

Materiality, Authenticity, and Skilled Engagement: A Commentary

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Introduction

In the universities of the Euro-American world, interdisciplinarity is currently held up as a virtue to be aspired to. None the less, the convergence between archaeology and performance studies is not the most predictable of dialogues to have emerged between academic traditions. Yet over the past ten years a rich and varied series of arguments has developed within this 'interdiscipline', largely inspired by the work of Mike Pearson, and culminating in the publication of *Theatre/Archaeology* (Pearson and Shanks 2001). The present volume collects a series of papers which relate to various aspects of this conjuncture. On first sight, the titles of the essays suggest a very mixed bag, but in practice the contributions cohere around a series of distinct themes: authenticity, representation and reconstruction, the skills of practitioners, and the ethical and political significance of performances on sites of cultural or historical importance. Taken together, the chapters of this book move the debate on, reflecting on the achievements or failings of 'performance archaeology'. This is perhaps most clearly the case with Susan Melrose's important critique of *Theatre/Archaeology*.

Melrose concentrates on the way in which signification is often separated from somatic and experiential aspects of human life, particularly in works that have

been inspired by Saussurian linguistics. This she considers to be characteristic of archaeological perspectives on performance, which are often preoccupied with the symbolic or semiotic qualities of action. However, what Melrose may neglect is archaeology's concern with materiality, which complements the emphasis on the physicality of performance that she appears to approve. Archaeology certainly produces written texts, much like any other academic discourse, but it does so on the basis of a series of engagements with material things. Furthermore, much 'interpretive archaeology' (that is to say, archaeology which rejects the positivist themes of explanation and the framing of law-like generalisations which characterised the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s) is anxious to stress not simply the experiential qualities of the material world, but also the constitutive role of materiality in social life and social action. Without a world of material things, and indeed without their own physical embodiment, human beings could not operate at all. Material things are not simply produced by people, forming a kind of trail that past cultures leave behind them, they are implicated in social life, so that humans can be said to be radically embedded in both social relations and material settings.

Nor is matter to be understood as the inert given substance of Descartes or Locke, for following Butler (1993) (but going beyond her exclusive concern with the materiality of the human body: see Cheah 1996), we need to address the processes of *materialisation* by which the physical world discloses itself to us in particular

ways. Within this perspective, writing can be recognised as a practice of materialisation, but one which possesses no ontological priority.

The ephemeral and the enduring

Arguably, then, recent and theoretically-informed versions of archaeology may provide a better partner for performance studies than Melrose implies. Archaeology may communicate through written texts, but its message is one that undermines the primacy of verbal discourse. In this respect it is instructive to remember that Mike Pearson's original motivation in developing an 'archaeology of performance' lay in his dissatisfaction with textual and video documentation of physical performances that were not based upon dramatic literature (Pearson and Thomas 1994: 145). Pearson was concerned with the traces that are left behind by performance (memories, photos, marks on the ground, scars on the performers' bodies), and with what happens when one attempts to reconstitute the past performance on the basis of these scraps. Is this a reconstruction, another version of the same performance, or a 'second-order performance'? In what sense can the first performance be said to be originary? Are any subsequent performances that base themselves upon the surviving evidence lesser, or less authentic, works? These are all questions that a practitioner might ask herself, at least as much as an academic spectator might. The performer's concern with what she did in the past, and what its relationship might be to what she does in the present, is closely related to the concerns of archaeologists. As Marcus Brittain argues in his

chapter, archaeology and performance studies share an interest in the ephemeral. But I would add that they share a preoccupation with the relationship between the ephemeral and the enduring, and the ways in which they interpenetrate. The archaeologist, as much as the performer, is concerned with past acts that took place in a particular space, and what their significance might be or have been. To what extent these questions can be identified with 'spectator studies' is arguable. At a philosophical level we could insist that the archaeologist never achieves a relationship of exteriority toward their evidence, for they are in history just as much as are the events and processes that they investigate. The archaeologist can never aspire to 'apocalyptic objectivity' (Foucault 1984: 87). But more significantly, archaeological understanding emerges from an engagement with material things: an engagement that can at times be overwhelmingly visceral.

