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### *Oral History as Site-Specific Practice: Locating the History of Performance Art in Wales*

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*Published in:*  
Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History

*Publication date:*  
2011

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Roms, H., & Edwards, R. (2011). Oral History as Site-Specific Practice: Locating the History of Performance Art in Wales. In S. Trower (Ed.), *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History* (pp. 171-192). (Palgrave Studies in Oral History). Springer Nature. <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=396330>

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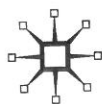
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# Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History

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palgrave  
macmillan



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First published in 2011 by  
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ISBN: 978-0-230-62369-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Place, writing, and voice in oral history / Shelley Trower.  
p. cm.—(Palgrave studies in oral history)  
ISBN 978-0-230-62369-9 (hardback)  
1. Oral history. 2. Aural history. I. Trower, Shelley, 1975-

D16.14.P55 2011  
907.2—dc23

2011018688

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: November 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

## **Oral History as Site-Specific Practice: Locating the History of Performance Art in Wales**

*Heike Roms and Rebecca Edwards*

Oral history's multifaceted connection with place, this chapter proposes, comes into sharper view when we look at it through the optic of performance. Oral history, place, and performance maintain a dynamic connection with each other that is mutually illuminating. This essay considers some implications of this connection by drawing on the example of our current research project, funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council, which has made extensive use of oral history in an attempt to engage with the history of performance practice in a particular local context. Under the title "It Was Forty Years Ago Today...': Locating the Early History of Performance Art in Wales 1965–1979"<sup>1</sup> the project—for which, as the title implies, questions of place are of major significance—has employed different approaches to the placing of its oral history conversations: these include conversations staged in public, *in-situ* interviews, and installations that aim to locate audiences' memories. Underlying all three approaches is the proposition that oral history interviews can be regarded as instances of located performance, or even site-specific performance. We will argue that to foreground the performative dimension of an oral history

conversation in this manner directs our attention more closely to the influence that its location exerts on the construction of its narrative. The ways in which artists have made use of performance's material bond with its setting can hereby serve as models for developing new ways of locating oral history conversations. And these new ways may help to create an oral history that, by being responsive to the sites where it takes place, offers in turn new insights into the contextual nature of performance.

### Performing Oral Histories, and Oral Histories of Performance

Scholars of performance are increasingly drawn to oral history as an allied discipline with a mutual interest in the live encounter. In her introduction to *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, an edited collection that charts the many connections between oral history and performance, Della Pollock speaks of the unique synergy that the two fields enjoy: "Oral historians and performance scholars/practitioners are increasingly discovering shared and complementary investments in orality, dialogue, life stories, and community-building or what might more generally be called *living* history."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, oral history can itself be regarded as an instance of performance. Linda Shopes and Bruce M. Stave propose in the same volume, "As many oral historians know intuitively, the telling of stories is inherently performative: an interviewee puts on a show, creates an identity, within the context of talking to the interviewer."<sup>3</sup> Whilst such theatrical role-play for an interviewer-as-audience may have traditionally been thought of as getting in the way of a "truthful" account, it now emerges as that which constitutes the very nature of an oral form of historical evidence.

Jeff Friedman argues that oral history "is a performance that includes both the local embodied social situation and a more public and official historical posterity for whom the narrators stage their experiences. This additional layer requires a complex public performance from both the interviewer and narrator within the oral history event."<sup>4</sup> Taking a cue from performance studies, Friedman here moves beyond mere analogies with theatrical role-play toward a broader concept of performance as a form of structured behavior that involves both interviewee and interviewer as co-performers in an embodied, spatio-temporal encounter. From such encounters, oral history narratives emerge as contingent "truths" that are always dependent on the manner of their staging. Yet, as Friedman proposes, oral history's "staging" is not limited to the live exchange between interviewer and interviewee. Similarly, Ronald J. Grele suggests that in any oral history interview, the narrative is shaped by the awareness of the interviewee that "he [sic] not only speaks to himself and to the interviewer, but he also speaks through the interviewer to a larger community and its history as he views it."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to approach an oral history interview as performance, we want to argue, implies

first that one needs to be mindful of the particular *mise-en-scène* of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee. But second, it also urges us to be attentive to the manner in which this initial encounter prepares for the future encounters that various audiences may have with it (Friedman's "historical posterity")—in short, to be attentive to how oral history stages itself for its different audiences in the present and the future.<sup>6</sup>

Given the unique synergy and structural similarities between performance and oral history, it is perhaps little wonder that a considerable number of oral history projects have of late turned their attention to the particular histories of performance, especially those of the theatre and related artistic practices. Susan Croft, in a recent survey of such projects in the United Kingdom, concludes that

the use of oral history to record aspects of British theatre history is a growing and widespread one. . . . [Oral histories of theatre and performance] cover a whole range of material from theatre buildings to amateur theatre companies of long standing to the big companies, with their own archives, like Royal Opera House and the National Theatre, to contemporary queer performance festivals.<sup>7</sup>

Among these—both in Britain and elsewhere—are an increasing number that focus on so-called experimental, non-mainstream, or avant-garde performance work. Croft herself currently conducts an oral history of the British alternative theatre movement from 1968–1988, entitled "Unfinished Histories."<sup>8</sup> A similar focus, albeit filtered through the perspective of having been themselves key contributors to this history, is shared by Roger Ely and Cindy Oswin, who have both undertaken interviews with fellow theater and performance artists of the period. And "Towards an Oral History of Performance and Live Art in the British Isles"<sup>9</sup> has addressed the same field of artistic practice, but with a primary interest in exploring methodological approaches.<sup>10</sup> If Croft is right in stating that "more traditional, text-based forms of British theatre were perceived to be adequately documented through conventional means," leading to a situation in which "oral histories of theatre have been slower to emerge,"<sup>11</sup> it is not surprising that non-traditional forms of theater and performance have conversely been drawn to oral history as a method for engaging with their pasts.

