

Event-Text

Shattered beings are best represented by bits and pieces.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.

Peggy Phelan

Shattered Anatomies collects together a set of commissioned contributions from an international range of artists and writers within the field of contemporary performance. The works documented and discussed here span many genres including experimental theatre, drag, performance-installation, physical theatre, durational performance, solo work, performance-poetry, internet and site-specific pieces. The presence of this diversity of forms is not arranged in order to identify a new transcendent art form category or to constitute a cohesive aesthetic movement or body, rather, the works gathered here were selected in terms of their address to two key debates: the status and imaging of the body in Western culture and the question of the historical preservation of transient performances. We asked, what visions of the body does contemporary performance present? How is the performing body marked by the powers of tradition, sex, memory and death? What issues are at stake in the translation of live art into dead records? What forms of documentation and critical writing are appropriate to these ephemeral events? In asking these questions, it quickly became apparent that the responses which contributors wished to make would not only entail creative approaches to the critical languages employed, but also innovations in the formal properties of the publication:

bound pages and textual expressions would not suffice. Why might the performing body and the performance event so trouble the traditions and forms of textual publication? Looking at a broad field of contemporary performance, it is possible to identify an uneven presence of certain shared urges that might begin to explain this resistance: a distrust of commodification; a commitment to undermine the dominant orders of the text; an interest in intense physicality and sensory impression; an avant-gardist suspicion of the values of consensus inherent within the popular; a defiance of institutionalisation in all its forms; and most commonly, a concentration on the interactive dynamics of the performer-spectator relation and a correspondent tendency towards the valorisation of the event. Many of these elements pose acute problems for the smooth incorporation of performance into historical record.

Despite the presence of these numerous inclinations, much contemporary performance is increasingly bought in to the economies of reproduction, particularly in forms of documentation and critical theory. This assimilation, as Peggy Phelan has so persuasively argued, takes away "performance's only life"; strips performance of the very elements which constitute its power and value.¹ But performance's after-life in the realms of publication also promises much. Not least, for the artist it may extend their vision to new audiences, further their reputation and increase their cultural authority. It may even relieve the harsh realities within which many live artists work. The 'profits' are certainly not one-sided, and in the realm of critical theory, the theoretician like the academy itself, gains from the intellectual commodification and reproduction of elusive events. Like an old colonial machine, the academy relentlessly surveys fresh cultural territory and submits it to its discursive control. It may bestow a little cultural capital along the way, but its institutional powers, within which many of us necessarily work, are turned towards the mastery of evasive phenomena by their conversion into objects of knowledge. Subjected to the proprieties of this knowledge machine, cultural events are surveyed, measured, identified and transformed into appropriate, lasting, material remainders. This is a problem for performance not only because, as Phelan has

identified, its ontology is constituted through disappearance, but as Fiona Templeton has argued, there is an historical and seemingly immutable association in the West of knowledge with materiality, an association which performance persistently calls into question.²

In the rush to capitalise on the cultural charge of performance, careful questions must be asked around the discourses and traditions within which documentary and critical practices take place and the politics of the operation of these forms of reproduction upon live events. Recent debates on the process of performance documentation have brought home the seductions of perspectives which see their own modes of writing or recording as transparent and non-affective, and the performance events that they 'capture' as restageable or recoverable objects.³ There is an urgent need for further approaches to the document and to critical theory which engage with, and openly present, the resonances of the performance event's radical inaccessibility within reproductive forms, the subjective constructions, and the inevitable reductions which such forms impose upon performance. If, within the media-dense culture in which we live, the passage of performance into other forms of representation (whether film, video, soundtape, CD ROM, object, text-document, journalism or critical theory) is inevitable, the terms of its transference are not. Undoubtedly each of these reproductive forms will enact distinct kinds of translation, operating differently on the event and recreating it in distinct ways according to their own inherent formal dynamics and traditions. As an assemblage of various reproductive media, *Shattered Anatomies* is an attempt to multiply both the modes of address to performance and the possibilities inherent within distinct documentary and critical forms.

For many of the contributors to this collection, to explore these ideas within a publication is to present and investigate the mechanics and the failings of the very form in which you record; to ask what reproduction omits, excludes, forgets and loses. Circling around this loss, a number of core questions recur. How can the eventhood of performance be defined? What is the body's presence and role within the ontology of the event? What cultural conventions, meanings and differences mark the bodies

¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993, p. 146.
² Fiona Templeton, 'Seeing the Academic Body: On the Dramatic Form of the Conference and the Relationship of Theory to Poetry', paper given at the *Assembling Alternatives* conference on contemporary poetry, University of New Hampshire, September, 1996.

³ These issues were dominant in the Documentation and Devising conference at the Centre for Performance Research, Cardiff, Wales, 1993, particularly in Nick Kaye's keynote address 'Resisting the Document' and in the subsequent collection of provocations on theatre and archaeology by Mike Pearson and Julian Thomas in *The Drama Review*, 38, 4 (T144), Winter 1994, pp. 133-161.

⁴ This history of thought is countered in Elizabeth Grosz's influential work, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, IUP, 1994, and identified as a problematic division within performance theory in Ric Allsopp and Scott deLahunta's collection *The Connected Body!*, Amsterdam School of the Arts, 1996.

utilised in performance? What happens in transposition to the phenomenal realms of the bodies of performers and spectators which are undoubtedly a constitutive element within the meanings of the event? Working against the binary traditions of Western thought and a structural division within performance theory, between the phenomenal body and the body as the object of representation, how might documentation and critical theory encounter and present the constitution of meaning through the sensory reality of the lived body?⁴ What happens to the spatial, temporal and inter-subjective dynamics of performance as it is reconfigured in the document or in critical theory? How might the terms of this reconfiguration be made apparent within reproduction? How does memory play through performance events and our subsequent restagings of their meanings in the record? In response to these considerations you will find a range of documentary perspectives here, from textual sources which precede the performance event and indicate intentions rather than effects, to residual artefacts and relics, which not only draw attention to their inherent loss, but the necessity of the reader's recreation and, in some cases, physical re-performance of their constitutive acts and meanings. Just as the authority and certainty of documentary power is opened here, the critical meditations, in their determinations of performance works, often return to the intrusions of the writer's subjectivity upon the process of the recovery of the event; the excavation of their psychic, phenomenal and memorial landscapes which are inevitably pressed into the experience and recollection of the work. The artefacts, documents and critical writings assembled as *Shattered Anatomies* concern themselves with these issues, exploring and interrogating the relation of the performance event to reproduction, of the body to the text. In their multiple forms, critical styles and influences, they present not one history, but many contesting histories, not one body, but bodies, marked in the process of translation.

Adrian Heathfield

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