Archaeology is a situated interpretive practice, which is conducted in the present, in a particular social and material context. Reflexively, archaeology is able to dwell upon its own situation, but only in so far as it recognises the particularity of the past that it studies. This requires that it should identify the material evidence that it studies as rather more than dead matter, the shadow or product of past action. This recognition transforms archaeology from a mere commentary on a set of evidence, performed as if in abstraction and from a distance, to an engagement in which meaning is produced. Such an engagement must take into account that the material 'traces' of past societies are not neutral and meaningless in the

present. Material evidence, whether we are thinking about Stonehenge or a rusted Roman legionary hobnail, has a political and ethical efficacy in the present. It may not (indeed, cannot) mean the same in the present as it did in the past, but this does not render it an inert object of knowledge. The archaeological practitioner *works* with and through the material remains of a past society in search of understanding. This work is analogous to the process by which past people engaged with the same materiality in comprehending and finding a place within their own world.

In this respect I would question the distinction that Melrose sets up between the performer and the archaeologist. For her, the performer seeks to achieve singularity and exemplarity, while the archaeologist constructs the general on the basis of the particular. Now, although Melrose argues that the ‘death of the author’ is an idea whose time has passed, I do not imagine that she is advocating a return to a notion of the performer as an atomised and self-contained fount of creativity. Rather, she appears to be stressing that a performance practitioner is a very particular kind of person, who embodies a tradition of working and a specific set of skills. Yet this is equally true of archaeologists. Both performance practitioners and archaeologists work through the particular poetics of their discipline, and from a particular biographical location. A poetics implies operating within a given set of possibilities, and crafting something out of conditions that are at once enabling and constraining. The archaeologist is

empowered to write a particular past on the basis of the materials available to her, and the contemporary situation in which she works. The past she writes is not general, for it is concerned with the specificity of lives lived in the past, and is framed by the prejudices of the time and place in which it is constructed.

Performers and archaeologists both employ skills, which may have been learned explicitly or implicitly, but which can be deployed without deliberation (Dreyfus 2000: 157). These skills are embodied, but it is important to add that they do not simply inhere in the person and their body. On the contrary, the practitioner's skills are embedded in the material world, rather than simply being applied to it. When the archaeologist uses her trowel to scrape the fill from the inside of a pit, finding the original edge through the combination of texture, colour, and 'feel', the ability that she is using is a potential that exists both in her body and in the soil. It is the focus on representation that Melrose rightly criticises which encourages us to imagine ourselves as entities that are separate from the world. In such a view, we observe the world as from a distance, act upon it through discontinuous bursts of intentionality, and gather atoms of information from it which can be transmitted to others as messages (Taylor 2000: 119). It is more fruitful to consider that we are *in* the world, alongside others.

It is the practice of excavation that most clearly refutes the notion that archaeology is a discipline of spectatorship. Digging a site involves not only the employment

of embodied and habituated skills, but also the inhabitation of spaces which owe their configuration to the actions of past people. Excavating a pit or a ditch, one may repeat the actions or hold one's body in particular poses which echo those of the original excavator (Lucas 2001). Excavation is an engagement which is at once corporeal and interpretive. In other words, fieldwork is not simply an exercise in data-collection, and interpretation does not begin once the evidence has been accumulated.

These reflections have some bearing on Anna Pakes' account of Rosemary Butcher's dance work, 'The Site'. Pakes observes that Butcher's work was inspired by her experience of a Devon hillfort, followed by reading about archaeology. To some extent this is disappointing, when one considers the degree to which the experience of archaeology in the field is not simply embodied, but actually quite difficult to verbalise. Pakes' descriptions of the kinds of physical actions that made up 'The Site' are curiously redolent of Peter Ackroyd's description of an excavation in his novel *First Light* (Ackroyd 1989). This is an imagined version of what archaeological investigation might be like, full of obscure technical doings. One is left wondering what a practitioner whose skills reside in their body and its actions in the physical world might create if they had actually taken part in archaeological excavation, rather than having merely read about it. There is something of a mismatch in a physical performance that relates to the idea of archaeology, rather than the embodied understandings generated by

the excavator. This brings us back to the absence that Melrose detects in *Theatre/Archaeology*, that of the professional practitioner. For if both performance and archaeology are disciplines in the full sense, which require a prolonged apprenticeship to achieve a degree of mastery, it follows that a merging or blending of the two will be difficult to achieve. Indeed, having a background in both areas, Pearson may be unique in being able to include both in his practice. In the broader context it may be that interdisciplinarity should be understood as a conversation rather than a hybridisation. If both performers and archaeologists have to invest heavily in the acquisition of their craft, perhaps they can both enrich their work through collaboration, and the translation or re-framing that comes from adopting ideas from another discourses. This may be more realistic than absorbing oneself simultaneously in two disciplinary traditions.

