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What's the Welsh for "performance"? [30 years of action art in Wales]

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What's the Welsh for "performance"?

[30 years of action art in Wales]

Heike ROMS

The history of performance art in Wales has yet to be written. Over a period of more than thirty years artists have been creating performance, action or time-based art in this country, yet their work remains largely confined to oral history, to half-remembered anecdotes, rumours and hearsay. Yoko ONO allegedly once presented an action at the National Museum in Cardiff, the small seaside town of Aberystwyth is said to have hosted a Fluxus Festival... One searches in vain for traces of these events anywhere. Surprising for a discipline so committed to documentation and theoretical reflection, there are no archives dedicated to performance art in Wales, no books, no journals. Rather than constructing a history from such fragmentary evidence therefore (a project which I am planning to undertake in the future), for the purpose of this article I will attempt to provide a kind of geography instead, a map of Welsh performance's many manifestations in the past and present. This map features a series of sites, locations at which performance actions have actually taken place but which, more importantly, have also served as conceptual locales around which performance in Wales has been created. These sites may be called, after FOUCAULT, 'heterotopias': 'real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (FOUCAULT 1986: 24). In Wales, such heterotopias include *'Y Maes'* (the Field), *'Y Tir'* (the Land), *'Y Ddinas'* (the City) and *'Y Ty'* (the House).

Mapping performance in Wales

The distinctiveness of much Welsh performance work derives from a fusion of global artistic developments with local cultural and political desires. The earliest art actions that appeared in this country in the late 1960s and early 1970s were inspired in equal measure by the movement of the international avant-garde toward a dematerialization of art practice and by the local reaffirmation of a distinct cultural identity that manifests itself primarily as performance (above all as the celebration of the Welsh language). This was accompanied by a political activism that too gathered pace in the sixties through harnessing performance's radical potential for direct political action in the struggle for the survival of the language. Wales has often been called 'England's first colony' - a marginalized culture turned to a marginal art practice as a means for its cultural and political expression. As a consequence the division between different artistic disciplines has been of lesser importance than the question of where these disciplines situate themselves in the cultural and political landscape of Wales. In its quest to develop a distinctive form that could provide an alternative to the dominant English mainstream, for example, Welsh experimental theatre from early on embraced artistic strategies that we have come to know from performance art, such as site-specificity, duration and active audience involvement. As a result, the term 'performance' in Wales today describes a fluid field of innovative practices originating in a variety of disciplines, including performance art, sonic art, experimental theatre, movement work, and performance poetry. It is this interdisciplinary quality and the 'sited' nature of Welsh performance in an international field of highly nomadic practices that distinguish the performance scene in Wales.

Y Maes – The Field

> The timetable of the whole event and the nature of the performance was [...] interrupted by an impromptu happening after Mario MERZ had completed his piece for piano, lazer [sic] beam, rose and coal sacks. He moved towards Paul DAVIES who at that moment was holding something like a railway sleeper above his head. On it were burnt the letters 'WN' ('Welsh Not') which referred to the punishment for speaking Welsh in school and enforced within living memory. As it happened the chorus of the national anthem was coming through the loud speakers and although MERZ does not understand Welsh he gave out phonetic improvisations as he moved around DAVIES. Paul DAVIES had already had an argument with a middle-aged man who had emigrated from North Wales to New Zealand and was now accusing the native artist of "stirring it up". [...] It showed too that DAVIES possesses a power of feeling which he expressed both symbolically and in argument and which was most relevant to the Eisteddfod. He felt enough to be a kind of flagellant.
>
> In a year prominent for its Union Jacks [1977 was the year of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee] he was inventive enough to wrap himself in that flag and then to struggle out of it. I heard comment elsewhere that both the Coronation Jubliee [sic] and the National Front [a far right-wing political party] had produced better performances than those at Wrexham. But Politics aside, such things depend on financial backing and critics express double standards with regards to this. But the South Wales Echo of "What a Shocking Waste of Money", and what the Daily Express called "The Fine Art of Wasting Money" as well as the Daily Telegraph's more conservative hint that "Wall Stunt Starts New Grants Row" only serve to register a higher record than would a polite review in the arts column.
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> (Ivor DAVIES, "The Welsh Arts Councils Performance Pavilion at the *National Eisteddfod*", in *Link* 9, Autumn 1977; reprinted in BALA 1999, p. 66)

