

Dancing The Bridge - Performance/Research: A Polemic

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Text of a paper that was not delivered to the Deakin University, Double Dialogues conference in November, 1996; it presents some information, an argument, and some polemic about the place of performance research in the academy.

The Performance Studies section in the Department of Human Movement, Recreation & Performance at Victoria University, Melbourne, which operates an undergraduate degree dealing with contemporary performance making and theory (as opposed to more traditional dance and drama), and in which I lecture, has also introduced performance based research at postgraduate level. Candidates for postgraduate degrees can present either a thesis, a combination of thesis and performance, or, most radically, a (series of) performance(s). Elsewhere in the University candidates have also presented works of art for assessment - an historical novel on principles of mathematics stands out - but it is the acceptance of performed work without requiring written documentation or analysis for examination (contextualising material, including any stage plans and an audio and/or video tape of the performance(s), must be deposited in the library) which sets the University's program apart from, and, in my opinion, ahead of, most postgraduate programs in performance in Australia.

Getting such a program running has not been possible without the goodwill and support of many people within our department and the University, as well as from outside it; the University should be congratulated on its vision and willingness to embrace what is for many a radical rethinking of research paradigms, but that goodwill, support, and (mostly) willing embrace have also been earned through our own hardheadedness, our willingness to take a risk, and, crucially, our refusal to be defensive about what we teach and do. We have been fortunate, too, to work in an environment outside a Faculty of Arts/Humanities and inside a Faculty of Human Development that includes departments of Education, Nursing, and Health Sciences, as well as our own. We are thus not dominated by the textual paradigm that paralyses theatre (and dance) studies; further, surrounded by researchers of sports processes and techniques, our need for flat-floor space has been largely understood, leaving us with excellent floor and studio space (we have just opened a new building housing two studios to add to our existing theatre and studios; in these straitened times this is a major achievement and signals the University's (present) support for us); the Department's teaching and research in

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the philosophical, social, psychological, and phenomenological aspects of sport and associated activities has also served us well, as has the University's recent conversion from an Institute: many conservative models of research have either not been in place, have been actively avoided in the search for "niche" markets amongst the more traditional models of the older universities, or, at least, not allowed to dominate as they might (although part of the price of not dealing with the textual tyranny has been dealing with neo-positivist rhetoric from some individuals - it has certainly not all been easy).

In presenting our postgraduate program to the various committees of the University, and working out protocols for examinations and examiners, we have justified it in many different ways, adopted our rhetoric to our audience(s), accepted strategic retreats, and tried to be as friendly as possible while refusing to back down from our basic position that performance can be, and must be accepted as, research. Our basic arguments to the University have been a mixture of the following related assertions:

- that works of art constitute legitimate "discourses" that must be recognised alongside the more traditional research discourses;
- that other works of art (particularly visual art) have been accepted as legitimate research activities in some institutions;
- that performance constitutes, or is constituted by, a series of practices that are recognisable and assessable, and indeed are already recognised and assessed outside the university environment;
- that performers use differing sensoriums to "think through" performance;
- that to demand performers learn an entirely new, and not necessarily more effective or productive, set of practices or to utilise another sensorium in order to gain recognition is unfair (one of our supporters questioned a resistant group of engineers: How would you feel if you had compiled data and made an analysis for a bridge and then someone said, Okay, now dance the bridge?); and
- that people exist who can recognise and assess these practices and sensoriums.

I don't want to rehearse these arguments in any more detail here; I see them as tactical devices for a more strategic intervention, an intervention which is both political and personal. Here I speak for myself - not for the University, nor for my colleagues there who may hold quite different views - and I return to the writer who has most influenced my thinking about performance, research, and the Deleuze himself, but a commentary:

Deleuze has in the past defined his philosophical perspective as a schematism of difference, a "transcendental empiricism" that turns inside-out Kant's idealist schematism of identity: "beginning in the middle" of conflicting schemes of experience in order to experimentally map out the primary dimensions of difference, rather than beginning in a systematic identity, outside experience, in order theoretically to reconstruct all differences within that unitary frame. This conception of philosophy as the

empirical mapping of difference is reflected in his frequently repeated view that philosophical discussion in general, and conferences in particular, are a waste of time: driven by a dynamic of "consensus" within which interlocutors assume they're using words like "concept", "difference", "war-machine" and so on to talk about the same identical thing "behind" provisional differences of interpretation. Whereas in fact they're talking about different things, the different inscriptions of these within their own incommensurably different schemes of "the world" (Joughlin 1993, 63-64).

