

Telling Secrets to Strangers memories of performance: performance of memories

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We begin with a definition.

There's a distinction to be made between memory and remembrance. It is a distinction suggested initially by Freud, who used the terms *memoire volontaire* for memory and *memoire involuntaire* for remembrance.¹ Whilst memory serves to put the past into some semblance of order, absorbing what has been remembered into a deliberate continuum which locates the distant past at one end and the present at the other, remembrance destroys the separation of past and present. In other words, at those moments when images from the past are triggered by sensations which are being experienced in the present, remembrance manages to fuse the past *with* the present. In this way the linear continuity that is generally seen, via memory, to exist between the past and present is taken apart, deconstructed. Linearity is no longer then accepted as a given so much as its deconstruction becomes a fact.

Time that was lost may in this way no longer seem to be so, for through remembrance that past is not made subject to an act of revival but one of renewal. Remembrance functions as at once the result of performance and a paradigm for performance itself

We begin again with a statement. A position.

That which we comprehend as the real is only ever in the here and now of the perceiver, whilst that which has been experienced ceases to be 'real' and becomes memory. That which is to come (the word, the sentence, the breath after this) is no more than imagination as projection. Accordingly, just as the real is intrinsically corporeal, so the unreal world must always be greater in substance than the real.

Performance is an endless present and its time-based nature keeps pace with the watcher, moving from moment to moment with a shared synchronicity. However, within this permanent and perpetual *present* an apparent contradiction exists. It does so because performance continues to offer itself to us as a motif of the referenced past and the referential future ... of the 'as was' *via* the 'as if' towards an always elusive 'to be'. Performance tends thus to deal with the past and the future more strongly than the present. In this way, convention leads to the conventional ... what we know from past experience fuels a capacity to imagine that which will probably follow. We live through performance in a semi-comatose state of memory, remembrance and prediction, a knowing state of departure and arrival which takes us down routes so familiar as to pass in a blur.

In opting for the performance to *take us somewhere* we have to miss the moments, more swift than prediction, wherein the performance is always already and always only forever in the here and in the now. Whether we view from the perspective of director, performer, spectator (or any combination thereof) the fact of the intrinsic incompleteness of performance augurs against any imposition of fixity. All that we have is the now . . . and yet we can only know that 'now' through acts of memory.

Taoist philosophy would have it otherwise, arguing that we can only know the 'now' through an act of being, which involves the conscious disconnecting of memories, but this is to place one's faith in a contradictory belief system. For the notion of conscious disconnection carries within it a reliance on memory. Without an act of memory one would not be able to remember to forget.

Despite its potential for immediacy, performance continues to locate itself as past or present in its use of text. To offer a prosaic example, we can say that within a performance text one is more likely to hear the words 'I am going for a walk' or 'I have been out for a walk' than 'I am walking'. In this performance seems to fear either tautology or contradiction. The speaker is walking, in which case the words describe the also seen, or the speaker *is not* walking, in which case the words are a type of blind. However, if my opening remarks on reality as corporeality are sustainable - if the 'real' is that which has not *been* experienced but which is *being* experienced in the moment - then any 'truth' of performance can only ever exist within its own emphatic concentration on the now.

Where this argument falters is at the point of creativity as an innately imaginative process - again, either in terms of product-creation or spectatorship. We do not merely make or see, we make and we see within the context of performance. Art-perception then is an act of imagination, and we are unable to imagine that which we cannot remember. This is true of all human perception. Memory, therefore, becomes the mainstay of creativity. Without memory there can be no imagination, ergo without memory there can be no art. If, as with Taoism, we disclaim the yogic belief in transcendence *via* meditation, we can say that the human brain is not like a computer, where remembrance can be overridden at will. The fact that we are not able to disassociate ourselves from remembrance is precisely that which allows us to engage in imaginative watching. Performance is not an act *of* memory and remembrance, it *is* memory.

