

## Storied Space: Epistemology and Place in the Performance Museum

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### Abstract

The paper interrogates the relationships between space and knowledge in performance museums, with reference to two interventions which explore the possibilities of a practice of documentation through performance: Suzanne Lacy's *Silver Action* (Tate, 2013) and non zero one's *this is where we got to when you came in* (Bush Theatre, 2012). In light of the increasing provision for live performance within museums, the paper examines the dramatization of museum space as a means of engaging with performance legacies. Querying art historian Donald Preziosi's critique of performativity as the basis for a somatic and spatial teleology of history, a reading of the 'performatic' will be proposed in light of Diana Taylor's notion of the 'scenario'. As manifested in non zero one's exploration of the Bush Theatre, the scenario allows for a generative ambivalence to permeate museum-going, in which the tendentiousness of history-writing and museology are playfully and self-reflexively made visible. Foregrounding the participant's performative and imaginative agency rather than the 'authentic' discovery of prior truth, the piece signals an interdisciplinary slippage between performance and museology which advances a progressive and self-challenging historiographic practice.

As the Tate Modern opened its new extension, the Tanks, in autumn 2012, an inaugural symposium announced a problematic that pinpointed the anxieties of a new gallery space devoted to 'Art in Action': an apparently paradoxical venture aiming to curate and exhibit artworks that no longer existed. Entitled *Inside/Outside: Materialising the Social*, the seminar focussed on concerns surrounding the exhibition of historical performance and live art practice as well as the contentious notion of using objects, text and audiovisual media to represent formerly live works within the museum context. The act of 'materialising' is itself an ambiguous term, here implying the realisation or

concretisation of action in object form, which might then be displayed in the gallery. Constituting the museum as a locus of archival matter seems to presuppose a particular relation between itself and history, one in which the latter (or rather, its artefacts) are contained within and/or simulated by the former. In both cases the museum is cast as a receptacle of history, indexical to time rather than part of it. The museum's own historicity and materiality are very rarely explicitly acknowledged in displays or galleries. White walls, vicariously projecting the curator's disembodied voice and a meditative 'indoors' separation from busier 'outdoors' social space, all serve to create a partitioned space of reflection *on*, rather than *in*, history and social space (See Duncan; Forgan; Casey 81-83). Here a second resonance of the term 'materialising' might come into play, one in which museums may themselves be materialised in public thought – designated not as neutral spaces within which history may be preserved or observed, but as (historically) material and economically and culturally invested artefacts in themselves. As a culturally-specific epistemological practice, museum-making and museum-going (the latter of which shall be the primary focus of this article) is seen not so much as the discovery of prior knowledge, but as a performative, culture-*constructing* act. Attending to this performative quality, my discussion examines two works which speak to a revision of the term 'performance museum,' indicating not just the display of performance history, but also the performativity of the display itself. Both Suzanne Lacy's *Silver Action* and non zero one's *this is where we got to when you came in* document performative events of the past, but equally enact a practice of documentation *through* performance, in doing so affirming and announcing the embeddedness of museology in social space and time.

Emphasizing the epistemological capital associated with archives and their interpretation, art historian Donald Preziosi suggests that museums are places in which we construct narratives of the past which are useful to the ideologies of the present: 'museology and art history are instrumental ways of distributing the space of memory [...], transforming traces of the past superimposed upon the present into a storied space' ('Performing Modernity' 34). The crucial significance of

museums to contemporary narratives of history and culture is therefore paramount: the museum is a public, institutional synecdoche within a wider process of collective history-writing. The agency of the museum, however, is specifically one of embodiment and site – a materialising of time through spatial distribution and the arrangement of matter in place. The museum's 'storied space' is the construction site of the present's instrumental readings of the past, or rather, the site within which they are performed. Derrida's often-cited reading of the archive as a formulation of knowledge and power (elaborated in *Archive Fever*) insists, similarly, upon the importance of place: 'the archives could do neither without substrate nor without residence' (Derrida 2).

Conversely, performance is often conceived of as an art form that dematerialises in space, jettisoning the physical matter that might, in Preziosi's terms, be storied or distributed. Peggy Phelan, perhaps the most influential voice in this regard, excludes 'ephemeral' performance works from any such arrangement or reproduction of historical symbols, since 'performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations' (Phelan 146). Phelan locates performance's radicality in an ontology of disappearance: barred from an economy of signs due to its perpetual vanishing, performance is always already precluded from the circulation of image and matter, and therefore also from the retrospective storying of space.

