The documentation of practice: framing trace
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Introduction

From a postmodern/post-structuralist perspective, the complexity of the relationship between theory and practice does not allow for hierarchical, causal or dialectical connections between the two. As Gilles Deleuze has suggested in a discussion with Michel Foucault, the relationship between theory and practice can be understood as "a system of relays within a larger sphere, within a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical" (in Foucault 1977, 206). This position sets up a framework for a range of possible relationships between theory and practice, including options that manifest elements of discontinuity.

Hosted by the academic area of dance studies, my doctoral research (which included a practical project) 1 challenged traditional choreographic practices that celebrate the authority of the choreographer as the only valid method through which dances can be made. Instead I suggested that movement improvisation in performance offers alternative routes for the creation of movement-based performance, through the use of "instant composition", a technique of exercising choice within the "present moment" of the dance.

The use of improvisation as performance mode in movement-based work was introduced in the early 1970s by the American group Grand Union as a totally open process 2. From within a post-structuralist perspective which assumes that totally open cultural manifestations are not possible, my doctoral thesis explored the contextual character of "instant composition" as a technique of opening up fields of possibilities rather than restricting the decision-making process through setting up limitations 3. The research proceeded as a dialogue between the theory and practice of improvisational performance: the skill of performing improvisationally was examined with reference to Carr's concept of practical reasoning 4 and Foucault's notion of the discourse 5, yet at the same time problematised by a series of studio experiments. Engaging with this process I was able to suggest that, there are cases in which, the process of crossing the border between a theoretical model and its application in studio-based practices is discontinuous.

Pursuing further my research into the dialogue between theory and practice during (and after) the creative process, I am currently involved with a post-doctoral project that addresses practice-based research and its theoretical implications from an interdisciplinary perspective. This perspective expands beyond the strict academic discipline of dance studies yet is directly informed by my own artistic and academic background in dance/ movement-related work and has been framed under the umbrella term "interdisciplinary choreographic explorations." One of the key issues in this project is to explore the potential of documentation as a hybrid domain within which theory and practice meet in Deleuze's manner. On the assumption that what is documented and how this is documented reveal the framework within which artists understand, conceive and develop their work, documentation can be understood as both a record and a tool of making decisions about the nature of the work. In order for this post-doctoral project to start dealing with such problems there is a clear need to articulate some conditions around the debatable role of documentation in art practice and, most importantly, in work which is manifested as live performance or incorporates live presence, elements or processes. It is the aim of this paper to articulate (however fleetingly at this stage) a set of conditions that can allow for this double purpose to be initially conceived and hopefully addressed.

Perceptions of documentation

Documentation in art practice has been frequently discussed in relation to its role as distribution tool. In this scenario, it has been criticised as a form of capitalist practice that appropriates the work, distorts its meanings and qualities through inappropriate reproduction which only aims to "sell" the work to large audiences at any cost. Peggy Phelan (1993, 1997) has repeatedly argued that documentation works against live performance's very nature of incorporating the processes of its own disappearance. Discussing the ontology of performance 6, Phelan presents a statement that almost sounds as a manifesto: "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" (Phelan 1993, 146).

The critique of documentation as a vehicle through which attempts have been made to make permanent the temporary despite itself is not totally unjustified, at least as far as academic contexts are concerned 7. The painful debates around assessing outcomes of research conducted in academic institutions carry striking evidences of how dominant some inappropriate positions about art practice have been. Such positions perpetuate out-of-date hierarchical systems which exclude alternative forms of "knowledge". Yet the purpose of this paper is neither to analyse current institutional practices nor the development of arguments for and against the accompanying agendas; rather it is to contemplate new roles that documentation is currently in a position to play due to how it has shaped itself into a body of diverse practices that respond to a variety of needs and purposes around artistic work. This includes frameworks that allow documentation to develop as a critical space in its own right where the issues/concerns of the work are addressed only through appropriate forms and without necessarily employing reproduction. Another option is to develop frameworks that make possible the integration of documentation practices within the work itself.