Monuments, materiality, modernity

Marcus Brittain's paper provides an example of how ideas that have been drawn from performance studies can illuminate archaeological problems. As he points out, our view of prehistoric monuments (from Stonehenge and Avebury to the Maltese temples) is often dominated by the notion that they represent 'the first permanent architecture'. This brings with it a series of assumptions related to the primacy of design, which are quite specific to the modern era. In the modern west, building is an activity that is carried out in accordance with a pre-existing blueprint, an abstract plan. This is possible because of the contemporary

separation of thought from action, and the conviction that the former must precede the latter. Every practice must be composed in the mind before it is enacted in the world. This results in a sequence in which design precedes building, which in turn precedes the inhabitation of constructed spaces. As a result, building does not arise out of dwelling (Heidegger 1971), and the consequence is the emergence of a soulless landscape of tower blocks and housing estates. This is architecture as social engineering, a development that is not coincidentally associated with architectural 'modernism'. 'Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build' (Heidegger 1971: 160). Rejecting the modern view, it is possible to recognise prehistoric monuments not as the fulfilment of plans, but the outcome of projects, which might be multiple, fragmented, open-ended or incomplete (see Barrett 1994, for example). Brittain's contribution builds on this conviction that the modern western conception of building is based upon the preoccupation with formed matter, in which dead substance is manipulated in accordance with the requirements of abstract design. The alternative demands that we recognise that 'working with' a substance involves adopting it as our *partner* in a project of making. Thus form is the outcome that is achieved in the negotiation between the artisan and the material, rather than something which is imposed as if from outside.

Much recent work on prehistoric monuments has adopted the view that they represented the 'settings' or 'stages' for ritual performances of one kind or

another. Here, performance theory has provided a potent resource for archaeology. But the implication of Brittain's argument is that the materials and entities that make up this kind of architecture were actively engaged in both the construction and the ceremonial inhabitation of these spaces. Again, it would be interesting to consider how the conversation might be taken forward by performers or performance theorists who took on board the implications of Brittain's argument.

The theme of modernity and modern western conceptions of the world brings us back to another of Melrose's points, her supposition 'that the literal meaning of 'deep' might be important to archaeologists'. This is an important observation, because the relationship between depth and surface has been of singular significance, not just to archaeology but to modern thought in general. Elsewhere (Thomas 2004) I have discussed the temporal coincidence of the development of stratigraphic thinking in geology and archaeology with the emergence of 'depth metaphors' (to use Jameson's phrase: 1984) in medicine, linguistics, economics and zoology. The consequence of this outbreak of 'depth thinking' at the start of the nineteenth century has been that archaeology has come to serve as a powerful metaphor in other disciplines, connoting the search for hidden truths, profundity, lost knowledge, the mythic, and the archetypal. This is most obviously seen in Freud's use of the archaeological metaphor. Freud held that the 'deep stata' of the psychic apparatus were laid down in sequence (Kuspit 1989; Freud 1927: 15-16),

as a consequence of a series of traumatic events experienced by the human race in the distant past (most notably the ‘primal crime’). These events are recapitulated by each child in the course of achieving adulthood (Bernfeld 1951; Bowdler 1996). According to Freud, the task of the psychoanalyst is to act as an ‘archaeologist of the mind’, uncovering hidden truths about the past of the individual and the species by stripping away the layers of repression (Freud 1946: 74-5).

Reconstruction and authenticity

We have seen that Mike Pearson’s interest in the connection between archaeology and performance was initially sparked by the question of documentation, and the status of performances that re-created earlier works. Pakes’ work in reconstructing ‘The Site’ from documents, photographs, videos and reminiscences is interesting in this respect. Would her account be more complete or authentic if she has actually witnessed the original performance herself? This is to imply that unmediated access to an event is a guarantee to its authentic representation. The difficulty here is that each person who witnessed the performance, and each performer who took part in it, will have experienced it and understood it in subtly different ways. Even if these multiple perspectives could somehow be combined, it is arguable that they might not amount to a ‘complete’ account of the event. Such a complete understanding is only open to a deity. Pakes recognises this point, in her insistence that the living human body is never

fully present, and not fully knowable in the instant. It is in and through performance that the body is materialised, and that materialisation is neither stable nor definitive.