We use memory as a means not just towards creativity, but also towards our own creation. Without remembrance we would be unable to say whom it is that we are, and without this we would be unable to say what it is that we see. Without constructions of memory we could not compare like with like, for no comparable 'other' would exist.² Without memory, one would need to rely on others to fill in the details of one's own past, which would constitute no less of a reliance on memory than if that memory were one's own.

Memory is connected to language, as is imagination. We can neither remember nor imagine that which we cannot identify, and we cannot identify that which we cannot name.

Making work for performance is an act of memory translated into

imagination. The past is trawled in order to create. The assessment of an artist's creativity is not arrived at through a measuring out of the distance between that which is remembered and that which is subsequently made. It is not the case, for example, that a domestic memory involving two people and eight words spoken needs to be reconfigured for five performers and sixty words. The act of making the private past public and performative — of telling secrets to strangers — is no less creative an activity than the most radical re-invention . . . which is not the same thing as arguing for a domestic relocation.

All performance is only ever disguised autobiography - of what has or what might have been - and all reception is a filtering of 'other' through the complex idiosyncrasies of 'self.' The memories of the makers merge with the remembrances of the watchers.

5 Memories

1: Gertrude Stein wrote of her first flight that she had seen the flattened out Paris as a cubist landscape in the way that Picasso must have imagined it to look, long before he ever flew. Picasso was thus credited with the ability to 'see' from a perspective he had never experienced. That this is a leap of consciousness and that it resulted in the first fundamentally new proposition about the way paintings were made in five hundred years is not in doubt. But Picasso's imagination was not without memory. The Eiffel Tower was completed when Picasso was eight and it created a vision of Paris based on patterned formality rather than perspective and depth. The Wright brothers' first flight occurred when Picasso was twenty-two. In 1850 most Europeans lived rural lives, by 1890 most of them lived in towns and cities. The age was an age of new perspectives and those new perspectives were of scale, of pace and of height.

In the midst of life we can imagine death. That imagination is memory is not the same thing as saying that memories only stem from that which has been directly experienced.

2: These words are being written in the early hours of December 3rd, 1999. Five hours after watching Forced Entertainment's *Disco Relax* at the Green Room, Manchester in the North West of England.³ Whilst my memory of this performance cannot be trusted, it has at least the dubious advantage of being fresh. That the work did not work for me is unimportant ... not least because this paper does not constitute a 'review'. What matters is that *Disco Relax* failed to connect with me precisely because the memories it drew on appeared to be the memories of earlier work and that it translated these memories into sentimentality . . . if we recognize sentimentality as that which seeks familiar responses to familiar stimuli, of memory and projection as something not just causal but formulaic.

The experience of *Disco Relax* was like watching an old champion repeating moves from a glorious youth. Rather than trusting to the imaginative leaps that made the journey possible we witness little more than a retreat to the grooves that were once so surprisingly traveled in. This amounts to memory as

memory and it is this that makes *Disco Relax* read like the stubbed out cigarette end of postmodernism.

This is not to say that the work is *less* postmodern than it ever was, but that postmodernism has collapsed to the point wherein the quotation marks are now around nothing other than earlier quotation marks drawn in by the self-same hand. We know that postmodern performance is characterized by its treatment of the past with an ironic and (oh so) cool detachment. Stripped of its authenticating powers, of its authority, the past has become the stuff of fragmentation, quotation and collage. Accordingly, narrative reads to us now — and has done for some years — as a system which favors the bogus there and then over the here and now. But aren't our own spectatorial memories already so overloaded with these beliefs that the -ism has devoured its currency along with its self?

What was once a paradigm of postmodern performance remains so. It is not the fact that the work is rooted in the past that is the problem, but that the past is so firmly rooted in the work.

The dilemma for postmodernism is that the ways in which the past is brought into the present substitute renewal for parody. The past is not made *more honest* by dint of the alchemy of quotation marks, and when that past is itself the past of recycled performance, then the result is not interrogation so much as regurgitation . . . for nothing dates as quickly as the nearly new. At the end of a century where change has come more rapidly than ever before, where our *memoires*, both *voluntaire* and *involuntaire*, are vast, we are reducing performance to a polysemia that sacrifices imaginative eclecticism to pluralism, essentialism to emptiness and memory to duplication.