The embodied and dialogic dimension of the oral history interview is considered especially productive with regard to artistic practices that have eschewed traditional dramatic narrative in favor of other forms of telling, most notably through physical expression, and that have frequently replaced the single author with collaborative creations (or, in the case of solo artists, have shown a greater awareness of the dependency of their performance work on the audience's collaborative act of witnessing). Such practices, the argument goes, have in the past been overlooked, marginalized, or insufficiently documented by scholarship

focused on the written word and the singularity of the author–creator. The scholarly currency of these practices, however, has risen considerably over recent years, and interest in the experimental performance work of the 1960s and 1970s is especially strong, as evidenced by the aforementioned projects. This interest is further boosted by the fact that the artist generation that originated this work more than forty years ago is beginning to disappear, which has added greater urgency to the recording of its memories.

An aspect that is shared by all the listed projects is that they have been initiated by individuals who have come to oral history from performance rather than the other way round.<sup>12</sup> Their commitment to performance has led many of them to make particular use of the performative dimension of oral history, contributing to a growing self-reflexivity in the field concerning the performative methodologies of oral history work. Perhaps a little surprisingly for performance practitioners, this generally does not affect the staging of the interview event itself, which in most cases takes place in the familiar oral history format of an intimate face-to-face encounter. Rather, it affects the staging of its afterlives, as several projects use the interview as material for the generation of new performance work. Cindy Oswin's "On the Fringe" (2005–present),<sup>13</sup> for example, is a "performance lecture" on the history of the British alternative theater movement in the 1970s and 1980s that makes extensive use of excerpts from Oswin's interviews with fellow artists from the period.<sup>14</sup> Such performative approaches to the history of performance present a subgenre of the wider field of so-called oral history based theater and performance, which turn interview transcripts into dialogue and action for new stage works. Della Pollock has called oral history based theater a form of "re-performance" because it reperforms the "magnitude of the primary interview encounter by expanding it to include other listeners."<sup>15</sup> It attends to what Friedman has identified as oral history's "more public and official historical posterity" by allowing for an audience's repeated encounters with its narration through a variety of formats.

### **An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales**

Our own oral history work has also been concerned in a self-reflexive manner with its performance. In our case, though, it is the staging of the interview event itself that has been at the center of this investigation. Our backgrounds are, respectively, in performance studies and in history, and our interest in oral history methodology emerged in relation to our current joint research project, "It Was Forty Years Ago Today...": Locating the Early History of Performance Art in Wales 1965–1979." The project is part of a wider investigation into Wales's history of performance art, which Heike launched in 2006 under the umbrella title "What's Welsh for Performance? Beth yw 'performance' yn Gymraeg?" Roughly

speaking, *performance art*—as distinguished from theater and the performing arts—evolved principally out of the traditions of fine art in the 1960s, when artists trained in painting and sculpture sought to extend and transgress the limits of their art forms by shifting their attention from the production of objects to the production of events.<sup>16</sup> Artistic practice of this kind has a long tradition in Wales. In 1965, art instructors organized the first “happenings” to occur in this country at Cardiff’s National Museum of Wales; a festival of Fluxus art took place in Aberystwyth in 1968; that same year, Welsh painter Ivor Davies responded to the violence of the era with a performance featuring timed explosions and staged amidst similar “Destruction in Art” events at the Swansea University Arts Festival. Throughout the 1970s, from their base in South Wales, sculptor Shirley Cameron and drama graduate Roland Miller explored performance art’s twin roots in fine art and experimental theater through their collaboration. New approaches to art teaching using performance as a mode of pedagogy evolved at the Cardiff School of Art and Design and the annual Barry Summer School during the same period. And the National Eisteddfod, the major Welsh-speaking cultural festival, included in Wrexham in 1977 a controversial performance art program involving famous European artists such as Joseph Beuys and Mario Merz, whose contributions were overshadowed by local artist Paul Davies’s performative protest against the suppression of the Welsh language. One often searches in vain for traces of these events in accounts of Welsh art history and in publications on international performance art. Performance art in Wales has been twice overlooked: for a long time it represented a marginal art practice in a marginal place.

The attention that our research pays to this hitherto hidden history of performance art in Wales, however, is not meant to identify a distinctive strand of the art form that could be characterized as “Welsh performance art.” Nor do we wish to reclaim its manifestations as lost masterworks. On the contrary, we seek to expand on the typical art historical focus on the close analysis of a single (and singular) work of art by attending to the wider context or scene from which such work emerged, and to the local infrastructures and international networks that produced and sustained it. By thus demarcating a limited terrain and considering it in greater detail, we also wish to highlight the manner in which even historical accounts of a genre-transgressing art form such as performance art have tended to restrict themselves to a certain canon of well-documented works (and that often means those created in the metropolises of art production), thereby neglecting local scenes of art-making. Through a case study focus on a multitude of performance activities in a geographically specific, socially and culturally defined place, we aim to examine the ways in which performance art as an artistic movement of international reach and influence was realized in different localized settings during its formative years. In Wales, this setting has been characterized by traditions of political radicalism, a lack of large art institutions, a small and multidisciplinary artistic scene, and a growing activism around issues of language and



identity. It became therefore a fertile context for an art form that was ephemeral, interdisciplinary, politically engaged, and direct in its address to audiences. But although particular, Wales was not unique in this: the development of performance art in Wales both mirrored and refracted developments elsewhere.