The problem here is that conventional conceptions of authenticity are closely related to correspondence theories of truth, and by that means are linked to notions of representation that we have already mentioned. Thus we tend to say that a statement (or an account of a performance) is authentic when it corresponds with the entity that it relates to. The alternative is to argue that a mimetic relationship between a thing and its linguistic description is impossible, and that rather than truth being propositional it is better understood in the sense that we can say that a person is being 'true to themselves'. This is truth as disclosure, as revealing a thing as it is, and allowing it to stand forth as it is. Obviously, this rather shifts our view of what authenticity might be. Something is authentic when it grounds a revelation of a world, and enables insight to be generated. This being the case, we are entitled to ask whether there is really any sense in which the original 1983 performance of 'The Site' was more authentic than the 1997 'reconstruction'. Does the latter derive its legitimacy from its relationship with the former, and does that diminish its significance as an event in its own right?

The question of the status of reconstructed performances brings us to Robyn Gillam's re-creation of performances described in Late Period Egyptian texts. As

her title indicates, these were site-specific rituals. The value of performing them in contemporary Toronto is undoubted, but following our reflections on Brittain's paper it is arguable that staging such a performance in the places where the rituals were originally conducted might have an entirely different significance. In performing a series of acts and utterances in relation to *the same material things* in which they were performed 2500 years ago, might we not expect something particular to be elicited from the relational involvement of people things? Such a performance might be conceptualised less as a recreation than an allegory for ancient events, in which modern bodies take the place of utterly different past ones, within a meaning-making apparatus. This might lead to a greater understanding of the past, although it might be one that highlighted the difference between the past and present contexts of performance.

That similar actions, performed in different temporal horizons by different kinds of people are not equivalent should make us wary of notions of continuity in ritual traditions, as Alessandra Lopez y Royo argues in her paper. As she says, performative events can be re-invented at times when an established social order is undergoing stress or challenge, as a form of legitimation. However, we should also bear in mind that all traditions are invented at some point, and this underscores the argument that the temporal priority of any practice does not automatically afford it greater authenticity. This is relevant to Kathryn Rountree's discussion of the activities of Goddess pilgrims at ancient sites [**not included**

among the papers on this website for reasons of *force majeure*]. As an archaeologist, I might share some of the scepticism that has been voiced by my colleagues over the years regarding Goddess-based interpretations of prehistoric material (e.g. Fleming 1969; Meskell 1995). Moreover, I see no need to demonstrate that non-patriarchal societies existed in the past for such a thing to be possible in the future. All that is required is a recognition that gender roles and identities are neither fixed nor biologically-determined. However, I would not jump from this scepticism regarding Goddess-worship in the past to an insistence that the experiences that Rountree describes are either illusory or illegitimate. It may be that they are grounded in an understanding of the past that is not entirely accurate. But it is important to be wary of *any* contemporary movement that relies on an authentic relationship with the past, irrespective of their formal truth-value.

Performance and the appropriation of the past

A variety of reactionary political agendas, not the least of them being popular nationalism, rely on the notion that an authentic connection exists between the past and the present. Most often the past concerned is a mythic 'golden age' of ethnic purity. It is the attempt to re-create such a pre-lapsarian state that has resulted in the recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, for instance. While it is important to identify the ways in which such arguments distort the past, it is equally imperative to take account of the effects that they have in the present. This is problematic in the case of Goddess pilgrims, for while we might wish to

argue that the past they seek to connect with is an imagined 'past-as-wished-for', this does not preclude their experiences being ones that are genuinely world-revealing and life-enriching. More troubling, perhaps, than the version of the past that various New Age practices promote is their relationship to local communities when they are enacted outside of the Euro-American world. As Ian Hodder (2002) has argued, performances at sites like Çatal Hüyük which are motivated by a desire for spiritual renewal may amount to a form of colonialism when they are carried out by westerners. Hodder criticises a form of narcissism which appropriates the archaeological site for cosmopolitan and global discourses that may be very remote from the concerns of the people who live in the vicinity. Yet while he recognises that there are different kinds of performances, Hodder expands on his argument that New Age rituals are insensitive to the local context by identifying formal similarities between these events and the performances of artists and of archaeologists who seek to address the experiential qualities of sites. It is this broad-brush approach to performances on ancient sites that Lopez y Royo seeks to question when she calls for a recognition of the degree of difference involved between species of performance.