This is not by any means a new idea. The issue has been addressed in a variety of ways through the development of both theoretical positions and studio practices. Joshua Sofaer has offered a solid perspective that somehow allows Phelan's uneasiness with performance documentation to settle. His suggestion re-frames Phelan's problem as part

of a wider (ontological) picture: "Phelan's definition of the ontology of performance as that which becomes itself through disappearance does not invalidate the potential of performance documentation, but rather positions it as something other than performance itself" (in Govinda and Hughes 2000). Interestingly, introducing Tim Etchells's recent publication Certain Fragments (1999), Phelan discusses the radical role of photographer Hugo Glendinning in the making process of Forced Entertainment's piece Club of No Regrets: "he shot without looking - never certain of what he'd get. But as part of the action"(p14). Phelan comments: "Eliminating focus, Glendinning's photographs "hunted" the performance without ever quite catching it. And yet precisely in the way in which Glendinning missed it, Forced Entertainment began to see what exactly [they] were doing" (p14). 8

It is important to clarify that Phelan's contribution in the development of an effective discursive framework within which the potential of documentation can be understood is paramount. In her rich argumentation against the relevance of documenting performance, she puts together a critical vocabulary which signposts key avenues in researching the potential of documentation. In order to develop a critique of Phelan's positions one needs to only push her ideas further! This is one of the typical joys of "playing" with critical theory in a post-structuralist landscape: one cannot achieve anything unless one uses what is already available therefore challenging the assumptions behind the positions criticised. In this respect, the fact that Phelan attributes a number of (bad) roles and functions to documentation suddenly becomes a map that structures a series of contemplative journeys towards an ontology of documentation itself this time.

Postmodern considerations of the critical vocabulary

Phelan uses terms such as representation, reproduction and recognition. She also talks about the real, loss and disappearance: "I want less to describe and preserve performances than to enact and mimic the losses that beat away within them" (Phelan 1997, 12). "I am investigating - the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body has disappeared. My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can" (Phelan 1997, 3).

Within Phelan's conceptual landscape, there are at least three methodological routes one might take in researching an expanded notion of documentation. The first would be to show that documentation is not about representation, reproduction and recognition of the performance event or final manifestation of a piece of work. The second would be to show how Phelan's understanding of representation, reproduction and recognition is somehow restricted and encompasses only reductive connotations around appropriation, distortion and processes of diminishing the "work". The third would be an attempt to prove that mechanisms of representation and reproduction that provide manifestations in which the "work" is recognisable do not necessarily exclude traces of loss and disappearance as part of the overall picture. The problem though with all three approaches is that, after a number of intriguing intellectual manoeuvres on how far these terms can be stretched, we would be left suspended in an uncomfortable vacuum with no clues as to how an expanded notion of documentation might be approached from a practical point of view. But would we want to arrive at some tangible conclusions at the end of this process and would this make any sense in the multidisciplinary worlds of contemporary art practice, where definitions are horribly failing and boundaries can only stay in one place for the duration of a glimpse?

There is a clear temptation here to develop a post-structuralist project by employing a primarily destabilising strategy and fully deconstructive one that could systematically negate every single affirmative idea in relation to Phelan's concepts. Strategies of negation are well established avant-garde practices. In his account on the character of avant-garde art since the publication of Finnegan's Wake (1939) by James Joyce, Butler differentiates between two kinds of work: "Those which are dominated by a theory of their own rule-dominated means of creation, and those whose method is antithetical to this, being irrationalist, indeterminate, or aleatory." (Butler 1980, ix). The task of subverting, resisting, negating has the character of permanent antithesis in Butler's second category. The "tendency ... for disturbance, dislocation, and the breakdown of structure" (Herwitz 1993, 141) becomes a manifestation of the right to negate, a familiar element in the work of Dadaists. A form of negation is also the artists' tendency to resist definitions or characterisations, both about themselves and their work. To use an example from the current British avant-garde music scene where free improvisation is a thriving genre, Eddie Prevost, describing himself as a meta-musician, says: "The meta-musician works within the conceptual framework of I am not "that"-I am not that [bourgeois art]. The meta-musician refuses to own or to be owned. That is the struggle" (Prevost 1995, 181-182). However, this form of negation is also postmodernist in its tendency to resist fixed definitions and remain fluid in character, open to change by means of transformation. Foucault (1972) adopts the method of negation repeatedly within his account of the "discourse, refusing to say "who he is" (1972, 17) and requests the readers to not "ask him to remain the same" (1972, 17).

Phelan sees a direct link between "representation" and "reproduction": "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology - the pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous" (Phelan 1996, 146). She talks about the work of Sophie Calle (which is about memory and "presence" 9) in order to show that the role of a performance document should only be to activate memory. But as Sofaer (in Govinda and Hughes, 2000) has pointed out, the very fact that Phelan has used this example automatically problematises her position because of the unavoidable juxtaposition between strong and settled theoretical opinions and hybrid unsettling practices. She brings to the fore the issue of description in order to ultimately speak of loss and absence, and the (inter)active role of the spectator who produce meanings in their attempt to grasp, catch, understand, absorb, inhabit and make it their own.