In ways more than one, Paul DAVIES' and Mario MERZ' appearance at the National *Eisteddfod* in Wrexham in 1977 can be regarded as a seminal event for contemporary Welsh art. Critic Shelagh HOURAHANE has called DAVIES' action, *Spiral Gag*, in which the artist struggled free from his symbolic imprisonment in a British flag, 'the inception of a self-conscious contemporary Welsh political art' (in BALA 1999, 79). The act can also be considered the inauguration of a self-conscious Welsh performance art. Performance art had evidently been made in Wales before. Artists Rob CON and Ian HINCHCLIFF, for example, had created a series of joint street actions around the country in the mid-1970s, among them a performance in the Brecon Beacons National Park during a snow storm. Well-known English performance practitioners Roland MILLER and Shirley CAMERON had created work in the context of the famous Barry Summer School, which from the late 1960s offered courses in fine art and improvised jazz based in a small port on the outskirts of Cardiff. And Welsh artist Ivor DAVIES, painter, activist and protagonist of the destruction art movement, had staged performances in Swansea as early as 1967. Paul DAVIES was probably the first artist, however, to utilize the idiom of performance in order to articulate within a simple symbolic action a complex nexus of issues concerning cultural domination and political resistance that commented very directly on the Welsh situation. As fellow artist Iwan BALA, like DAVIES a member of the Welsh artist collective, Beca, claimed for the work of the group: '[Beca] was the instigating force in the politicisation of Welsh art, and one that focused international trends and methodologies into a language that highlighted specific concerns in Wales' (BALA 2003, 23) – in DAVIES' case this focus was expressed in the language of performance art.

The location at which the event occurred is hereby highly significant: the National Eisteddfod (*Eisteddfod* Genedlaethol) is one of the oldest, most poetic and most political European festivals. The word *'eisteddfod'* literally means 'sitting' and originally described a medieval contest of poets with rules and prizes. These days, the National *Eisteddfod* has grown into a weeklong festival of Welsh culture to which the Welsh-speaking community makes a pilgrimage *en masse* each year. This is not just the place where awards are given for rhyming and singing, but also where books, records and political campaigns are launched, and where over the years the visual arts have enjoyed an increasingly high profile. I can think of few other occasions at which innovative art and conservative folklore, radical politics and cultural traditions co-exist in this way. What seems to hold this eclectic mix together is an acute awareness of the performative nature of Welsh culture in all its facets. What the Welsh themselves refer to as *'y pethe'* (the 'things'), considered to be central to a traditional Welsh identity, such as religious singing and preaching, oratory, poetry recitation and choral song, have always been thought of as inherently performative, and they are all still celebrated at the *Eisteddfod* today, as are their contemporary equivalents of pop music, poetry slam and political speech. It is to these cultural performances that particularly Welsh-speaking artists turn time and again as material for their work. Poetry reading turns into political demonstration leads to art action – their difference is often impossible to identify in the highly performative context of the *Eisteddfod*.

Even the format of the *Eisteddfod* has a performance dimension. There is no fixed location for the festival; instead it travels up and down the country, each year located at a different site, alternatively either in the North or the South. All activities take place in a makeshift village of pavilions, tents and stalls. The Welsh term for this site is *'Y Maes'* (the 'field') : peripatetic and provisional, ephemeral and decentralized, the Eisteddfod *Maes* is more a conceptual place than an actual location. The term has obvious connotations in the traditionally rural economy of Wales, but it also resonates with ideas of openness and (as in 'field-work') with the close anthropological study of culture. As such, the 'field' as trope has figured in much Welsh performance work, on and off the Maes. The *Eisteddfod* in 1977 was the first time that performance art was officially represented at the festival - and the outrage that MERZ' and DAVIES' work created meant that for a long time it also remained the last. But performance art has nonetheless retained a presence at the festival, sometimes within, sometimes outside of its official structures. At the *Eisteddfod* in Bro Dinefwr in 1996, Welsh experimental theatre company Brith Gof decided to ignore the sanctioned spaces for presenting art work on the *Maes* and hired a commercial stall, where they showed a durational performance over five days, which became infamous for its use of male nudity. Since 1994, Cywaith Cymru/Artworks Wales, the national organisation for Public Art in Wales, has commissioned a special project, usually with a performance focus, at the *Eisteddfod* every year. Some of the most innovative arts practitioners working in Wales today, such as André STITT (who performed a walkabout on the *Maes*, holding a sign with the words *Fi'n Dy Garu Di* [I love you], making encounters and exchanges with the people he met), Peter FINNEMORE (who installed a shed on the site that became a venue for alternative ceremonies to the official pomp and circumstance of the *Eisteddfod*), Simon WHITEHEAD (who presented *Cysgod*, an audio walk around the festival led by a horse) and David HASTIE are among the artists who have in recent years received commissions to create work for the *Maes*.