In order to chart this history, our project combines a number of methodological approaches, most notably extensive archival research, accompanied by the compilation of an online searchable database of performance work that was presented in Wales between 1965 and 1979 by Wales-based and visiting artists (published at [www.performance-wales.org](http://www.performance-wales.org)), and a series of oral history conversations. We regard these conversations not merely as a way of filling the gaps that the archival record has left open; nor do we regard them as more truthful accounts of the performance work in question. Rather, we aim to subject archival documentation and oral testimonies to a comparative reading in order to examine the respective usefulness of both methods for an understanding of past performance practice. Such a reading can also help to reveal the complex manner in which memory interacts with archival remains in constituting our knowledge of the past. In this task, the performative dimension of the oral history interview becomes an important tool.

Heike has written elsewhere about the manner in which the oral history interview itself performs as a scene of historical evidence, and about what role past audiovisual documentation plays in this *mise-en-scène*.<sup>17</sup> In the following, we want to shift our attention to two related questions: Can we stage oral history conversations in different ways in order to generate different kinds of historical insight? And, what role does the location of the staging play in this *mise-en-scène*? Among the methodologies we have applied for this purpose are: conversations staged in public; in-situ interviews; witness seminar style group reunions at particular sites; reenactments of performances in their original locations; and installations that aim to situate audiences' memories. We have also undertaken more standard "life story" style interviews. What distinguishes these methodologies is, broadly speaking, their varying relationship with the location where the interview event takes place. A number of oral history conversations we have undertaken have been staged at selected sites in Wales that once served as locations for performance works. Such a located approach—what performance studies has termed a *site-specific approach*—has allowed us to go beyond analyzing the history of performance art as a series of individual pieces of work toward exploring its contextual dimensions.

### Placing Performance, Locating Oral Histories

The different approaches to locating oral history conversations that we have worked through in our project have been inspired by the ways in which artists

have explored and exploited performance's relationship with the places of its staging. One of performance's defining features is, after all, that it can and must "take place"—its embodied, material, interactive practice can only be realized if it is located somewhere. But the manner of this location is complex. In her study *Space in Performance*, Gay McAuley proposes that in traditional theater settings, "the spectator is continually tossed from awareness of... the here of the theatre space, and the (multiple) here of the fictional place(s)."<sup>18</sup> It is from the interplay between these two spatial dimensions and the "continual tossing of the spectator's awareness" between them that theater derives its particular representational strategies and pleasures. Nontraditional performance work, on the other hand, particularly so-called site-specific performance practice, is widely associated with a move away from the spatial conventions of traditional theater or gallery buildings—with their clearly defined separation between the realm of the art and the artists on the one hand and the space of the audience on the other—and into different kinds of sites (including streets, fields, and factories) and thereby into different cultural and communicative relationships.<sup>19</sup> Such a move, however, does not necessarily lead to the abolishment of performance's complex engagement with real and represented locations. Rather, site-specific practice allows for a reconfiguration of their relationship. It situates performance in "real" places<sup>20</sup> and frequently focuses its representations (through stories and actions), as McAuley has pointed out, on "the history and politics of that place."<sup>21</sup> It thus brings the present location into correspondence with (or sometimes in conflict with) its own past, engaging spectators in a playful method of historical inquiry by "tossing their awareness" between these two dimensions.

What then of the specific sites where oral history takes place? Whilst the recent attention to oral history's performative nature has generated extensive engagements with its corporeal elements<sup>22</sup>, its located aspect has been less widely discussed. It is often implied, however. If we return, for example, to Friedman's citation at the opening of this chapter, we can infer that oral history also negotiates two spatial dimensions, what Friedman distinguishes as the "local embodied social situation" (the actual place of the interview) and "a more public and official historical posterity" (something like the abstract summation of all the potential locations in which the listening acts of future audiences will have taken place), and that both lay claim to the participants' awareness.<sup>23</sup> Oral history's address to future audiences, which we have identified above as one of its defining features, implies therefore a process of relocation: from the place of a private encounter to the realm of public engagement. To this we may add a third layer—akin to McAuley's represented places—namely, the past location(s) of this history that are evoked in the narration. We would like to propose that, following the example of site-specific performance, a mode of site-specific oral history too can explore and exploit the relationships between these different layers—the place of narration, the narrated place, and the place of an audience's encounter with

the narration—in order to perform an historical inquiry that offers different (or additional) insights. We shall discuss how this has worked in practice in the context of our research project in more detail now.

### **Staging Interviews in Public: “An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales”**

From 2006 to 2008, under the title “An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales,”<sup>24</sup> Heike undertook a series of conversations between herself as interviewer and a number of key artists who have shaped the development of performance art in Wales since the mid-1960s. Seven 2-hour conversations focused on a single event (the performance art festival at the National Eisteddfod in Wrexham in 1977); artistic oeuvres (Ivor Davies’s “Destruction in Art” work in the late 1960s); Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller’s collaborative performance work in the 1970s); institutions (Cardiff School of Art and Design in the 1980s and 1990s; the activities of the Centre for Performance Research); and on scenes (Cardiff’s performance scene in the 1970s; contemporary artists’ networks in Wales). The theme of place in all its variations emerged repeatedly throughout these talks: Why did artists settle or remain in Wales? What was the local scene like at a particular time? How did artists connect with artistic networks and scenes outside of Wales? How did they choose the places at which they showed their work? How did their work respond to the places at which it was shown? What were the cultural, social, and economic aspects that influenced their performance practice? What was its relationship to local audiences? Did Wales as a geographical or cultural entity have any relevance for their work?