If I was going to follow a strategy of negation in the context of the above theoretical landscape, it would be easy to argue that documentation can not-be reproduction, because documentation is about dialogue, reflection and response (which is not what reproduction is about). And if I was doing this, I would start abandoning my position of negation by means of my own argument which presents documentation as a site where all of these things (dialogue, reflection and response) happen. On the other hand, if I was going to claim that documentation is not representation/reconstruction of the performance or live process but rather a way of recording traces, imprints, projections, echoes, I would not be able to prove that it is impossible to represent these things (traces, imprints, projections echoes etc.).

This hypothetical process would have made my conceptual steps fairly consistent within the realm of the postmodern paradox 10 and the Foucauldian problematisation 11 as I would endlessly re-phrase my questions: what is representation? is representation reproduction? is then representation about "sameness" as opposed to "otherness"? does "sameness" imply recognition? is (should?) the work (be) recognisable in the document?

what is the document? there is a disturbingly interesting answer to the last question, one that further shows the relevance of stretching the existing critical vocabulary to its absolute limits. Tim Etchells wrote about dancer's Wendy Houston performance/presentation in a Conference on Documentation and Performance at the University of Lancaster (Etchells doesn't mention the year but I discovered that it happened in 1994) 12: "it's compelling because here the document is a body remembering itself and a voice describing itself. There's a struggle in what's happening and the anger and the energy of it is all directed inwards, in a search. I say to Houston later: "like your body is fighting itself, for possession of itself". The act we are watching is precisely a struggle - a dance that knows it cannot ever get back to the past but which knows that the past can live (changed) in the present by an effort of will" (Etchells 1999, 72). Connections amongst all sorts of heterogeneous elements would become immediately visible under the thrill of that (conceptually sublime) moment. Capitalism and its side effect, the need to possess, would naturally meet postmodern theories on the body addressing the body as document, text, and site of diverse inscriptions.

But I don't want to do any of this, despite the temptation, simply because it would lead me to a far too vague place in relation to the original aim in my project. I still want to define a field of possibilities (however fleetingly) for an expanded understanding and use of documentation, not only in relation to performance and the live final event (in the way Phelan is using these terms) but also in relation to process and (art) practice, both undoubtedly live by definition. And I want to do this by using, at its most, whatever is currently available in the field: methods, suggestions and positions which I consider highly precious for they manifest the professionals' (both practitioners and theorists) genuine struggle to develop working practices in the contested area of documentation. I would also like to sketch a conceptual framework to comfortably host these practices, one that would also allow for an expansion of Phelan's terminology. This framework has been inspired by the work of Della Pollock, someone whom Phelan really trusts and has invited to contribute in a collection of essays about performance entitled "The ends of performance" (1998).

Existing practices

Edited by Adrian Heathfield, Andrew Quick and Fiona Templeton, Shattered Anatomies (1997) was presented as a box (rather than a book) containing a diversity of documents of "visions of the body in contemporary performance" 13 through a wide range of media from academic texts to sculptural objects. Heathfield was convinced that this kind of "innovation in the formal properties of the publication" was crucial for a number of reasons enumerated in his essay entitled "Event-Text" and playing the role of an introduction. Amongst other elements, his list included anti-hierarchical references to text and recognition of the popularity of material forms and the (inter)active role of the spectator in new work. Although multi-dimensional in both its final manifestation and perspectives adopted, this collection did not develop an overall theoretical strategy. This is not a criticism but simply an observation that the editors were probably not interested in expanding in such areas. However this collection touched upon crucial issues which if further explored could offer solid grounds for a more coherent overall theoretical position. The first of these issues was in relation to the question of whether the work or its documentation can be considered as an object of knowledge. What is acceptable as "knowledge"? through which means and under which conditions? is the work an object of knowledge? Is documentation a manifestation of this knowledge or a strategy to produce it? Where is the locus of this knowledge? In the work itself or in its document? and for whom? For the maker, the audience or the critic? or if it is for all of them at the same time, is it any different for each one of them and how? However vague and self-evident these

questions might seem, an attempt to address them carefully for each work-documentation relationship would reveal the plethora of avenues from which to choose in order to both conceptually frame the documentation practice and devise working practices.