Much of this work has centred on the question of language. In Wales, where only around 20% of the population still speak Welsh, the survival of the language has become a daily struggle. Again, it was the Beca group, this time led by artist

Tim DAVIES, who expressed this struggle in a performance piece at the National *Eisteddfod* in Bro Colwyn in 1995. In an outdoor performance/installation event lasting eight hours, participants took it in turns to recite sounds of the Welsh alphabet 'which, for them, were imbued with particular associations, while DAVIES ritualistically burnt these "ineffable symbols of sound" on to large squares of woollen blankets which, as they were completed, were displayed around the stage.' (Martin BARLOW in BALA 1999, 152-3). DAVIES, who comes from a Welsh speaking-background but does not speak the language himself, attempted to engage 'with that elusive spirit hidden within the letters of the language that he himself has lost.' (BALA 1999, 156).

Y Tir – The Land

The mountain range appears, white and gleaming, against the fading light as dusk sets in. A thunderous rumble in the far distance warns of a storm approaching. The glowing red ball of the sun vanishes slowly behind the peaks, bathing them for a moment in its orange beam. We are witness to a glorious sunset in the uplands of the Llyn peninsula in North Wales. Only we are sitting, neatly packed in rows, inside the black-box auditorium of a theatre space. The mountains are formed from crumpled strips of white paper. Moments ago movement artist Simon WHITEHEAD had used them to scribble down memories of a walk across the landscape of the peninsula. Now he is standing next to the paper panorama, moving a red light bulb slowly from one side to the other to illuminate the scenery, whilst his collaborator, sound artist Barnaby OLIVER, mixes the sounds of nature with those of technology.

WHITEHEAD's *folc-land* from 1997, subtitled *The long lines project - A landscape re-envisioned*, was one of the first of a growing body of work by a new generation of artists working in Wales today who create performances from their physical, sensual and emotional response to the Welsh landscape. Their work is located within a long tradition: in Wales identity has been linked historically, culturally, politically, linguistically, socially, emotionally and aesthetically to its landscape. As a result, in the area of the visual arts, 'landscape painting has been synonymous with Wales for a long time' (BALA 2003, 30), firstly as 'mainly a Romantic ideal, painted for tourists by touring artists like TURNER, SISLEY, SUTHERLAND, John PIPER and Paul NASH, [a form of] colonisation of Welsh landscape through art' (BALA 2003, 29); more lately in works by contemporary painters from Wales such as Peter PRENDERGAST, Iwan BALA and Catrin WEBSTER, who aim to reclaim the pictorial representation of the landscape of their home.

In Welsh performance work, this landscape has been explored with an aesthetic that has its roots in the time-based strategies of land and environmental art and in an ecological concern for rethinking our connection with nature. WHITEHEAD has created a series of 'mapping' performances based on long solitary walks through the Welsh landscape, informed by a sense of estrangement and the desire for a sensual and perceptual reconnection. WHITEHEAD is also a member of the 'ointment' collective (with Stirling STEWARD, Pete BODENHAM and Maura HAZELDEN), a group of artists based in West Wales, who have staged 'place-sensitive work' in rural sites, inspired by an ecological agenda, local folk traditions and the decline of the traditional farming economy. Ointment is currently involved in an exchange with the Boréal Art/Nature centre in Québec. Another artist who has maintained close links with Boréal is performance artist Phil BABOT, who undertook a residency at the centre in 2002. BABOT creates psychogeographical performance work that too is often based on the practices of walking and mapping, most recently *The Long Road to the North*, a journey from the southernmost tip of Wales to its northernmost point, following magnetic north and creating occurrences and interventions *en route*, accompanied by the creation of solo art works alongside collaborations with four other artists who live in varying geographic locations northwards along the designated path.

The first instalment of BABOT's year-long project took place in 2002 at Coed Hills Rural Artspace (CHRA), a 180-acre farm in the Vale of Glamorgan in South Wales, which is run by artists who attempt to reconcile the making of contemporary art with ideals of sustainable living. They have transformed the farm into an art space with purpose-built studios, low-impact dwellings for visiting artists, a sculpture trail of site-specific works and a programme of exhibitions, performance festivals and community workshops. The project is sustained by a host of on-site small businesses, including an organic café, wholefood distribution, lime putty production and greenwood handcraft – the Welsh Assembly recently appointed CHRA a model for sustainable development.