It is precisely, however, the 'performative' that Preziosi associates with the hegemony of the museum. Space itself, and the distribution of bodies and/or matter within it, is the foundation of performance; as such, Preziosi identifies the museum space as 'one facet of a dramaturgical practice [...] central to the performance of our modernity' ('Performing Modernity' 38). Performative (that is, spatial and somatic) activities such as museum-going are crucial in maintaining cultural narratives. Lacking an ontological essence or guarantor, they must be constantly participated in and (re)articulated: simultaneous, if not synonymous actions. In contrast to Phelan's notion of performance as excluded from object-hood and representation,

for Preziosi, performance is precisely the means by which space and matter gain their cultural currency and force.

More recently, Phelan's position has been challenged by critics who install her work within a tradition of scholarship predicated upon categories of originality and authenticity. Emphasising instead the notions of embodied knowledge and residual behaviour, designated as 'performatic' (Taylor 6), over the logocentric 'performative', Diana Taylor describes performance as a collective system of 'learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge' (16). Taylor's 'repertoire' is a mobile and adaptable transferral of embodied practice that includes corporeal mnemonics and lingering patterns of movement and gesture. Taylor is productively ambivalent about the capacity of the embodied repertoire to allow for ongoing individual agency typically excluded from written history. Her postulation of the 'scenario' (28-33), adaptable plot structures that exist within specific cultural imaginaries, allows for the creative parody and mutation of learnt behaviour (as shall be seen below), and is also ghosted by the prescriptive cultural formulae that reappear in Preziosi as frameworks of dominant culture-making: performance and repertoire belong 'to the strong as well as the weak' (22) and the performatic has hegemonic, not just radical potential.

The flexibility and open-endedness of performance-based knowledge transferral is predicated, however, upon its nature as embodied and spatial, thus 'the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning' (20). Through the reiterated actions (choreographies) of bodies in space, the repertoire allows for both the retention and the transformation of corporeal knowledge. Nuancing Preziosi's theorisation of performed historiography as hegemonic narrativisation, Taylor proposes that, 'instead of focussing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description' (16). Using performance studies research to explore the implications of Preziosi's paradigm of the museum-as-performance therefore offers dual import: performatic scenarios might be seen as prescriptive frameworks in which material resonances are (re)produced and

(re)enacted. However, as a state of play and experiment which takes place through singular and inflected actions, performance can offer real potential for the subversion of normative codes of behaviour and the exposure or reformulating of epistemological hierarchies.

This dialectic was paralleled by Duncan Cameron as early as 1971, who proposes a twin paradigm to designate the museum either as ‘temple’ or as ‘forum’, both metaphors that have also been repeatedly deployed in academic and popular discourse to characterise theatre (Cameron 11). As a temple, the museum offers an apparently objective frame of reference, a model of reality against which the perceptions of individual visitors may be measured. A parallel in theatre might be a performance that purports to represent a complete, hermetic reality, foreclosing or pre-empting imaginative responses and thus constituting the spectator as passive voyeur. Just as the museum is posited as an objective, authoritative model that may be discovered and read by its viewers, so this theatre signals itself as a central locus of knowledge which informs and persuades its audience. In this sense, the fictitious theatrical presentation is even comparable to Preziosi’s analysis of museums as ‘instruments for the production of cogent and convincing knowledge,’ and indeed Preziosi goes on to ask, ‘Why else would the labor of [...] watching a play or a film, or walking (performing) a museum be seen as socially useful unless it were framed as resulting in the (proper) discovery of the ‘truth’ of individuals?’ (‘Performing Modernity’ 32).