3: In response to a request from Allan Kaprow to do the stupidest thing he could think of, followed by the smartest, a student hung pickles from live cables, filling the room with smoke and stench. This was his 'stupid' act. The following day he repeated the act as his 'smartest.'⁴ The example works in a direct converse to *Disco Relax* because the transformation is in the repetition . . . indeed the repetition is intrinsically transformative. Our knowledge of the way that it *was* results in our reading of the way that it *is*. What was stupid becomes smart. The alternative to this, if memory serves, is that the once smart starts to read as the joke twice told

4: Brecht told us this, as he argued against the very canonization of technique that has been used to calcify his own once-innovatory practice- 'Time flows on methods wear out, stimuli fail. New problems loom up and demand new techniques. The means of representation must alter . . . What was popular yesterday is no longer so today.'⁵

Lyotard's notion that 'The artist and the writer . . . are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of *-what will have been done*'⁶ is no longer true of postmodernism. The rules are now so well established as to be published in what amount to 'how to' guides.⁷ Postmodernism has become the mainstay culture it once so tellingly critiqued, and its effectiveness is no more now than memory.

Postmodern performance is no longer searching for forms that in their

own turn inform the times. What was once the functional (re)presentation of a dysfunctional world has become its own reverse. Postmodernism is possessed of currency only for so long as it explores the paradox of creating effective performance at the same time as it does not know what effect it seeks. When this effect is determined in advance postmodernism drifts towards functionalism, and functionalism is no more than an overreliance on the memory of once vital forms.

5: In 1995 Benjamin Wilkomirski had a book published.⁸ The book, *Fragments*, was a book of memories — memories of the Holocaust, told from the perspective of one who had survived the Nazi death camps. The author was feted along with the book, and the world took note.

That Wilkomirski's memories have been exposed as the seemingly untrue (to the extent that the author has been 'outed' as the non-Jewish Bruno Dossekker) does not negate their existence — or even importance — as art. Issues of authenticity belong in the world of morality and ethics (if they belong anywhere at all) rather than within the liminality of work offered to be read as art. And just as with performance, what goes into art is generally not as important as what comes out. The art of memories becomes a catalyst for our own memories of art. In this we can say that the 'authenticity' of Steven Spielberg's Jewishness does not make *Schindler's List* a better work of art than *Fragments*.

We would do well to remember Nietzsche's claim that truths are no more than "illusions we have forgotten are illusions."⁹

We cannot trust the truth we know because our knowledge of truth is itself a memory, unstable and insecure. What matters in art is not the truth of our memories, but the way that we remember and the way that this remembrance is renewed. The invention of a knowingly 'false' memory is already an imaginative act in a way that the repetition of a 'true' experience can never be.

If postmodernism has taught us nothing else, it is that we can trust neither the teller nor the tale. All that we can trust is that the teller is telling. All that we can hope is that the tale is worth hearing. All that we can know is that, once heard, nothing will ever be quite the same again.

Notes

See Feud, S. *Art and Literature*. (Penguin, London, 1985).

See Williams, B. *Problems of the Self*. (Cambridge UP, 1973) 13.

Forced Entertainment's work is detailed in *Certain Fragments*, (Etchells, T. Routledge, London and New York, 1999).

Kaprow, A. TDR, 41, 3 (T155) Fall, 1997. New York University.

Brecht, B. from *The Popular and the Realistic* (1938, reprinted in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willet, New York: Hill and Wang, and London: Eyre Methuen, 1964) 108-112.

Lyotard, J. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (UP Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1984) 81.

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See Lappin, E. "The Man With Two Heads," *Granta*, 66:1999, "Truth + Lies" 9-65.

Clark, M. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, (Cambridge UP, 1990) 2.