The location in which the conversations were held was the same throughout the series:<sup>25</sup> the so-called Space Workshop at Cardiff School of Art and Design. The Space Workshop was itself an important site for the development of performance art in Wales: in the mid-1970s, Cardiff College of Art (as it was then called) became the first art college in Britain where students could specialize in time-based art (at the time referred to as the “Third Area,” which encompassed performance, film, and sound art). It is also here—under the guidance of teachers such as John Gingell, Anthony Howell, and André Stitt—that students have since created a myriad of different performances, and here where in the 1990s the Cardiff Art in Time Festival, under the directorship of Howell, became an important forum for international performance work. This particular location, however, was only explicitly referred to once during the series of conversations that made up “An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales.” In his interview about the history of performance at the school, Howell discussed several performances that he had witnessed in the space. He seemed to use the architecture of

the room to call up from his memory the details of these works, evidently locating them imaginatively within the outlines of the present space.

When I started... I asked for students to do a morning workshop... I think it paid off because people became really keen on quite difficult disciplinary acts inside their own performances, and they had the stamina and the sense that you could demand something of yourself... there was one girl... very, very good performer who used to love tying herself up in knots from which she herself could not untie herself... The point was that nobody else could tie her up, she had to self-inflict her inability to move. Her final piece was to erect a wall of lockers here [*points to the right hand corner of the Space Workshop*], get from the lockers to chains from which she dangled with her arms through the rings and then kick away the lockers. If she'd been left there she would have just starved to death. But she had put herself there. And then there was absolutely no instructions as to how to get her down. It was only through the good offices of other students saying "we'd better get Clare down." It was terrific, so much thought and guts had gone into it. I think that came out of that discipline, every morning working at action ideas, really taking action as seriously as a painter takes painting every day.<sup>26</sup>

Although "An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales" was not site-specific in the narrow sense, as it did not generally (with the exception of Howell's interview above) match the locations referred to in the conversations with the locations at which the conversations took place, the project was nonetheless attentive to the specifics of oral history's relationship to place. The series attempted to bring together the place of narration and the audience's encounter with it in the same space at the same time. This was done by staging the conversations as public events in front of a live audience; they attracted an average of about one hundred people per event (see Figure 1).

There were several implications that arose from thus breaking with the oral history convention of conducting interviews as one-to-one conversations in the intimacy of a private, mostly domestic setting. First, a domestic setting might seem the most straightforward and pragmatic choice, but it also privileges particular readings. It might lead one to believe, for example, that here we may be able to get a "truer" picture of the artist as a private person, beyond his or her public persona, whereas, as many have argued before, private and public memories are both the products of complex cultural mediations.

Second, the audience at the conversations also included collaborators on or witnesses of the past performances under discussion, and these people were encouraged to add their own memories, either orally or through written contributions. The artist's narration was consequently treated as one version (and an



**Figure 1** “An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales,” public conversation about the international performance program that took place at the National Eisteddfod in Wrexham 1977; John Chris Jones, Timothy Emlyn Jones, and Andrew Knight, interviewed by Heike Roms in Cardiff, February 22, 2007. Photo: Phil Babot.

important one) but not the only possible version of events, even where the artist’s “own” work was concerned.

As Pollock and others have argued, oral history narratives do not “belong” to the teller, as such histories are always part of a wider cultural “forcefield of relationality.”<sup>27</sup> This is especially true of narratives relating to performance art, as such art work is deeply contingent on its relationship with an audience. But just as in performance, where generally the very fact of an audience’s presence, rather than the presence of specific individuals, impacts on the work, so in the conversations too, we propose, it was less the attendance of specific former eyewitnesses than the very fact of the conversations being staged in front of a public that influenced their performance. By inviting an audience to the conversations, the project attempted to make the usual “historical posterity,” the wider audience community to which an oral history addresses itself, an actual co-presence in the same space as the interview itself. This helped to foreground the performative qualities of oral history, its contingency on the situation of its staging, its dialogic nature, its repetitive structure, and its public address. We recognize that such an approach is not suitable for all oral history work, as it may put some interviewees who are not familiar with speaking in public under undue pressure to perform. But in the case of artists, who are often used to accounting for their life and work in lectures, writings, or in interviews, and who have available to them

the interpretations of their work through critics, such an approach can help to unsettle a little the usual perspective that these artists take on their work and can allow for new insights to emerge.

More than having an impact on the narration, however, we wanted the opportunity to utilize the public nature of the conversations to involve an audience with the narration in a manner that was essentially collective. It helped to engage audiences very directly in its historical constructions by performing such constructions live in front of them. And it turned private memories instantly into shared histories, and located performance art in Wales into a public space of debate and increased recognition.

It may be important to add here that "An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales" did not completely do away with the relocated "historical posterity" of the interview, with all that such posterity is able to offer in terms of a more considered critical reflection made from the distanced perspective of historical hindsight. The transcripts from the interviews have been published in book form,<sup>28</sup> and the video and audio recordings of all conversations will be made available in a selection of archives and oral history collections.<sup>29</sup>

### **In-situ Interviews: Revisiting Sites of Performance in Wales**

"An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales" served as a pilot project for our current, more comprehensive research enquiry, "It Was Forty Years Ago Today...": Locating the Early History of Performance Art in Wales 1965–1979." This enquiry has again made use of oral history and related conversational methods in a manner that has tried to harness their performative dimension. "It Was Forty Years Ago Today..." more specifically focuses on the origins and formative years of performance art in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of substantial artistic creativity and political radicalism. Methodologically, "It Was Forty Years Ago Today" has advanced a number of approaches that emerged from the earlier oral history work. These include the format of group interviews in the style of a "witness seminar," which has proven especially productive when referring to a single event or to a clearly defined scene, as it allows for multiperspective views of a particular set of circumstances. We have become increasingly interested in situating oral history conversations in locations that have an actual connection with their narrative. In the case of some of the group interviews we have undertaken, for example, participants have been reunited not only around a common event or scene, but also at a place that played a significant role in the history that they have been asked to recall.<sup>30</sup> This approach has been developed more fully into what we term *in-situ interviews*.