I want to bend this statement to my own ends, to use it dynamically, strategically, and productively - to deterritorialise it somewhat²⁸ - to say that I see performance/research at Victoria University, Melbourne, as aiming to turn inside-out the idealist schematism of identity: "beginning in the middle" of conflicting schemes of experience in order to experimentally map out the primary dimensions of difference, rather than beginning in a systematic identity, outside experience, in order theoretically to reconstruct all differences within that unitary frame. This conception of performance/research is reflected in our frequently repeated view that performance/research discussion in general, and conferences in particular, can often be a waste of time: driven by a dynamic of "consensus" within which interlocutors assume they're using words like "concept", "performance", "research" and so on to talk about the same identical thing "behind" provisional differences of interpretation. Whereas in fact we're talking about different things, and the different inscriptions of these within our own incommensurably different schemes of "the world".

As I have pointed out, through accident, design, and our pigheadedness, our particular world has in general been/become unusually receptive and supportive, and we have acted quickly and tactically to do what we want. But above all, we have refused to ignore (what I might call somewhat simplistically) the political, social, and personal dimensions of research: *viz*, research isn't simply a neutral tool used to discover "facts" about the world and performance but a machine that intervenes in and constructs the world and performances. One of the interesting effects of textual based, exegetical, research into theatre and dance has been the way it has favored certain kinds of director and/or choreographer based performances which produce stabilised "textual" objects:²⁹ the difficulties of talking about work made in other ways (either in the organisation of roles and the hierarchies of roles within groups, or the "products" of groups) leads to the "capturing" and valorising of only particular forms, styles, of performance. Additionally, it can also mean raising to prominence what, after all, may be quite retrograde performances, processes, and styles. Without wanting to push this

²⁸ "Deterritorialisation" runs through most of Deleuze and Guattari writings; Massumi provides a provocative use and analysis of it in his commentary to their work, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (1992). For those who prefer a less opaque style, Marie Maclean provides a clear analysis of deterritorialisation in her study of Baudelaire (1988, 45ff.).

²⁹ See Elam 1989, 3-4.

point too far (since it may founder on all too personal a judgment and vague notions of “relevance” already a means of attack on university programs by the corporate fanatics that are our present governments), the all too depressing spectacle of an essay or presentation which offers dense observation/documentation/explication of what was a fairly tawdry piece of (performance) work is, unfortunately, not confined to undergraduates’ explanations and exegeses of their own work, as a quick perusal of the offerings to any number of Dance and Drama Studies or “Industry” conferences will confirm.

It *seems* to be an inescapable fact of the demands of documentation and exegesis that it is easier to document and explain what has passed, and the more passed it is, the more removed from the everyday, and the more amenable to “capture” through being preserved as some form of text, the easier it is to write about. I know the (apparent) subject of my own writing lags many years behind what I now do as a performer and maker, so that by the time I see it in print or hear my voice at a conference I am more than bored by it - I’m embarrassed by its misrepresentation of me. But then writing is more than its apparent subject matter - a point to which I hope to return.

Acknowledging the political, social, and personal dimensions of research/performance, taking into account the power structures we operate in (and, depending on the institutions we find ourselves in, these are different in subtle ways for all of us whatever features they may share) means - to grossly paraphrase any number of writers³⁰ - recognising that we create what we study. In a world which flagrantly demeans and undervalues artists and performers through processes of exclusion to which the academic world contributes through its valorisation of particular forms of research and knowledge, in a political climate which can see the legitimate work of young artists censored by an increasingly paranoid state without being defended by the head of the institution to which the artists belong, where so-called training institutions (“The only thing I’ve ever trained was my dog”, said Jude Walton a couple of years ago at a National Theatre Training Conference; myself, I’ve trained tomatoes) increasingly buckle under to the demands of the “industry” and not only adopt but apparently believe the rhetoric of “quality control” (which leads us into the dangerous territory of “standards” and “excellence”), and where performance is increasingly a product for corporate run festivals, I repeat, in such a world, it is important that there be a place where artists, creators, performance makers can get access to resources to invent, redescribe, renew, and produce worlds which challenge the majoritarian apparatuses in which we all operate.³¹

³⁰ See for example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987; particularly ch’s 1 & 12), de Certeau (1984), and Feyerabend (1993); from another (related) perspective Denning (1992 & 1993) is interesting, too.