This dynamic of truth-revelation posits a supposed hierarchy of authentic knowledge from which the spectator is virtually excluded. Conversely, Cameron’s forum depicts the museum as a place for divergence and argumentation: a multi-directional sharing of knowledge, in which spectators are also designated as speakers or authors. This model has enjoyed rich experimentation in twentieth century performance history via intellectual, affective and physical interactions. Moving beyond their role in the co-creation of meaning, the active, bodily *inclusion* of participant-spectators in the performance itself has been the aim of practitioners as diverse as Allan Kaprow, Jerzy Grotowski and Augusto Boal. In the wake of curators’

increasing attention in the last decade towards performance and its histories (significantly, the Tate Tanks, opened in 2012, have been claimed as the world's first museum galleries permanently dedicated to performance), today's museum spaces often seek not just to represent but also to incorporate live performances within their walls. A much-debated field of curation, this move invites the interdisciplinary slippage of performance and museology into one another, so that the parallels drawn above become real possibilities for formal overlay and exchange. Drawing on performance's history of radical experimentation may offer parallel – and indeed practical – models for progression in the ways that performance is documented, represented and accessed in the museum context.

Suzanne Lacy's performance *Silver Action* was staged as part of the Tate Live series on 3 February 2013. Maintaining her interest in the cause of older women who, though neglected by superficial media fascinations, nevertheless offer valuable life experience and knowledge, Lacy facilitated a live, unscripted discussion between hundreds of women aged sixty and over who had been involved in feminist activism between the 1950s and 80s. The women were invited to London's Tate Modern, to sit at an arrangement of tables in groups of four debating a set of previously agreed questions.\* Members of the public could freely access the South Tank, where the performance took place, and gather on the peripheries of this central bloc. Since we could not walk amongst the tables, it was difficult to hear any of the discussions clearly, but individual women were 'picked out' (Harvey) to speak to transcribers: transcripts were typed in real time and projected onto the walls of the space as well as diffused through social media, particularly Twitter. The piece was explicitly inscribed within a genealogy of experimental (participatory) performance art, notably, Lacy

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\* The questions can be paraphrased as follows: 1. What can older women contribute? What challenges can we face? 2. Discuss something you witnessed or experienced that propelled you to action. 3. What differences are there for young women (and men) today? What role do value perceptions play? 4. What needs questioning? What needs to be done? What are you willing to take action on now and how?

frequently cites her mentor Allan Kaprow\*, and the piece also acts as a ‘re-investigation’ of Lacy’s 1987 work, *The Crystal Quilt*, whose documentation was exhibited in the adjacent Tank (Lacy, ‘Artist’s Statement’; ‘*Silver Action: Performance Recreation*’). Moreover, there was a clear impetus to transmit the women’s subjective narratives of political protest – as well as the vestiges of *The Crystal Quilt* – to people who had missed the events themselves. The piece thus functions as a form (or forum) of documentation or even a live ‘museum’ in itself: as iterated above, an act of documenting *through* performance. The transmission was doubled by the projection of textual fragments of the discussions into dynamic online networks and consolidated by publicity and literature around both the work and the Tanks which emphasise a drive to constitute spectators as active interlocutors or even performers (‘Suzanne Lacy: *Silver Action*’; Holtham; Searle).

Lacy’s performance is perhaps an apt response to Taylor’s ‘scenario,’ which allows the past to be made visible through corporeal as well as discursive (written) action; or equally to Phelan’s call for performative documentation, ‘the act of writing toward disappearance’ (Phelan 148). Both in its form and its content, *Silver Action* explores an alternative to the conventional logo- or image-centric historical showcases often found in museum spaces, typically aligned in contemporary - particularly feminist - theory with patrilineal and/or white-cultured perspectives. However, if the medium and the message of *Silver Action* are in this sense married, they are, in another, contradictory. Whilst the interactions between the women participants seemed fluid and engaging (indeed Lacy highlights the benefit of the project for the participants themselves), the work’s provision for embodied exchange did not extend beyond the group itself, reiterating very traditional models of exclusion and reinstating the epistemological hierarchies discussed above. Aurally, spectators were straining to hear the women’s conversations, and any access we did have was transmitted through transcriptions, speaking disembodied from the walls of the Tanks in essentially the same medium as conventional

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\* Lacy began working with Kaprow as a student at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s.

exhibition plaques. This represented not so much a valuation of the text over the vocal conversations, but, for many spectators (as well as online viewers), a substitution for the aural and/or physical experience. Tectonically, the piece was arranged according to a clear centre-margin dichotomy, which was reinforced by the focussing of light onto the participants with relative darkness on the peripheries – just as in a museum display case or proscenium arch theatre.