Not all artists in Wales who share an interest in working in and from the land, however, are primarily motivated by such ecological or perceptual concerns. There are a number of those whose work has centred instead on social questions of community, on political issues of land use and ownership, or on personal matters of identity. Rawley CLAY, founder of CHRA, spent three months in the small village of Beddgelert in the heart of Snowdonia in 2002, working alongside and with the local community, offering them his services as a 'village artist', a new addition to the local economy. Performer Eddie LADD, who comes from a Welsh-speaking farming background, returns time and again in her work to the location of her upbringing. But LADD's performances are as much shaped by contemporary media influences as they are by traditional rural culture (recent works referred to the Western Shane, Brian de Palma's *Scarface* and FULLER's *Shock Corridor* and stories of rural landslides, the Welsh dairy industry and the theme of terrorism). LADD shows how ideas of self-containment and stability are inevitably lost and are instead replaced by erosion, fragmentation and cultural self-loathing.

The rural landscape of Wales, however, presents only one part of the country's environment. South Wales in particular is highly industrialized, and the industrial landscape of the so-called 'South Wales valleys', the site of the former coal and steel industries, possesses an iconic status comparable to that of the Welsh mountains of the Romantics. In the works of many artists of the late 19th and early 20th century 'there was a sense of the "picturesque" transferred from unspoiled "heavenly" landscape to "infernal"; from paradise to paradise lost'. (Bala 2003, 30). Today little of this landscape remains – factory buildings have been knocked down and slag heaps greened over. There was a short spell in the 1980s, however, when the abandoned architectural remnants of Wales' industrial past were seized temporarily by site-specific theatre and cross-disciplinary performance work. The most prominent of these were Brith Gof, pioneers of site-specific theatre in Britain, who staged their works in railway stations (PAX, Aberystwyth 1991), disused car factories (GODODDIN, Cardiff 1988) and abandoned iron foundries (*Haearn*, Tredegar 1992). These buildings have since made room for the anonymous sheds of the new call-centre industry. But the psychic landscape of South Wales, with its concomitant symbols of hard physical labour and aggressive masculinity, remains a strong presence. Gay performer and dancer Marc REES, for example, who worked as a performer with Brith Gof for many years, creates performances and actions that revolve around the negotiation of his sexuality between the intimate childhood landscape of his upbringing in South Wales, a world steeped in conservatism and rugby-machismo, and his current life in the 'queer' landscape of the city.

Y Ddinas – The City

In 1955 Queen Elizabeth II declared Cardiff to be the capital of Wales. Cardiff is the country's largest city (around 320,000 inhabitants) and thus seemed an obvious choice. But 'Swansea and every other major town in Wales had laid claim to becoming the capital, and most of them had better historical justification for their claims. In their eyes, Cardiff was a town without a past, a nouveau riche fishing village which made a career for itself in the 19th century as a coal port, and did not even receive a town charter until 1905.' (Sager 1991, 93). Cardiff is also Wales' most anglicised city, geographically and culturally located in close proximity to England. And as a port it has always maintained stronger links with the rest of the world than with its Welsh *hinterland*, which for many called into question its suitability as a capital. The dispute was revived again in the wake of the so-called 'devolution': 1999 saw the creation of the National Assembly for Wales, a somewhat historic achievement in that it gave Wales, which up to that point had been governed from England, its own executive forum for the first time in six centuries, albeit one with restricted powers. When searching for a fitting location for the Assembly, Swansea and every other major town in Wales again laid claim to becoming the seat of government, but in the end the city of Cardiff won out.

In 2005 Cardiff celebrates its centenary as a city and fifty years as the Welsh capital. It was the town's ambition to follow this by becoming European City of Culture in 2008, but it narrowly missed out to its competitor Liverpool. Cardiff's campaign for the competition, however, briefly energised the local arts scene and inspired a debate on the nature of urbanity and the artist's place within it. It also highlighted the major changes the city had undergone in recent years. Cardiff, once a thoroughly anglicised and overwhelmingly working-class town (and as such with no real tradition of a public patronage of the arts) has been gentrified by a new middle class, many of whom are Welsh-speakers employed in the media and government. Symbol for the change is the bay area, where, adjacent to the neighbourhood that still houses one of the oldest multicultural communities in Britain, one of Europe's biggest waterfront developments now attracts new upwardly mobile costumers to its chic bars and restaurants. But the accusation of a cultural apartheid between a Welsh-speaking elite, an English-speaking second-class proletariat and various disenfranchised multi-ethnic groups ignores the far more complex interplay of different communities, languages and economies that make up the cultural life of the city, and that presents the context in which many socially-engaged artists in Cardiff create their work.