In-situ interviews take artists, administrators, and audience members back to the locations where they once made or witnessed performance work. The

interviewee is brought back to the places that his or her memories revisit imaginatively, bringing into correspondence the place of the narration with the narrated place, or, in other words, bringing together the past and the present of a location. We have investigated two main manifestations of this approach. One focuses on a single location; for example, we have undertaken a series of in-situ interviews with different interviewees at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, a key location for the history of performance art in Wales. Another manifestation concentrates on taking an interviewee to a series of connected places. Our intention with regard to the latter has been to explore how such an approach might assist our understanding of the infrastructural and contextual aspects of performance work, which by definition exceed the focus on one place alone.

To give an example: in November 2009, Mike Pearson, an artist and performance studies scholar, revisited the venues in Cardiff where he could remember watching and making performance work in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>31</sup> Pearson came to Cardiff from Lincolnshire in 1968 to study archaeology, but soon became involved in performance, devising work, helping to stage other artists' work, and attending a range of performances that were shown in a variety of venues. Challenged to identify the main locations where performance art and related art practices occurred in the Welsh capital during this period, Pearson came up with seven sites (see Figure 2). These included a lecture theater in the former Arts Block of Cardiff University (now the Law Building), where in the late 1960s students put on a show by the Pip Simmons Group (in less-than-appropriate architectural conditions); the School of Engineering, where the late Geoffrey Axworthy programmed a season of experimental theater in the early 1970s, before he became director of the university's newly built Sherman Theatre; the Sherman Theatre, which opened in 1973; the former Casson Theatre, now the Rubicon Dance School; Llanover Hall in Canton, home to numerous performance workshops and summer schools; and Chapter Arts Centre, still Cardiff's premier venue for contemporary art.

As happened in the aforementioned conversation with Anthony Howell, the various locations of these in-situ interviews often functioned as a trigger that helped Pearson to summon the memories of events that occurred in them. But the locatedness of these interviews also served a wider purpose. As Michel de Certeau has proposed, stories have the unique ability to "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories."<sup>32</sup> From the revisits and the stories they engendered, a picture of the complex and diverse ecology of venues (and people) that supported performance work in Wales in the late 1960s and 1970s emerged, as well as their organization and connection.

The frequent assumption is that performance art, as an innovative and radical art form, developed primarily outside of institutions. But the in-situ conversations with Pearson revealed that this is not the complete picture. The performance



**Figure 2** In-situ interview by Heike Roms with Mike Pearson, Cardiff, November 27, 2009. Pearson revisited the main locations where performance art and related art practices occurred in the Welsh capital during the 1960s and 1970s. Photos: Heike Roms.

scene in Wales (like performance scenes elsewhere during that period) quickly began to develop its own institutions or, better put perhaps, its own infrastructure, which was made up of people, buildings, and a range of financial and social support systems.

As we have suggested above, the very material, spatio-temporal nature of performance demands that it “takes place.” Performance artists have often been at the forefront of taking possession of new buildings in the name of art, or of placing their work in contexts that had no previous history of art-making. Of course, an oral history interview could have imaginatively revisited these locations and could have narrated their stories without actually going there. But by being in situ, the interviews also made manifest the changes that the locations had since undergone. Venues had changed their name, their purpose, their architecture, or had disappeared altogether. By thus connecting current places in Cardiff with the memories of their former manifestations of forty years ago, the in-situ interview helped to bring the specific local conditions and spatial extensions of both the historical and the contemporary scene into sharper focus.<sup>33</sup>



The in-situ interviews, unlike the public conversations, address themselves primarily to a potential historical posterity in the form of transcripts and recordings, rather than involving a copresent audience. However, we intend to rethink the ways in which performative forms of engagement can help to reshape an audience's encounter with the documents of oral history. In the case of the in-situ interviews, some of the recordings will be transformed into audio guides, which audiences can take to the locations in question.<sup>34</sup> Not only is this intended to enhance an audience's engagement with and enjoyment of the recorded oral histories, we also hope that it will encourage listeners to perform for themselves the form of located historical inquiry that these interviews represented, comparing and contrasting the narrated past with the physical present.<sup>35</sup>