**Suzanne Lacy, *Silver Action*, 3 Feb. 2013, Tate Modern. Photo: Johannes Bondzio.**

Whilst both *Silver Action* and *The Crystal Quilt* emphasise the importance of visibility for older women, this work risks replicating the same epistemological inequalities the artist claims to debunk. Essentially, the women could be seen but neither heard nor spoken to. The work was a culmination of workshops with the women, and a sense of intimacy, even domesticity, was mustered in the image of the small tables (the last element of the project was a series of filmed discussions known as the ‘Kitchen Table’). The performance in question, however, was curated as a focal event at the heart of the economic and cultural capital of the UK, with ripples of online discussion emanating from a ring of onsite Tweeters. The experience may have resembled a typically forum-like discussion for the women participants, but, in its wider remit, the event reproduces the



museum as a source or ‘temple’ of knowledge. Its performative model offers no guarantee of equality of expression, and indeed manages to reverse Lacy’s own politics of inclusive visibility. The contradiction of the work may come as a result of, as Amelia Jones observes, ‘claims of the special status of performance as authentically delivering ‘presence’ [coming into] direct conflict with the simultaneous efforts to raise the status and economic value of performance events by displaying them in museums’ (Jones 199). On the other hand, live performance lends itself well to a culture fascinated by dynamic online platforms and experiential commodities, which may attract greater cultural (if not economic) capital for the Tate than its valuable permanent collections (compare Casey 80; Lütticken). The materiality of Lacy’s piece, then, is enacted *through* its performativity: it dramatises space via a centre-margin dichotomy that organised both the Tank and the virtual space of the Tate’s online networks.

Performance group non zero one’s production *this is where we got to when you came in* (Bush Theatre, September 2011) also did much to blur the boundaries between performance and museum. Commissioned by the Bush Theatre as a farewell to its venue at the time of its relocation, the performance explored the history of the theatre building, presenting it for exploration to the public. Using wireless headphones, spectators were guided around a series of installations within the building, played excerpts from interviews with practitioners who had worked at the theatre and invited to participate in the performance in various ways. The piece was researched so as to provide an informative (but often anecdotal) account of the history of the building, which had been the Bush Theatre venue for over forty years; its goal was thus comparable to that of any performance museum that provides access to a history of theatre or performance. In conceiving of the theatre building itself as an archive, non zero one speak back to Derrida’s analysis of the archive’s etymological resonance; as Derrida insists, the *arkheion* refers to a domicile: ‘The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public’ (Derrida 2). Derrida recognises this passage inhering in the conversion of the Freuds’ private house to the public Freud Museum; likewise, the rendering public of the Bush Theatre

building – its passing from the private spaces of administration, rehearsal and performance, to the public space of historical matter – takes place. In its public ownership, Derrida notes, the archive is also democratized through ‘the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation’ (Derrida 4, fn.). The guiding voice, heard through speakers or headphones, states from the outset that all areas of the Bush will be accessed, and later, disregarding a sign marked ‘private’, that for now, this notion simply doesn’t apply. The fact that *this is where...* was itself a ticketed event for a very small number of participants (four per performance) troubles the claim to its theorisation as a rendering public of the Bush venue; equally, its opposition to the much larger remit of Lacy’s work (from participants to spectators to online audiences) risks a critique of exclusivity. Yet it was precisely within this small-scale format of the production that the notion of public access to the site-as-archive was made possible. A different quality of participation was produced within this ‘scenario’ of historicization – both discursive and corporeal – which challenges easy correlations between inclusivity and democracy.

From its opening, the performance dramatizes the temporality of the event, situating itself at the very end of the venue’s history as a theatre and reminding the participants (through the headphones) of previous moments they may have experienced at the theatre and that this will be their last. The participants never encounter any other people in the building, and yet the debris of the space – coffee cups, cigarettes, paperwork – amplifies the immediacy of its pivotal transition. Moreover, the historicity of the performance is something the participants are themselves made part of. Cast as explorers in Taylor’s atemporal ‘scenario’ of discovery, the participants are nonetheless very aware of their own personal and social identities: the scenario thus ‘allows us to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously, and thus recognize the areas of resistance and tension’ (Taylor 30): in this case, pointing up the tendentiousness of the archival act. In one installation, the participant is invited to sit in a toilet cubicle and compose a message. Through the headphones, s/he is directed to find an (ultraviolet) pen; simultaneously, ultraviolet light replaces the light in the room

and other messages are suddenly illuminated on the toilet walls. Each participant is invited to contribute memories of working at the theatre, stories of creative collaborations or recollections of performances attended – including *this is where...* itself, thus highlighting the event of the participant's own visit within a history of theatrical presentations. This installation constructs an ongoing performance of documentation, through which the participant may access a collective archive, not just as observer, but as co-author. Participants in *this is where...* were invited to engage in performance history through the writing on a toilet wall: a playful, personal and quotidian exchange.