This position is reinforced by another point addressed in this introductory text which undoubtedly meets Phelan. Heathfield is aware of the unreproductability of performance or the live or for our purposes (in this paper) the process or the practice in its relationship with time. This is Phelan's notion of loss and fascination "with the outline bodies leave after they disappear", valuing what is not there rather than what is. Yet Heathfield recognises that it is possible to register this experience and that there is a variety of "distinct documentary and critical forms" which have different strengths and weaknesses when used towards this purpose. Heathfield continues further to credit another crucial area: the fact that documentation has tools to acknowledge the problem of dichotomising "the phenomenal body [from] the body as object or representation" in Western culture and by these means show the fragility (and fluidity) of the boundaries of the performance "event" . Finally Heathfield throws into the debate some additional useful terminology: excavation, recollection, translation. One can join him at this stage and contribute further words to be used as strategies/practices, stimulating metaphors or bodies of very specific disciplinary knowledge. One can suggest notation, mapping, diary or (why not?) description and multiply in this way the potential methodologies through which documentation becomes a manifestation of registered concerns rather than an attempt to reconstruct the original. Matt Adams of the live art company Blast Theory has addressed this issue directly referring to some video documentation produced for Blast Theory's interactive virtual reality-based piece Desert Rain. The problem here was to register the non-linear character of the piece. Therefore, the crucial question was how to bring together examples of different types of footage (and not so much which "bits" to use) so that the non-linear character of the piece would be sufficiently "represented" (Lycouris, 2000).

At this juncture, Tim Etchells's undated conference on Performance and Documentation should be brought into this discussion via a very informal document: the unedited notes of researcher Nigel Stewart who attended both the conference and the accompanying workshops and who informed me about its title (Mind the Gap: Process and Documentation) and date (1994). The personal character of these documentary traces in the form of short sentences mapping the responses of the author to the narrative of this event do not allow for any generic conclusions about the overall significance of this event. Yet despite their fragmentation, these notes clearly register some very radical ideas in the field. With a combination of artists, theorists, practitioners and scientists or professionals from other areas such as architecture, history, law, medicine and archaeology, the perspectives presented seemed impressively diverse. Documentation was attributed adjectives such as "evocative" (as opposed to encapturing); it was associated with systems of signification; it was mentioned in its capacity to continue and diversify already existing creative processes, it was discussed in its philosophical potential ("documentation always suspends the moment of truth"); it was brought back to Phelan's realm yet through a very specific sensibility: "the need to speak of [and for that matter document/register] a performance practice is to tacitly acknowledge its incompleteness"; it was clearly pointed out that documentation has always a purpose and that it can be produced for a variety of contradictory reasons such as aesthetic, pragmatic and economic reasons; it was interestingly mentioned that "the document can reflect the unstable relationship between the performer and the documentor" and that documentation can remind us that "art is a way of thinking rather than a singular form"; documentation was finally defined as "i. a cluster of narratives, ii. physical scars, iii. notebooks and iv. verbal memories from performance" and performance as an "experimental analysis of events".

Conclusion: the introduction of an open framework

There is a fascinating diversity above of radical and promising attitudes to the practice of documentation which deserve extensive examination in both their conceptual premises and practical applications. Yet in order to conclude with the fragile task of this paper, it is necessary to introduce briefly the kind of theoretical position which would support the initial materials to develop into their full potential. I promised to talk about Della Pollock. Pollock has explored performative writing from a post-structuralist position. The usefulness of her work for the project of this paper is that it is committed to opening up possibilities rather than defining limitations. She states: "I want to explore some of the ways what we have come to call "performative writing" answers discourses of textuality not by recovering reference to a given or "old" world but by writing into a new one" (in Phelan 1998, 75). She goes on to name 6 qualities which represent her notion of this form of writing: evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational and consequential. After having elaborated on each one of them she concludes by saying that performative writing "travels side by side with normative performances of textuality - always drawing its energy from - the possibility that it may always be otherwise than what it seems" (in Phelan, 1998, 97). It is because of this difficult almost slippery space that this position sets for itself, but also because of its ambition, that it currently offers an uncompromised framework to consider current practices and roles of documentation in both the process and the outcome which together constitute the practice. In addition this position puts in a really useful perspective Phelan's notion of representation and reproduction and her fascination with the real, the live and disappearance. Hasn't she already said that "performances [are] acts that both solicit and resist the notion of an end at all"? (in Etchells 1999, 18)

Endnotes

 1 Destabilising dancing: tensions between the theory and practice of improvisational performance" (1996), University of Surrey.