For some, of course, the very idea of 'Cardiff as City of Culture' is already an oxymoron – for this is the city in which Zaha HADID's daring design for the Cardiff Bay Opera House won an international competition in 1994, but was turned down by the financiers. The ensuing scandal won Cardiff an international reputation as a city of philistines, a reputation it recently confirmed when architect Richard ROGERS was first hired, then fired, then hired again to design a new home for the Welsh Assembly, currently housed in an annex with all the charm of a corporate meeting room. Cardiff has one of the best schools for architecture yet no contemporary architecture of any note, and one of the best art schools in the country yet (at present) no publicly run contemporary art space. (There are a number of Welsh galleries devoted to contemporary art outside the capital in towns such as Swansea, Machynlleth, Aberystwyth, Wrexham, Llandudno and Newtown. Plans to open a major new visual arts facility in Cardiff, the Depot, have currently stalled, but the success of the Cardiff-based Artes Mundi, the largest prize for visual art offered anywhere in the world, has awakened a new public interest in contemporary visual arts after its launch in the spring 2004.) In the absence of large public institutions, the critical mass of artists involved with contemporary art in Cardiff thus takes the form of independent artist-run centres, collectives and artists' networks.

The Cardiff School of Art and Design (or Howard Gardens as it is commonly known) has for many years offered students the opportunity to specialize in time-based art practice (i.e. performance, video, sonic and installation art) as part of their fine art degree. Teachers and students affiliated with the school have consequently occupied a central position in the performance art scene of the city. For a number of years the time-based department was led by poet and performance artist Anthony HOWELL, founder of the influential Theatre of Mistakes, with whom in the 1970s he performed Fluxus-inspired minimalist 'conceptual performances' based on rules and instructions. During his time at Howard Gardens, the school housed Cardiff Art in Time (CAT), a performance art and video festival, which took place in 1994, 1996 and 1999 and featured student and professional work from around the world. Stuart SHERMAN, Gary STEVENS, Seji SHIMODA, Aaron WILLIAMSON, Hayley NEWMAN, Station House Opera, Mark JEFFERY (Goat Island) and Jeremy DELLER all presented live work at the festival, whilst artists such as CHRISTO, Gary HILL and Aleksandr SOKUROV were represented by video works. CAT fulfilled an important role in the development of performance art in Wales, not so much because of its spectacular event character, but by providing a forum for the documentation and dissemination of contemporary performance art practice, a form of performative 'publication' in the shape of a festival. This function was further enhanced by HOWELL, who filmed much of the first festival as a contribution to his *Grey Suit: Video for Art & Literature*, a performance art magazine distributed on videotape, which was intended as an innovative approach to the recording of live art practice and remains to this day the only publication originating in Wales and solely devoted to performance art.

CAT also brought André STITT to Cardiff, who presented three of his intensely visceral and cathartic 'akshuns' at the festival. The themes of the Belfast born-artist, issues of oppression, freedom, subversion, alienation from and appropriation of cultures, resonate strongly with the concerns of many political artists in Wales. STITT took over from HOWELL as subject leader of the time-based department in 1999, which he now runs in collaboration with Paul GRANJON, a French artist working in robotics, whose playful performances and installations take a tongue-in-cheek look at the relationship between human and machine. Recent performance graduates from Howard Gardens include Kira O'REILLY, Richard DEDOMENICI and Matt COOK. COOK in particular creates works that directly reflect on their urban environment. His sound work, *'Pendulum Electronica'*, an extension of Steve REICH's famous *Pendulum Music*, featured swinging torches above light sensors that triggered a series of sound samples collected from around Cardiff, which produced an increasingly dense aural portrait of the city.

On the other side of town from Howard Gardens is Chapter Arts Centre, Wales's most important centre for contemporary art. A former school, the building was opened as an arts centre in 1971 by local artists Christine KINSEY and Bryan JONES with journalist Mik FLOOD. Their vision was to establish a place that would serve the local community as well as provide an environment in which all creative disciplines could be housed under one roof. More than thirty years on, Chapter has developed into an extensive complex of artists' studios, performance spaces, galleries, cinemas, and premises for various cultural enterprises. It now presents over a thousand events a year and works with partners from all over the world. It also still functions as a meeting place for community initiatives, mother and baby groups, the local Buddhist congregation or weekly Yoga classes, although the two sides to its activities rarely meet.

