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‘repeat it, repeat it, repeat it until something new enters the world’ –

Performance, Archive and the Future

If we are searching for a glimpse of the future, the archive may not be the obvious place in which to look. Archives are generally thought to be places of the past, repositories where things that are taken out of their circulation in the present ‘repose’, waiting for the historian to blow the dust off them. And yet, as Derrida insists in *Archive Fever*: ‘the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. [...] It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps.’

(Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever – A Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1995), p.36)

For the past two years I have been afflicted with an acute case of ‘Archive Fever’. Not only have I spent much of my time in archives, an unusual location for someone whose work has been almost exclusively concerned with contemporary performance art, I am also attempting to build an archive of sorts myself. Under the title, *What’s Welsh for Performance? (Beth yw ‘performance’ yn Gymraeg?)*, I am aiming archive Wales’s history of performance art, a history that is as yet unaccounted for. The project combines a number of different approaches: extensive archival research, through which I aim to track the multitude of traces through which performance, although ‘past’, remains present, from audio-visual documentation to writings or rumour and hearsay; curatorial interventions, especially in the form of publicly staged

‘oral history’ events, in which I aim to bring into dialogue the contingencies of performance documentation with the contingencies of personal memory; and an investigation of key theoretical issues that arise from the construction of a performance archive and the writing of performance histories which it is designed to support. These issues include a consideration of how the ephemeral art of performance can be made material for an archive; how an artistic scene is formed within a particular cultural and social context, through internal and external influences; and how the archiving of performance itself contributes to the constitution and recognition of such a scene.

Mine is not the only current project that is devoted to the archiving of performance – on the contrary, such projects are proliferating. From the digitisation of documentation, to oral history initiatives, to re-enactments of past works, to the staging of interventions into existing archives, ‘archive fever’ is widespread in contemporary performance art practice, curatorship and scholarship. The ubiquity of archival projects in relation to performance work may at first seem paradoxical. Performance has often been regarded as that which cannot be archived, its ephemerality at odds with the archive's quest for permanence, its disappearing acts resisting the desire to label, stack and store. This stance is most pointedly expressed in a much-quoted dictum by American performance scholar, Peggy Phelan, which dominated the debate in performance studies for much of the 1990s and beyond:

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. [...] Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance.

(P.Phelan, *Unmarked* (London, 1993), p. 146.)

For Phelan, the disappearing nature of performance gives it its political potency as it allows performance to resist a culture driven by the principles of reproduction and commodification – and, by implication, also to escape what Derrida has identified as the archive's authoritarian desire to place matters under 'house arrest' (Derrida, 2) by securing them in the form of records. Phelan's stance has subsequently been re-evaluated by performance scholars such as Joseph Roach (*Cities of the Dead*, 1996), José Muñoz ('*Ephemera as Evidence*', 1996), and, most importantly, Diana Taylor (*The Archive and the Repertoire*, 2003) and Rebecca Schneider ('*Performance Remains*', 2001), who both have turned to the notion of the archive to emphasise performance's own particular modes of reproduction in light of a new interest in the ways in which alternative genealogies are constituted in the continual reappearance of performance. Yet, although aiming to displace the opposition between ephemerality and historical record, these approaches have frequently reasserted this opposition by placing the embodied and ephemeral performance knowledge of the 'repertoire' (to use Diana Taylor's model) as exterior to the 'archive' as the realm of an inscribed system of knowledge in order to retain performance's potential for resisting dominant histories.

I would like to take Derrida's evocation of an 'archive of the future' as an invitation to rethink some of our long-standing distinctions between archival records as past and the presence of performance by attempting to regard them both as articulations of the

future. It is striking in this regard that the archive fever in performance currently focuses very much on early exponents of this art practice from the 1960s and early 1970s. This may seem like an expression of a desire to lay claim to the 'origins' of this genre and to invest an art form that has been preoccupied with its own 'newness' with a sense of history. But it is this period's particular promise of futurity to which we currently seem to feel a compulsion to return. It shifts our focus from our long-standing attention to the manner in which performance disappears to the way in which performance aims to make something new appear that could not have been prognosticated. The documents that these art works have generated play a central role in articulating this promise: they serve not as records of what has occurred, but as accounts of what will have occurred. Perhaps.

I will talk about three examples from my archive of performance art in Wales, all made between 1968 and 1970.