 2 Grand Union was a collective of Downtown New York artists with primarily dance/ movement background. Yet their work, produced between 1970 and 1976, also integrated elements from other artforms, including improvised and found text. For further information on Grand Union see Ramsay (1991).

 3 Improvisational practices based on dancers' physical responses to instructions given by choreographers have been extensively used by New Dance artists since the 1970s. Yet, this has been a highly popular method in the practice of traditional choreography where choreographers have full control of the use of these materials as part of fully set (as opposed to improvised) pieces of work.

 4 Carr discusses the difference between "practical" and "theoretical" knowledge and claims that "practical knowledge [by being] considerably more complicated than that of physical ability" (Carr 1981, 53) cannot be demonstrated simply through the performance of the activity, because the latter would be only a matter of coincidence. The performing agent should be competent in applying the rules of practical reasoning, a distinct type of logical procedure by means of which practical knowledge is constituted and which differs from theoretical reasoning. Practical reasoning establishes logical connections "between specific means and particular ends" (Carr 1981, 60).

5 Foucault's notion of discourse refers to forms of knowledge that exhibit an element of unity: sciences, theories or various forms of text can be such examples. However, this coherence does not originate in the commonality of "an object, a style, concepts or thematic choices ... rather [in] the presence of a systematic dispersion of elements" (Smart 1985, 39). This type of organisation becomes possible because the elements of the discourse are not meaningful as such, but "have the capacity to carry meaning, because they are making a statement" (Racevskis 1983, 70). This capacity relies upon "a play of [discourse's] prescriptions that designate its exclusions and choices" (Foucault 1977, 199).

6 To provide a fair representation of Phelan's notion of performance one needs a number of different theoretical tools and substantial time to proceed through all relevant discipline-based discourses. For this reason, any such attempt is far beyond the purposes of this paper and would only distract its purposes. However, one cannot but stress the importance of the "live" in Phelan's theory of performance. Here is a supportive quote: "performance employs the concept and experience of the live event as a way to rehearse our obligations to the scenes we witness in realms usually labeled the representational or the mediated" (in Etchells 1999, 10).

7 Non-academic contexts are much more difficult to discuss in the sense that there is a variety of parameters that determine the needs and purposes of documentation, ranging from promotion strategies in the competitive arena of art market to artists' working practices where documentation appears in diverse degrees of importance and might be incorporated for a number of different reasons around the very nature of some types of work.

8 Tim Etchells's recent publication Certain Fragments (1999) can be described as a hybrid space aiming at locating a variety of textual practices in relation to a number of complex (and non- linear) activities situated in the periphery of the making/presenting of work, such as researching and reflecting, locating connections between historical accounts and memories of named people, finding links between collective memories and personal dreams, looking at the textual qualities of the blurred border between the real and the dream.

9 Sophie Calle created work based on the unfortunate event of several valuable paintings being stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990. She asked the visitors and the museum staff who had previously seen these paintings to describe them. Then she transcribed what they said, photographed the galleries of the museum and then exhibited those photographs together with the text from these trascriptions (for further details, see Phelan 1996, 146-147).

10 Hutcheon claims that to practise a postmodernist critique is paradoxical: "you cannot step outside that which you contest, ... you are always implicated in the value, you choose to challenge" (1988, 223). Postmodernism has an inherent element of "complicity"; it cannot be "innocent" in that it encompasses elements of power and domination. Its practices operate on the basis of their own ideological foundations. Parody, through which fragments of past representations contribute to the construction of the present (reality), operates as an ironic comment of postmodernism's impossibility to escape from its own ideology while "signal[ling] how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 1989, 93).

11 "[The] development of a given into a question, [the] transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to

produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problemization and the specific work of thought." (Foucault in Rabinow 1984, 389). The "problem" becomes "the answer to the question ... [and] is resolved ... by displacing the question" (Foucault 1988, 185). Foucault only "raise[s] ... question[s] in order to ... maintain [them] in a permanent state of irresolution" (Racevskis 1983, 116).

12 Houston's presentation was based on a series of attempts to remember (and reproduce) how she was using her body at different points in time. She had asked the audience to shape the sequence of her dance by randomly calling out years from 1959 until that moment (Etchells, 1999)

13 Because of the unorthodox form of this "publication" there are no pages to refer to.

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