Revisiting *Plato's Chair*: writing and embodying collective memory.
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The review I wrote of *Plato's Chair* in 1985 evaluated Rose English's performance as if it were a piece of dance. While not ignoring the fact that the piece consisted of a long improvised monologue, my review emphasised the embodied aspects of the performance, claiming that the piece foregrounded the corporeality of English's presence. In retrospect, it seems to me that my review explores the tension between the mostly verbal, archival traces of *Plato's Chair* and those physical aspects of its performance that largely escape the written record because they are embodied experiences that are hard to document and preserve. The review was published in *New Dance,* a British magazine dedicated to covering experimental dance practice. The fact that after sitting on it for a few months they eventually decided to print it indicates the extent to which, in the early 1980s, disciplinary boundaries between experimental dance and what is now called live art were beginning to congeal. My proposal that *Plato's Chair* could be considered a dance was intended as a slightly mischievous way of opening up questions about the ontology of dance performance. What I actually wrote became key, earlier this year, to my remembering the work as part of Sophia Hao's project *NOTES on a return*. My aim in this morning's presentation is to revisit my review and examine some questions about memory and recollection that it raises.

The process of remembering is, I suggest, an important aspect of *NOTES on a return*. This becomes evident when one places this project in the context of two other comparable ones. For *Crash Landings Revisited (and more)*, the Brussels-based writer and dramaturge Myriam van Imschoot has been interviewing participants in the *Crash Landings* series of improvised dance performances that Meg Stuart, Christine De Smedt and David Hernandez curated between 1997 and 1999. Next month in Ljubljana, Janez Janša, formerly Emil Hrvartin, is running a series of events marking the 40th Anniversary of the emergence of the Pupilija Ferkeverk Group. The latter was a group of Yugoslavian visual artists who, in 1969,

1

created an experimental performance in Ljubljana titled *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks* which Janša has recently reconstructed. All three projects share a similar historiographical desire to deal with unfinished business. This is most evident I believe in Van Imschoot's *Crash Landings* project. All three also recognise the extent to which radical experimental performance can constitute an unofficial site of resistance against dominant ideologies - and this is a major concern of the reconstruction of *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*. Questions about memories of ephemeral performances are inherent in all three projects, but these I suggest are foregrounded most clearly within *NOTES on a return*. Philosopher Maurice Halbwachs argued that recollection of memory is always a social process; in his view there is no individual memory that is not also, in some way, part of the memories that we share with those with whom we are connected. Performances like *Plato's Chair* that draw on those corporeal aspects of a radical tradition that are least amenable to preservation can nevertheless transmit communal memories, histories and values -- that may be to some extent unofficial -- from one generation or group to another. Through reflecting on the written and embodied memories of *Plato's Chair*, I want to consider what kinds of histories and values its recollection transmits.

Maurice Halbwachs (1877 - 1945) initially studied with the philosopher Henri Bergson but then in a radical change of focus joined the circle of researchers that formed around the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Towards the end of his life, Halbwachs's work on collective memory represents his attempt to reconcile Bergson's vitalist work on memory with Durkheim's objective, evidence-based approach to social research. In his 1939 essay on collective memory among musicians, Halbwachs uses a striking metaphor taken from the story of Robinson Crusoe. When Crusoe saw a footprint on the beach of his desert island, Halbwachs argues, this put him back in touch with the human world. Man Friday's footprint comprises a trace of the comings and goings of members of a group within which Crusoe

recognised he belonged. Halbwachs then asks: what traces might comparably put a musician in touch with the world of music? His answer was the notes of a musical score. These, he believed, conjure up for musicians the memory, or ensemble of memories, of the social milieu of musical practices, and the conventions and obligations that are imposed on us when we engage with the world of music. Thinking about memories of live art performances like those celebrated in *NOTES on a return* offers an opportunity to consider what traces might conjure up the ensemble of memories that circulate within the social milieu of live art.

Turning now to the story of my own encounter with *Plato's Chair*, I think I came to the Laing Art Gallery in 1985 primarily to see *Pandora's Box,* a feminist-oriented exhibition of work by women visual artists. Attending the lunchtime performance by Rose English was an added bonus. I believe it was only afterwards that I decided to write about it. English had a peripheral connection with *New Dance* magazine; she collaborated in the 1970s on a few projects with the choreographer Jacky Lansley, one of the magazine's founders. For the 1980 Women's Issue of *New Dance*, English wrote a feminist psychoanalytical analysis of fetishisation in Romantic ballet titled 'Alas alack: the representation of the ballerina'. Coincidentally, for the Newcastle performance of *Plato's Chair*, English wore a romantic-length ballet costume. Her performance was improvised around a core of pre-rehearsed material and at the time a similar approach to improvisation was key to much innovative dance practice in the UK.

Earlier this year, my colleague Helena Goldwater invited English to give an (excellent) artist's talk at De Montfort University. At the end of this, I introduced myself, mentioning that I'd once reviewed a piece of hers. This initiated a chain of events that culminated in Sophia Hao interviewing me about *Plato's Chair* as part of her curatorial project. I was surprised to find how much I could remember about the piece. This is perhaps less surprising when one takes into account the fact that I had made notes during the performance, checked

over these immediately afterwards, and subsequently spent a couple of weeks working them up as a review.

