND PERFORMANCE AT THE SAME TIME? WHERE DO SUCH MODES INTERSECT OR COLLIDE? HOW DOES THIS WORK DEPART FROM THE TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VISUAL ART AND TEXT?

O'NEILL

In visual art, the artificial separation between the experiences of an artwork (either a physical object or a performance) and an accompanying text is exaggerated by the means of presentation of these modes of communication. In the contemporary art gallery, the text (which usually includes the artist's name, a title, the year in which the work was made, and on occasion some contextual information about the work) is conventionally minimized to reduce visual clutter. The work of art is presented as the conduit through which the viewer can engage with artist intention, and the text is supporting information. There are of course exceptions to this convention. For example, in *Vides (Voids): A Retrospective* at the Pompidou Centre (Paris, 2009), the only visual elements were the texts that accompanied each void. In our work we explore the potential of the text, which has an aesthetic capacity of its own, to enhance, contribute to, and alter the viewing experience.

BARTRAM

Equally in the documentation of ephemeral work such as performance, the textual element has the potential to contribute to the experience, to offer the viewer another means of engagement. The viewer thereby shares in the experience of collaboration, seeing two agents, two opinions, two disciplines, working to and fro to create one work.

Q: PEGGY PHELAN OPENS HER ESSAY "THE ONTOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE" (1993) WITH AN UNEQUIVOCAL STATEMENT: "PERFORMANCE'S ONLY LIFE IS 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." HOW DOES ORAL/RESPONSE EXIST BEYOND THE MOMENT OF PERFORMANCE?

O'NEILL

This is really the question that brought us together as a collaborating partnership in the first instance. As a theorist concerned with the ephemeral and how it is perceived, I am interested in the polarized argument that Phelan represents at one end of the spectrum and Amelia Jones at the other.³ As a performer I can empathize with the purity of Phelan's "you have to be there" argument, but in practice Jones' pragmatic view is a more plausible account of the reality of experiencing events. In agreement with Phelan,

³ Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation." In *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, Issue 4. Issue special topic, *Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century* (Winter, 1997): 11-18

Oral/Response acknowledges that a performance “become[s] itself through disappearance.” However, we expand on Phelan to suggest that the documentation is also subject to the same vagaries of time as the performance itself. By including documentation in the work the ephemeral nature of the performance and text are linked. In reiterations of this performance, the disappearance of the text itself has been incorporated to emphasize the transience of the text as much as the actions described. We have also performed a section of this piece for a “live” streamed exhibition (*Low Lives 4*, 2012) where the audience watched the performance in the U.S., Japan, and France. In order to accommodate the camera we restructured the performance. When this piece is viewed via the internet, the audience will not necessarily be aware of the time gap between the performance and the moment of viewing – and it will not matter. In fact, the work in the moment of performance was already mediated by virtue of being streamed and “out of time” as we were performing at 2:25 a.m. (GMT) in an empty gallery in Nottingham, to an audience that viewed the work in different time zones.

BARTRAM

Beyond most performances, memories remain in the mind of observers and form part of the legacy of the fleeting experience they have witnessed. Memory is mostly a personal indulgence that shifts, mutates and fades over time to become distant, and different to its origin, and in this way its archival potential is unreliable. To overcome this dilemma, posthumous archival methods have become the tradition of recording the “actual” event in as far as it is possible. Although a recorder, of any variation, can provide footage that gives place and context to the archive document, it does present a dilemma for renditions of what it was like to be there. Recordings are mediated and translated through the direction of the person holding the device, documenting his or her viewpoint and subjective encounter with the work. There are points, however, in which those elements can be seen to intersect through the narrative of text, and this is useful for performance. The directed observation of the archival document is open to subjective memorial discussion and recourse to its translation in text. The memory and eye collide to initiate a discussion between seeing and recording. This gives text a potency as an archive of performance, one to which the collaboration of Bartram O’Neill is indebted.

Q: DOES IT MATTER THAT THE DOCUMENTS OF THE COLLABORATION CAN BE LOST AND IGNORED OVER TIME BY WORKING IN THIS WAY?

BARTRAM

We accept and collaboratively welcome the loss of any visual archive. Visual documents, such as still images and video footage, seem unsuitable for a process founded on performative textual dialogue. The document’s role as integral to the performance, witnessed by others in the same way as the action that it interprets and transcribes, means that visual documentation is unnecessary. The reflexivity of the process is the work’s legacy.

O’NEILL

Through an engagement with ephemerality the collaboration acknowledges a cultural desire for permanence but intentionally sacrifices durability for the potential gain of the focus on experience and the knowledge of the event. The fixity of the permanent object suggests an illusion of a completeness or a conclusion. In this work, the gallery becomes the artist laboratory in which ideas are tested and lessons drawn but the work is never completed. It is more a stage in the development of an idea.

Angela Bartram works in live art, video and sculpture and published text. Her interests concern threshold and 'in-between' spaces of the human body, gallery or museum and definitions of the human and animal within companion species relationships. Bartram completed a PhD at Middlesex University in 2010 and is senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln (UK) in the department of fine art.

Mary O'Neill's practice is interdisciplinary and focuses on contemporary art as a means of discussing significant cultural issues. From an original interest in ephemerality in art and notions of mortality and immortality her research has developed to explore attitudes towards the dead, mourning, loss, bereavement, memory and value. O'Neill completed an AHRC funded PHD in 2007 and is currently senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln.

BartramO'Neill are a collaborative partnership whose work centres on art and ethics and the documentation of performance through situated writing and text that moves beyond formal academic conventions. They offer an alternative creative strategy to the binaries of theory and practice, academic and artist, event and text. BartramO'Neill have exhibited, performed and published nationally and internationally. Most recently they performed after a residency at Grace Exhibition Space New York 2012, as part of Low Lives 4 streamed event, at Environmental Utterances at the University of Falmouth, In Dialogue at Nottingham Contemporary Art, 'BLOP 2012' at Arnolfini Bristol, at 'Action Art Now' for O U I International performance festival in York, 2011, and at 'The Future Can Wait' in London.