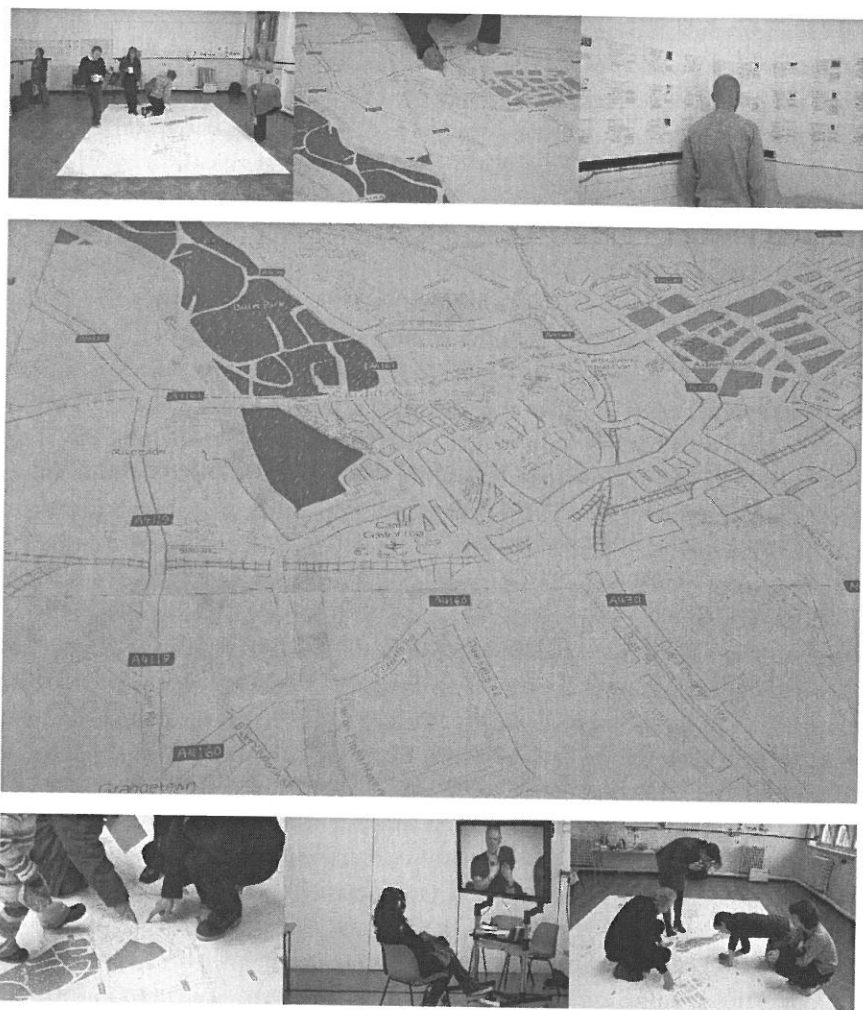
### **Locating Audiences' Memories: "Mapping Performance Art in Cardiff"**

One feature that characterized the public conversation series was its primary focus on the testimony of artists (and that of a few administrators). Although audiences were encouraged to add their own memories, it was the makers of the work that were the actual interviewees. As Robert Proctor has proposed, with regard to oral history interviews with architects, interviews with makers inherently privilege an authorial concept of an artist's role and often hope to gain a direct access to an artist's intention.<sup>36</sup> It is a perspective that is difficult to get away from, though. We are used to referring to the artist as the main authority on his or her work, even in relation to an art form such as performance art, where artistic intention is often very different from its realization and the notion of authorship is challenged by the collaborative presence of an audience. Yet, there admittedly was nothing inherently structural about the public conversation approach that would have prevented the interviewing of someone whose involvement with performance work in Wales had been primarily as an audience member. There were other reasons why this did not occur, which have to do with the particularities of staging performance art. Often audiences encounter works of performance art by accident, or, if they encounter them voluntarily, few records of their attendance are kept; at least such records weren't usually available for the time period that concerned us in our research. Performance art may be adept at creating its own infrastructures, but such infrastructures are often fluid and discontinuous. Whilst it is often not difficult to find a regular past attendee at a civic theater or gallery with the help of historical box-office records or mailing lists, locating audiences who have a history of seeing performance art work with some degree of continuity proves to be more challenging. We have begun to identify persons who witnessed certain performance events in Wales, with the help of local newspapers and social networking websites, but the process is time-consuming.

Furthermore, the comprehensive nature of an oral history interview is only really suitable for audience members whose experiences of performance art have been comparatively substantial. But what of the majority of audience members who have only vague memories of events caught out of the corner of their eye? We tried to engage with such memories through an interactive installation setup, which encouraged audiences to contribute their reminiscences, however small or imprecise, to a collaborative effort at remembering. Although not oral history in the strict sense, the approach nonetheless had at its core a conversational relationship that centered upon the oral narration of a history or histories. "Mapping Performance Art in Cardiff"<sup>37</sup> was shown on October 19, 2008, at Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, as part of its annual Experimentica performance art festival. Audiences were invited to share their memories of performance work in Cardiff over the last fifty years by locating them on a large, walkable map of the city. The idea for this approach again emerged out of the public conversation series. That series tested several ways of encouraging audiences at the conversations to part with their memories of performance work. Archive record cards were distributed with a request to fill them in, after-talk questions and feedback were actively solicited. But by far the greatest response was generated when audiences were asked to locate their memories on a small Ordnance Survey map of Wales.<sup>38</sup> It appeared to be much easier for people to remember where an event occurred than when it occurred, and the focus on the map seemed to lessen the pressure to have to recall with accuracy the details of their memories.

For "Mapping Performance Art in Cardiff," artist Kasia Coleman created an elegant, minimalist map of the center of Cardiff: the main roads and major buildings were outlined in pencil, waterways were marked out in tracing paper, and parklands appeared in grey cardboard (see Figure 3). The map, approximately 4.5 by 3 meters (14.6 by 9.75 feet) in size, was placed on the floor in one of Chapter Art Centre's performance spaces. It was surrounded with printouts from our archive, including a selection of 40 events from forty years of performance-making in Cardiff, and had a small viewing station, where visitors could watch the video documentation of the public conversation series. The project's online database, which records details of more than 2000 events of performance art in Wales, was also made available. The installation was open to the public for 8 hours from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. It was advertised with the help of Chapter's Art Centre's monthly events brochure and Experimentica festival marketing, via specialist electronic mailing lists, on a number of relevant websites, and with leaflets that were distributed in and around Chapter on the day.