For a long time Howard Gardens in the east and Chapter in the west of the city presented the main two sites where performance practice in Cardiff was created, but in between which there was surprisingly little exchange. Howard Gardens was devoted primarily to performance work that had its roots in the traditions of visual art, while Chapter championed work coming from experimental theatre, multimedia performance and new dance. This separation has changed in recent years – the two scenes today are much more interconnected. The reasons for this development are manifold: in the UK generally an increasing blurring of the boundaries between theatre and performance art has taken place, which manifests itself in the wide-spread use of the term 'live art' for practices emerging from both. In Wales specifically, a recent crisis in arts funding has led to the abolition of most of the ensembles and companies working in the experimental theatre sector. What has emerged in the wake of this crisis is a new generation of solo performers (Eddie LADD, Simon WHITEHEAD, Marc REES), often working in highly conceptual ways, whose practice owes as much to the tradition of performance art as it does to that of theatre. Under its theatre programmer, James TYSON, Chapter has in the past few years organised a number of festivals (12 Days of Risk in 2000 and *Experimentica* in 2001-3) which have been devoted to the presentation and discussion of innovative time-based work, including performance, video, sonic and installation art, and which have acted as great catalysts for the development of emerging artists working in this field in Wales.

By opening itself up to the support of young local artists practicing time-based art, Chapter has managed to reassert its position within the contemporary art scene in Cardiff. But in this it has been joined by an increasing number of artist-run venues devoted to innovative art, among them TactileBOSCH, Morefront, Trace and G39. One of the most performance-oriented of the new venues is TactileBOSCH, which is situated in a reclaimed Victorian laundry and opened as a studio complex and alternative exhibition space in 2000. In the mere four years of its existence, it has developed into one of the main players on the Cardiff arts scene, driven by the seemingly limitless creative and networking energies of its founders, Kim FIELDING and Simon MITCHELL. FIELDING and MITCHELL have built a reputation for establishing international exchanges between artists and galleries in a host of other countries, helping to bring a wide range of work into Wales for their "ridiculously large international multi-media exhibitions", and in return raise the profile of Welsh art abroad. TactileBOSCH's 'carnivalesque' curatorial approach (described by local critic Debbie SAVAGE as 'throw as many people into the mix as possible and see what happens') often favours performance work of a vaudeville nature that is able to withstand the legendary party atmosphere of its opening nights. Among the artists who regularly present work at the venue is MITCHELL himself. His work is task-based, including such actions as attempting to grab a pint of beer repeatedly whilst being pulled back by an elastic band. His performances confront clichés of macho masculinity from a very British perspective: whoever has found himself in a bar in Cardiff, the drinking capital of Britain, on a Friday night will recognize the images of aggression and violence with which MITCHELL plays.

Increasingly, Cardiff itself becomes the focus of much of present-day performance work in the capital. Performance collective Pearson/Brooks is currently engaged in a series of works for the city, multi-site events for several groups of audiences watching different situations occurring simultaneously in different locations in the town, recorded by the spectators themselves and then assembled in a multimedia installation in Chapter's theatre space. Artist Jennie SAVAGE, whose practice has a strong socially engaged or 'relational' approach, created *Anecdotal Cardiff* in 2003, an archive of stories from and about Cardiff, which she collected whilst working as artist-in-residence at the town's central library. The archive was made available in the library's local history section and later staged as a guided bus tour, visiting many of the locations to which the stories referred. *Cardiff Projects* has undertaken a series of situationist dérives in and around Cardiff, among them a search for the Heart of Cardiff and Relax Cardiff, a psychogeographical survey of leisure in the city. And SWICA (South Wales Intercultural Community Arts) engages the city's multi-ethnic communities in celebratory street actions such as carnival and light processions. Performative civic explorations like these are not limited to the Welsh capital either : *Locws International*, a bi-annual series of site-specific installations and events located across the city of Swansea, was created as a response to the varied topography, history and architecture of Wales' second city.

Y Ty – The House

The most striking architectural feature of Cardiff, as of many other Welsh towns, is the extent of its terraced houses, which crawl like stony snakes up and downs its many streets. In one such ordinary terraced house in October 2000, André STITT opened Trace: installaction artspace. The gallery is housed in the front room of his home, and it is this domestic context which is central to its functioning.

trace is the only venue in Britain that focuses exclusively on time-based art and work that emerges from this field – i.e. performance, video, sonic, interactive and installation arts. Every month, a different artist presents a live performance, with the 'trace' elements of his or her activity exhibited on the following weekends. The combination of performance and installation is hereby programmatic: 'Within absence there may be a material counterpoint to presence. It is through trace and memory than we find absence revealed, and both of these are core properties of experience and, though partially intangible, possess string assurances of ontological security in existence.' (Roddy Hunter as quoted in trace's catalogue for its first season).