This installation speaks back to the strengths of Suzanne Lacy's work in its foregrounding of the act of history-writing as an embodied and performative practice. In this sense, both works offer a riposte to Preziosi's above-cited suggestion that the labour of watching a performance is only socially useful in that it results in 'the (proper) discovery of the 'truth' of individuals'. On the contrary, the commonality of these productions lies in their insistence upon the contingency of historical 'truth', a fiction forged in the fires of individual and social positionalities. Whilst this emphasis is more explicit in *Silver Action's* discursive exchanges between feminist activists, a less obviously forum-like potential inheres in *this is where...* Indeed, *Silver Action* might be more easily compared to non zero one's subsequent production *you'll see me [sailing in antarctica]* since here, participants, seated together at a table, were invited to engage in a structured discussion about their own memories. Company member Alex Turner's claim to 'communality' (non zero one 'Interview') might be queried by the fact that, aside from lying down together in the cramped dressing room, and the moment in the toilet cubicle (which is of course a peculiarly private space), the audioguide cultivated a sense of solitude rather than verbal communication – additionally, the participants did not always follow the same path. In doing so, however, the production (as do many of the company's others) created space for individual experiences within the group. Although open to reproofs of discrepancy, it perhaps offers a more sensitive alternative to the structures of anonymisation installed in *Silver Action* through the block of identical tables, and the darkness in the rest of the

Tank. Rather than a comparison to the conversational *you'll see me [sailing in antarctica]*, the contrast outlined here highlights the potential for an animation of space which is non-verbal, but powerfully performatic.



**non zero one, *this is where we got to when you came in*, Bush Theatre, 15-30 Sept 2011. Photo: non zero one.**

The brief timeframe of *this is where...* was one in which the space and the objects within it – soon to become (at least for the Bush) obsolete – were *differently* valued, accruing a resonance that spoke more to human absence than material presence. A missing dimension was alluded to, which was reconstrued within the participant's own imaginary, inscribing him/her within the creation of the space through a meaningful, if not vocal, practice. As a representation or document of past action, the space is mined for its affective potential, and inscribed within a spatial dramaturgy through which the participant is directed. On the surface, then, non zero one reproduce Preziosi's critique of 'performance' as a teleological re-alignment of (plural) histories. Crucially, however, the performance consistently foregrounded the sense that the participants could never know the whole story and that the objects belied an unrepresentable past life. The space and the objects within it were not constituted as stand-ins for past events, but rather conspicuously incomplete traces, and it was for the participant her/himself to imagine (and never accurately, of course) what their histories were.

*Silver Action*, which staged a typically forum-like discussion between a central bloc of speakers, might be considered a performance of history writing - it thus contains

the potential of Phelan's 'writing towards disappearance' - but equally results in the exclusion of non-speakers, reproducing a wider temple-like dramaturgy of centralised knowledge. In *this is where...*, however, an imaginative dialogue is constructed between participant and site: not an act but a 'scenario' of discovery which, 'by definition introduce[s ...] generative critical distance between social actor and character' (Taylor 30). It is the participant her/himself who both becomes and resists the figure of archivist or historian. The participant's role was not one of understanding or decoding documents, but rather of speculating and imagining. Thus, non zero one underscored the impossibility of ever writing a coherent or comprehensive history, either of place or people. The production's playful dismissal of 'authentic' knowledge and the always-already incompleteness of its vision of the past is a helpful reply to the growing incorporation of performance into museums, who stand to benefit from the opening-out of historical epistemologies onto theatres or choreographies of memory. *this is where...* acknowledges the self-consciously performative historicity of museology and the theatre-museum is openly recognised as an invested, subjective and 'storied' space.

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