A number of visitors came especially for this event, including some that brought documentation of past performances with them to share. Others came across the installation as they were browsing other festival events or simply walking through the building. Around 100 visitors attended the event during the course of the day; some stayed only briefly, without making an active contribution, and some



**Figure 3** Visitors mapping remembered sites of performance art in Cardiff, October 19, 2008. Photos: Daniel Ladnar.

merely browsed or observed. But the majority contributed at least one memory to the map, with some visitors staying for several hours, drawing and discussing. Heike was present throughout the day, welcoming people as they entered the space, introducing the idea of the project, and engaging visitors in conversations about their memories. She was carrying an audio recording device, which recorded all conversations, and two video cameras filmed the activities on the map and in the space. The map was photographed at the end of the day, and photographs, video, and audio recordings were subsequently edited together for a short film documentation of the project, which has been shown at a number of art events since.<sup>39</sup>

Initially, the intention was for people to use the map merely as a reference and to write down their memories of performances they had encountered in Cardiff on a stack of archive cards that had been made available. But as soon as the first visitors entered the space, they stepped onto the map right away and started writing directly onto it. They jotted down memories, made little drawings, and gradually filled in the smaller streets and buildings that had been left out of the original version of the map. Most importantly, these activities became a conduit for dialogue—transforming the map into a tour, as De Certeau (citing a study by Charlotte Linde and William Labov on oral narrations of place) might have described it.<sup>40</sup> The conversations often involved Heike, but more frequently they occurred between audience members. Visitors discussed events they remembered, tried to help each other in identifying locations, and negotiated their memories together. Unlike the in-situ interview with Mike Pearson, which created a memory tour of Cardiff's performance scene at a given time, this map of performance art in Cardiff was more or less atemporal, although some visitors included dates in their accounts. The map nonetheless presented a form of historical inquiry, as it made manifest a number of aspects that related very directly to the history of performance art in Wales. It revealed in particular how certain locations in the town have repeatedly drawn performances to them. Areas of dense performance activity emerged, particularly around the central shopping precinct, where many street performances have taken place across the years; around the art school and venues such as Chapter; and also in certain private houses or defunct industrial sites. Infrastructures of connections between sites and networks of continued support came into view. And the map made material how, in a city as relatively small as Cardiff (with its 330,000 inhabitants), and with a nearly fifty-year history of artists creating performances in it, there is barely a place in the town that has not been touched by performance art at some point in its past.

### Performing Audiences

This chapter has proposed that oral history interviews can be regarded as instances of located or even site-specific performance. Exploring and exploiting the performative dimension of an oral history conversation, we have argued, foregrounds the influence that its location exerts on the construction of its narrative. The ways in which artists have made use of performance's material bond with its setting can serve as models for developing new ways of locating oral history conversations. And these new ways may help to create a form of site-specific oral history that, by being responsive to the sites where it takes place, offers new insights into the contextual nature of performance.

To approach an oral history interview as performance implies that one needs to be mindful of its particular *mise-en-scène* and of the encounter between

interviewer and interviewee. But more important, in our opinion, is the manner in which this performance forms the present and future encounters that different audiences may have with it. It is this aspect that has emerged most strongly from our inquiry. In its unique dependency on an audience's engagement, performance directs our attention to the fact that oral history's performance also does not merely involve interviewers and interviewees, but implicates a wider community of listeners. Finding new ways of locating and relocating not just the interview situation itself, but also an audience's encounter with it, can help to recognize the important role audiences play in shaping this complex performance we call oral history.

### Notes

1. "It Was Forty Years Ago Today...": Locating the Early History of Performance Art in Wales 1965–1979," funded by an *AHRC Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Grant* (Standard). Start date, 4 April, 2009; End date, 31 March 2011. Principal investigator: Heike Roms; Postdoctoral research assistant: Rebecca Edwards. <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundedResearch/Pages/ResearchDetail.aspx?id=142967>
2. Della Pollock, "Introduction: Remembering," in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, edited by Della Pollock (New York, Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.
3. Linda Shopes and Bruce M. Stave, Preface, in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, edited by Della Pollock (New York, Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), xi.
4. Jeff Friedman, "Fractious Action: Oral History-Based Performance," in *Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 473. Henceforth referred to as Friedman, "Fractious Action."
5. Ronald, J. Grele, "Movement without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, 1st edition, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 44.
6. For a more comprehensive discussion of the relationship between performance and oral history see in particular the works of Della Pollock (*Remembering*; and "Moving Histories: Performance and Oral History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, edited by Tracy C. Davis [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008]). Also see Jeff Friedman ("Fractious Action;" see note 4; and "Muscle Memory: Performing Embodied Knowledge," in *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*, edited by Richard Cándida-Smith [New York/London: Routledge, 2002]). Such work builds on the earlier performance-oriented scholarship of Richard Bauman; see, for example, Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1977) and Ruth Finnegan; see, for example, Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices* (London: Routledge, 1992).