So far, Trace has presented 32 artists from 12 countries – among them some of the doyens of performance art, such as Alastair MacLENNAN, Stuart BRISLEY, Zbigniew WARPECHOWSKI and Jerzy BERES, and emerging artists, including Jessica BUEGE, Julie-Andrée T and Eve DENT. The programme has afforded an unparalleled insight into the richness of current performance art practice, an insight previously only available through the spectacularized format of a festival. Trace resists such spectacularisation. Its programme is based on STITT's extensive networks, developed through making performance work for over 25 years in many locations in the world, and sustained by the principles of hospitality and generosity (STITT's and that of the visiting artists). At the heart of Trace is the idea of encounter, of contact and exchange that is so central to much performance art practice, and which has led trace to explore for formalized international exchanges with other spaces devoted to performance art (e.g., with Le Lieu in Québec – *RHWNT* 2003/4; and with Surge in Tokyo 2005). Even among these artist-run spaces, however, Trace seems a unique example of what 'artist-run' can mean. It presents a different model for 'housing' performance art, where such art is made public in a private space, and its liveness quite literally penetrates the realm of everyday life. Fellow performance artist Julie BACON, who came to Trace's opening performance by Alastair MacLENNAN, describes the impact the venue's domestic situation has on its visitors: 'And so, there was something immediately engaging about being present (in the psycho-geographic sense) in one of a dense, sprawling mass of residences, waiting to see a performance in an ordinary house – 26 Moira Place to be precise – directly opposite an abandoned (!) pub. The large group of people that had come along were mostly bustling in the kitchen (like at the best of parties), having a cup of tea, juice and crisps [...]. The situation did not suffer pretension, as the domestic setting seemed to make for a diminished sense of territory and heightened sense of responsibility. By this I mean that the occasional sophistry of art audience which allows a kind of blasé knowing before the event, was unsettled, - the behavioural codes are mixed. I felt a recognition of a shared context and overlapping reality,

which many current art projects aspire to; this is more than a matter of delivering opinion; in the intimate realm of another one senses ones own gestures and accordingly responsibility. It is this presence that underlies Trace. [...]' (BACON 2001).

And to those of us who pay a monthly visit to trace, the remains of past performances are always present. There is the perfect circle that Morgan O'HARA drew on the back wall by swirling her arm around her body; there is the time capsule that Brian CONNOLLY filled with the remnants of his audience's actions and buried in the floor – the one since painted over, the other now concreted over, but both still there, physically and in our memory. Each performance resonates with those that have been and those that are yet to come: the line that Julie Andrée-T. strung between the side walls pre-echoed a similar line in Zbieqniew WARPECHOWSKI's performance. Two artists of different nationalities, genders, generations, aesthetics and politics become part of the same history, a history of performance that is being created as a series of performative explorations of the same limited space.

Postscript: Y Rhwydwaith – The Network

'It is this isolation of everything not on the map that so potently naturalizes what's on it.' (WOOD 1992, 87)

No map is complete without a consideration of that which remains unmapped, in this case the increasing number of artists' collectives and networks in Wales. The Artists' Project (one of the longest-established of the groups), the Umbrella Group and Trailerpark are all artist-run collectives that organise collaborative exhibitions and performance events. Dempseys, an old Cardiff pub, has become the venue for a regular meeting of experimental music and sonic art, The Quarter. Other networks are devoted to discourse rather than display: Bloc is a virtual forum for art and technology, which organises seminars and conferences to raise the profile of digital media in Wales. The 2nd Wednesday Group, which meets on the second Wednesday of every month at Chapter for presentations and debate, is a loose network of around eighty artists, writers, teachers and students with an interest in performance, cross-disciplinary, live and time-based art in Wales. It was founded in December 2001 as a forum for discussion, to share information and to develop advocacy in an area of artistic practice that in this country has notoriously lacked sustained critical attention and incisive theoretical reflection, a lack that has often hindered its development.

Some of this reflection is provided by *Performance Research*, a peer-reviewed academic journal that aims to promote innovative connections between scholarship and practice in the field of contemporary performance. Although published in England by Taylor and Francis and international in scope, the journal maintains close links with Wales through one of its editors, Richard GOUGH. GOUGH is Artistic Director of the Aberystwyth-based CPR Centre for Performance Research, at its roots a theatre organisation devoted to training and the reflection of practice, which organises workshops, festivals and symposia, publishes theatre books and runs a multi-cultural performance resource centre. The CPR's decidedly intercultural approach to theatrical performance has from very early on brought it into contact with the emerging academic discipline of Performance Studies, which it has helped to promote in Britain through a range of international conferences. The CPR assisted in establishing the Performance Studies network PSi Performance Studies international, a world-wide membership association for scholars and artists working in the field of performance, and co-hosted the 5th Performance Studies Conference in Aberystwyth in 1999, which brought several hundred artists and scholars to West-Wales, among them Peggy PHELAN, Richard SCHECHNER, Rebecca SCHNEIDER and Guillermo GOMEZ-PEÑA, for an exploration of the rapidly shifting definitions at play within the field.