Importantly, Hodder's article recognises in passing that archaeological excavation is itself a colonialist appropriation when it is conducted by western professionals in a context outwith western Europe and the US. If we follow the arguments that I have presented above, archaeological excavation is also an embodied

performance, and it certainly constitutes a spectacle. Digging always attracts an audience. Excavation shares many of the structural similarities with other kinds of performance that Hodder identifies. Moreover, Hodder's project at Çatal Hüyük is funded by IBM, Shell, KocBank and Boeing, and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it too is embedded in the agendas of certain 'global interests'. Furthermore, while Hodder expresses reservations concerning the experiential or phenomenological archaeologies that would investigate human movement within the site, it may be that these are better placed to open up a dialogue with local people than are the excavations themselves. The technical details of archaeological discovery may engage members of such communities less readily than the questions of how they themselves might use particular spaces, and what they might mean to them.

Lopez y Royo's view that we should distinguish between different kinds of performances at ancient sites arguably provides us with a way of clarifying what is and is not an appropriation. For instance, where a site merely provides a 'backdrop' for some kind of spectacle (as with performances of Aïda at the Pyramids), it is unlikely that the performance will take a form that is sensitive to the material presence of the place. We have argued that the substance of sites and monuments can enter into the activities that are conducted within them, but it is equally possible for the location to be reduced to a mere container for action. In this situation the place might as well be the flat, cut-out scenery of a film studio.

This kind of performance does not attempt to elicit anything from the site: it merely imposes itself upon it. An example of the opposite pole is provided by Mike Pearson's paper on the performance of 'Baroque' at the church of St. Margaret in Sonov in the Czech Republic. As Pearson points out, 'Baroque' was far removed from the kind of reconstructive pageant that dominates 'heritage performance' in the UK (such as English Heritage's 'Living History' events). While the performance seems at times to have operated at a tangent to the church and its architecture, it is evident that it also succeeded in showing the place in new and unfamiliar ways, as when images of inaccessible parts of the building were projected onto the ceiling. The importance of this particular approach is not simply that unseen parts of the church were revealed, but also that changes of scale and re-framings disclosed the whole in a new light. As a prehistorian it seems to me that this way of working might be particularly appropriate in the context of ancient monuments. Where no specific historic details are known concerning the use of a site, the danger is that any kind of performance conducted there will gravitate toward 'hairy men dancing about in furs'. By making no concessions to reconstruction, a performance like 'Baroque' defamiliarises a location, and in the process makes us look at it again in a fresh way. This might be particularly important in the case of a monument like Stonehenge, where the iconic status of the structure actually makes it very difficult for us to 'see' it at all.

The counter-argument might be that in seeking to present archaeological sites and monuments in unfamiliar ways, one succeeds only in exoticising the past (Hodder 1999: 154). It might be that such a past would be stripped of its potential for nostalgia, but that it might nonetheless constitute a form of spectacle. This problem is connected with Gillam's observations on the recent emergence of a cultural terrorism. The contemporary western discourse on heritage has invested particular places with a certain value, which is grounded in a universalising conception of the past – to the point where certain locations can be defined as 'World Heritage Sites'. It is easy to see how such a way of understanding ancient sites might prove dissonant with more localised systems of meaning. In a post-9/11 world, global heritage has arguably come to be associated with western values, mass tourism, and the alienation of particular places from their immediate context. The implication of Gillam's argument is that there is a kind of complementarity between the colonialism of performances that exclusively embody western concerns and terrorism as spectacle, in which the value afforded to the site assures the visibility of the act. However, these arguments do not simply apply to performance events, but to the whole structure of archaeological research and the valorization of the traces of the past, as is demonstrated by the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Hodder's argument that New Age, artistic and archaeological performances at ancient sites are formally similar carries with it the implication that each might

have a similar impact in relation to local communities. The connection between heritage and terrorism demonstrates that this is a serious issue, and that Euro-Americans should not imagine that they can walk into other cultural contexts and conduct research or create artworks without accepting their responsibility for potentially grave consequences. However, my argument has been that there are different kinds of research and performance, which may be more or less responsive to the places where they are put into practice and the people whose lifeworlds they impinge upon. Performing *Aïda* in Egypt involves the enactment of a closed dramatic script. Devising a performance that seeks to engage and make space for local voices might actually amount to a form of conversation between cultural traditions.

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