³¹ Deleuze and Guattari contrast minor literatures/languages with major literatures/languages in many writings, most notably, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986); they also say this (1987, 105):

I'm not describing a simple binary here: I'm certainly not suggesting that all written research into performance "toes the line", as it were - after all, I have written this, and I readily recognise the benefit to me of completing a written doctorate; but I do think there must be a place for performers and performance makers to have their work - their research - recognised. I'm not going to repeat the arguments about different kinds of knowledges, although I do think they're relevant; I'm not going to ask you to believe that such research is without its problems - it is often difficult to articulate clearly what has been researched (although I question, again, the necessary benefits of articulation), I'm not going to say that such research couldn't become a site for the production of bad art (so that those who can't get work elsewhere can get a qualification that takes them professionally beyond others more deserving); I'm not going to pretend that examining a performance based project isn't difficult, because it does force examiners to confront questions of what they know, and how they know it; and I'm not going to say that sometimes the gap between our rhetoric and our "product" doesn't sometimes appal and exhaust me; still less am I going to claim I'm certain the entire Performance Studies program won't disappear tomorrow. But it does depend on what frame we choose to place around it all which "system" we address. That research and its assessment requires the active participation of all involved - candidates, examiners, committees - and the constant questioning of positions and values by all concerned is surely better than stale reiteration of known and familiar positions, better than the "comfortable and relaxed" position enjoined by our conservative government.³² And we must recognise that artists need the space to produce what an undergraduate student of mine called "something small and terrible": in calling for which he recognised the tyranny of the demands for "product" that can so easily stifle so much work, and the productive pleasure that attends performing/researching as process.

The notion of minority is very complex, with musical, literary, linguistic, as well as juridical and political, references. The opposition between minority and majority is not simply quantitative. Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it. Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language....It is obvious that "man" holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc....Majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around.

I have used the notion of minority/majority extensively in my own writing: see Minchinton 1994a, 1994b & 1994-95.

³² In the recent election won by the Liberal (for which read Republican or Conservative) Party, the party leader now Prime Minister, John Howard, campaigned around a theme of wanting the country to be "Caring, Comfortable and Relaxed"; since his election there have been unprecedented verbal and institutional attacks on (members of) minority groups, including aborigines. Howard has conspicuously failed to intervene effectively against racist comments made by independent Member of Parliament, Pauline Hanson.

Listening to Radio National some time ago I heard it said that artists shouldn't be allowed to "rort the system", meaning the University system. My immediate thought was, why not? My next thought was, you mean the system isn't being rorted already by countless MBA's, hundreds of well-behaved science graduates presented with ready-made research topics by well funded senior researchers, thousands of drearily persistent drudges dredging up unimportant details on irrelevant topics for perfectly formatted theses that will sit unread on library shelves for decades, and, mostly, by the increasingly prominent corporations that dictate the direction, flow, and production of research and ideas? Again, what system are we talking about?

I want to finish by reemphasising that I'm not saying writing/ documentation is bad, performing/producing is good. That is very far from the case: many performances and performance makers are equally as guilty of supporting majoritarian positions as the most unimaginative and moribund of exegetical theses, and writing, of course, too produces worlds; and that is the point: to produce the world, to perform/research through production not reproduction. Performance based research (and all research is (a) performance) is a step towards this. Lying down, trying to prove our legitimacy, through being good sons and daughters dutifully dotting our i's and crossing our t's, embracing the existing research traditions without radically questioning them, will not make performance makers more attractive or legitimate to the institution, but only signal our acquiescence. Performance must teach us this if anything: we must act as though we believe what we do is important and productive so that others will believe it.

And if the (small) connections I've drawn between the discourses of party politics, performance, and university research seem far-fetched, or overstated, let me state that we are in a war: the political conservatism and reemergence of retrograde discourses on race in this country are connected to debate on knowledge and research, and the universities should be places of resistance and not only the articulation, but the production, of difference.

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