If, as Henri Bergson believed, memory of the past is produced through recollection in the present, it can therefore take on a life of its own, and in doing so may incorporate partial misrecognitions and subjective rationisations. Halbwachs reminds us of the social dynamics of this process. Our confidence in the accuracy of our recollections increases, he argues, 'if it can be supported by others' remembrances also. It is as if the very same experiences were relived by several persons instead of only one' (1980: 22). My own experience of recollecting *Plato's Chair* earlier this year fits with Halbwachs's description. I was more confident about what I was able to remember after I heard English's own lecture about the piece, and I subsequently found Sophia Hao's prompts reassuring during her interview with me. Photographs of English in the ceramics gallery at the Laing where the performance took place show her wearing a ballet costume. This confirmed the description in my review as well as things that English recalled in her lecture. Some of the more impersonal traces, however, left me unmoved. When I revisited the now remodelled gallery space that used to display the ceramics collection, it was so changed that I found myself unable to recognise it as the site in which I had beheld the performance. I was also surprised when an extract from a video made of a performance of *Plato's Chair* in Vancouver also left me cold. While this is probably a generic problem with video documentation, the traces to which I responded most strongly were those that put me in touch with the perceptions and affective responses of others with whom I shared some knowledge or experience of the piece.

Halbwachs's idea that the notes of a musical score constitute a privileged trace that puts the musician in touch with the world of music is a problematic one for live art because issues around approaches to documenting performances remain contentious. Halbwachs's idea nevertheless offers a way of reflecting on what is at stake in discussions about

documentation. If, as he suggests, a score puts performers in touch with the collective memories of a community of fellow practitioners, then the breadth or narrowness of the range of entities and qualities that it can record will both enable and constrain the world view and inclusiveness of this community.

Some aspects of performance are inevitably more difficult to document than others. Diana Taylor offers some reflections on this in her discussion of the archive and the repertoire. In her account, the archive contains what are supposedly enduring kinds of material such as texts, documents, and visual images. The repertoire draws on those primarily non-verbal aspects of lived experience that are embodied in performance including 'gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing - in short all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non reproducible knowledge' (2003: 20). What Taylor calls the repertoire therefore has the potential to offer alternative, sometimes unofficial ways of accessing cultural traditions that cannot usually be derived from the archive. Live art practice, I suggest, draws more heavily on those aspects that Taylor associates with the repertoire than it does on those traces that can be stored in the more official archive.

Embodied memory, Taylor suggests, 'because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance - as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior - disappears' (ibid.: 20). Taylor is evidently responding here to Peggy Phelan's much cited argument that performance always disappears. It is possible to develop ways of identifying and writing about those effectively intangible aspects of performative behaviour that constitute the repertoire. This involves recognising and counteracting those processes that marginalise and invalidate non-verbal experience. Taylor argues that embodied acts 'reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge' (ibid.: 20-21). My decision in 1985 to evaluate *Plato's Chair* as if it were a piece

of dance meant that I focused in particular on those physicalised aspects of the performance that Taylor associates with the repertoire. This raises the question: what kinds of communal memories, histories, and values are being transmitted through recollection of such aspects today?

Back in 1985, I saw *Plato's Chair* through the lens of feminist cultural theory. As I understood it, the premise behind the exhibition *Pandora's Box* was to present work by women artists that reappropriated European myths like that of Pandora in order to rework them in ways that counteracted their patriarchal bias. *Plato's Chair*, I thought, attempted something similar. In my review I wrote:

> Plato proposed that objects in this world were corrupted versions of ideal models that existed on another dimension. This concept for English becomes a metaphor for performing. *Plato's Chair* in Newcastle was a partial version of an ideal that only exists fully in her imagination, and its 'corruption' comes from her responsiveness to the specific context in which she is performing, and the way the audience behaves and reacts. [*I was referring here to its improvised nature*] On another level her representations of woman - as romantic ballerina or melodramatic actress - are corrupted versions of another sort of 'ideal', an oppressive social construct [*i.e. a patriarchal one*], which it is English's achievement that she manages to expose in such an entertaining way. (Burt 1985: 26)

Although this is a very neat interpretation, retrospectively I can see problems with it. Admittedly during the performance English stated that she wanted to give up being a fine art entertainer and become a philosopher; but in her talk at De Montfort earlier this year she claimed that she had in fact hardly read any philosophy. One can still interpret the performance in the way I suggested, but I should not infer that English intended to articulate of this philosophical approach. Retrospectively, the particular feminist approach to

representation that I then believed informed the piece should now perhaps also be reconsidered. To expose an oppressive social construct is in effect a negative, deconstructive intervention. *Plato's Chair*, I suggest, did something that was, in effect, more affirmative. Through reflecting on my memories I now realise I can see the 1985 performance as a celebration of an immanent creative potential within the tradition of female performing artists - ballerinas, melodramatic actresses - whose contributions have been largely marginalised and undervalued. A recognition of a potential that is inherent within this particular, marginalised group does not, however, preclude the possibility of recognising a creative potential immanent within other less marginalised individuals or groups, of people or horses.

Works that recognise such immanent potentials can have be socially transformative by enabling a belief in what might otherwise seem impossible. What I am suggesting here is that what is officially possible is generally confined to what can be stored in the archive, while to conceive of the impossible one has to draw on the kinds of qualities and experiences that are remembered and maintained within the repertoire. Earlier in this presentation I suggested that *NOTES on a return* offers an opportunity to consider what traces might conjure up the ensemble of memories that circulate within the social milieu of live art. Unfortunately I have not been able to think of anything sufficiently concrete to stand comparison with Halbwachs's examples of the footprint and the musical note. From my experience of recollecting memories of *Plato's Chair*, I can say that such traces would be redolent of the sedimentation of collective memories of a group who share a belief in the impossible. In order to believe in the impossible it is necessary to keep open a range of possibilities that lie beyond the set of normative performative practices whose habitual reiteration maintains isolated, passive patterns of cultural consumption. Memory, I have been arguing, plays an important role in keeping these possibilities open. In conclusion, one thing that *NOTES on a return* has surely revealed is the strength and richness of the memories that connect us with those with whom

we share some involvement with the milieu of live art, and that these can be recollected in greater depth and from a more distant period than we had previously appreciated.