These networks may take temporal possession of a site, but otherwise remain largely virtual, nomadic and decentralized. Yet even the most 'sited' of the Welsh arts initiatives mentioned above find themselves engaged in a multitude of networks, acting locally as much as internationally, putting collaboration and exchange at the heart of their activities. It is thus Y Rhwydwaith (The Network) that emerges as the true heterotopia of Welsh performance art.

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Review: RHWNT Wales - Québec performance exhange2003-2004

1st phase: October 2003, Cardiff

James PARTAIK, Claudine COTTON, Les Fermières Obsédées, Carl BOUCHARD and Martin DUFRASNE, Christian MESSIER [Trace: installaction art space and Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff]

Heike ROMS

What exactly gets exchanged in an international performance exchange?

Exchange presumes equivalence between those who partake in it. And indeed, the cultural and political similarities between Québec and Wales (Cymru), and those of their capital cities, Québec City and Cardiff, have often been highlighted: a bilingual country with a strong sense of cultural identity (against an Anglophone dominance) and a long-running campaign for political independence (although the presence of First Nations peoples in Québec disturbs this neat picture and reminds us that French, unlike Welsh, is itself a colonial language); a historical city in the process of remodelling itself for the global economic market; and an arts scene in the shadow of a dominant neighbouring metropole that sets the cultural agenda.

These parallels have inspired a long-standing cultural exchange programme between the two countries, both on the official level of government-subsidized art projects (including the recent *RHWNT* Québec/Cymru exchange programme, festivals, residencies and translation support) and on the more informal level of individual artistic collaborations (performer Simon WHITEHEAD, for example, has been involved in an exchange with Boréal Art/Nature for a number of years; and most recently Welsh movement artist Marc REES invited Québecois artist Michael TOPPINGS to restage his *House Project* in Cardiff). The latter form of exchange is driven by a similarly vibrant scene of artist-run centres and initiatives in both Québec City and Cardiff.

But the differences are as significant as the similarities. Seen from the outside, it appears that the Québecois performance scene has experienced a sustained development over the past thirty years, assisted by the patronage of such organisations as *Inter* magazine and Le Lieu and similar artist-run initiatives throughout the differents regions of Québec. Performance art in Québec is supported, promoted, documented and critically reflected upon in festivals, archives and journals. As a result, on the evidence of the work presented at *RHWNT*, the performance practice that comes from Québec is accompanied by a highly developed sense of its history and a sophisticated critical vocabulary (which was introduced in Cardiff in a lecture-performance by critic Guy SIOUI DURAND): concepts such as 'relational aesthetics' (N. BOURRIAUD, Paris, 2000) and 'manœuvre' (*Inter* #47, Québec, 1989) are (as yet) little known in Wales. In this country, the history of performance art is far more fragmentary, and the theoretical debates surrounding it are more unsystematic. There are no archives, no publications, and barely any festivals devoted to this still marginalized art practice.

This situation is improving, however. With the establishment of Trace: installaction artspace* in 2000, Cardiff now has a gallery space exclusively devoted to the presentation of performance, which maintains strong links with the international artist community. And Chapter Arts Centre, the city's main venue for contemporary art, increasingly hosts time-based art practice. Chapter's annual *Experimentica* festival is solely dedicated to a presentation of emerging work in this area, primarily from Wales itself. *RHWNT* was evidence for this change : initiated by Trace in collaboration with Le Lieu and staged at both Trace and Chapter, the event took place in the context of *Experimentica*. This allowed for a very direct comparison between the performance work currently originating from Wales and Québec.

There is a danger in exchanges of this kind to interpret the work on show as somewhat 'representative' for the entire artistic practice of a particular place. This, of course, it is not. For *RHWNT*, Richard MARTEL had chosen emerging artists as well as more established artists who are in the course of making their mark internationally. Their formal approaches were highly diverse: multimedia installaction, manœuvre, body art, action art, relational intervention... What linked them all, however, was the highly politicised nature of the work. It was in this case not so much 'local' questions of cultural difference, linguistic diversity, colonial legacies or political independence that interested these Québecois artists, but concerns with a wider global resonance: the nature of collective aggression, individual responsibility, human competitive behaviour, and the all pervading sense of paranoia in our post-'9/11' world.

"[P]aranoia . . . is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination – not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In ...".

Thomas PYNCHON, *Gravity's Rainbow*, 1973

*ndlr, voir www.tracegallery.org/