7. Susan Croft, "Oral Histories of Theatre: A Survey," March 2009, Society of Theatre Research website, <http://www.str.org.uk/research/resources/oralhistory/index.html>. Henceforth referred to as Croft, "Oral Histories of Theatre."
8. Susan Croft and Jessica Higgs (In Tandem TC), *Unfinished Histories—Recording the History of Alternative Theatre* website, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com> (accessed July 1 2010).
9. Claire MacDonald, Sara Jane Bailes, Stephen Cleary et al., *Sounding Performance: Towards an Oral History of Performance and Live Art in the British Isles* website, <http://www.soundingperformance.co.uk/> (accessed 1 July 1, 2010).
10. Comparable oral history projects outside the United Kingdom include the Switzerland-based *Performance Saga*, which has dedicated itself to interviewing women "pioneers" of performance art (see Andrea Saemann and Katrin Gröge, *Performance Saga* website, <http://www.performancesaga.ch> (last updated February 2010, accessed July 1, 2010), and *Crash Landing Revisited (and more)*, run by the Belgian writer and curator Myriam van Imschoot, which centers on conversations with participants of the long-running improvisational dance project (led by Meg Stuart), *Crash Landing*; see Myriam Van Imschoot, *Crash Landing Revisited (and more)* online wiki, <http://crashlandingrevisited-andmore.wikispaces.com> (accessed July 1, 2010).
11. Croft, "Oral Histories of Theatre."
12. Another common aspect that may be worth mentioning is that all these projects have been developed without major institutional backing.
13. Cindy Oswin, *On the Fringe* is "a personal history of British experimental theatre from the sixties to the eighties." For more information see Artsadmin, *Cindy Oswin* webpage, <http://www.artsadmin.co.uk/artists/cindy-oswin> (accessed August 1, 2011).
14. Myriam van Imschoot has similarly drawn on the conversations she undertook as part of *Crash Landing Revisited* to develop a series of performances, films, lectures, and installations, each of which reconfigures this material in new ways.
15. Pollock, "Remembering," 3.
16. For a brief history of performance art, see Roselee Goldberg, "Performance Art," in *From Expressionism to Post-Modernism (The Grove Dictionary of Art)*, edited by Jane Turner (London: GroveArt, 2000), 294–302.
17. Heike Roms, "Eventful Evidence: Historicizing Performance Art," *Maska* 117–118 (Issue: *History—Experience—Archive*) (Autumn 2008), 69–77.
18. Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 86.
19. For a discussion of site-specific performance practice, see Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art* (London: Routledge, 2000).
20. Although the theatre too is a real place, of course.
21. Gay McAuley, "Local Acts: Site Specific Performance Practice," *About Performance* 7 (2007), 9.
22. See above all, the collection edited by Cándida-Smith, *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002).
23. Friedman, "Fractious Action," 473.

24. Funded by a grant from the Arts Council of Wales/National Lottery Fund and supported by SHIFTwork, Cardiff School of Art and Design. For more info. see Heike Roms, *What's Welsh for Performance? Beth yw "performance" yn Gymraeg?* website, <http://www.performance-wales.org>
25. One conversation took place in Aberystwyth.
26. Anthony Howell, interviewed by Heike Roms, Cardiff, March 15, 2007; in: Heike Roms, *What's Welsh for Performance? An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales*, vol. 1 (Cardiff: Samizdat Press, 2008), 162–63.
27. Della Pollock, "Moving Histories," 124.
28. Roms, *What's Welsh for Performance?*
29. Copies of the interviews are to be deposited with the British Library Sound Archive, the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, the Live Art Archive at Bristol University, and the Centre for Performance Research at Aberystwyth University.
30. For example, four organizers and one audience member of the Aberystwyth Arts Festival 1968 were reunited at Aberystwyth University in January 2010 for a group conversation. Three members of the Zoo performance collective met at the former home of their late teacher and collaborator, John Gingell, in Cardiff in March 2010. Four ex-students of the Cardiff School of Art were interviewed at the School in July 2010. See <http://www.performance-wales.org/it-was-40-years-ago-today/oralhistory-interviewees.htm>.
31. Mike Pearson, interviewed by Heike Roms, Cardiff, November 27, 2009. (IWFYAT-Sited 1: "Performance in Cardiff 1968–1975: A Guided Tour." See [http://www.performance-wales.org/it-was-40-years-ago-today/interviews/36\\_PearsonTourCardiff.htm](http://www.performance-wales.org/it-was-40-years-ago-today/interviews/36_PearsonTourCardiff.htm)
32. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 115.
33. Being in-situ also prompted Pearson to remember sites of performance he had previously forgotten, such as a shop in Queen Street (Cardiff's main shopping precinct), now buried under the Capitol Shopping Centre, where artists Christine Kinsey and Bryan Jones put on art events in 1969 prior to their founding of Chapter Arts Centre.
34. The audio guides will be available from October 2011 through Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff.
35. Heike has also undertaken reenactments of past performance events at the location of their initial performance in the presence of former eyewitnesses as well as of new audiences; these are forms of *in-situ* explorations that make use of the co-presence of audiences for their investigations. For more details see the project website, Roms, *What's Welsh for Performance? Beth yw "performance" yn Gymraeg?* <http://www.performance-wales.org>
36. Robert Proctor, "The Architect's Intention: Interpreting Post-War Modernism through the Architect Interview," *The Journal of Design History* 19:4 (2006), 295–307.
37. "Mapping Performance Art in Cardiff" was a Chapter Arts Centre/ Experimentica commission.
38. The idea was inspired by a workshop exercise devised by Dee Heddon at the Placing Performance Histories workshop, University of Glasgow, June 18, 2007,

as part of the *Towards an Oral History of Performance and Live Art in the British Isles* AHRC-funded network; see Claire MacDonald et al., *Sounding Performance* website, [www.soundingperformance.co.uk/](http://www.soundingperformance.co.uk/)

39. Heike Roms, *Mapping Performance Art in Cardiff: A Documentary*, color video, 3 min.
40. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 119.