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The Claude Glass: Views & Re-views

Jondi Keane, Lecturer in Cross-Artform Practice at Griffith University, responds to issues raised by Allen and Pearlman's Performing the UnNameable: An Anthology of Performance Texts published this year by Currency Press.

Because *Performing the unNameable*, edited by Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman, raises so many issues and diverse questions, due to both its concept and realisation, it provides a good opportunity for a review to expand into a panoramic view. The extra room allows several contexts to be taken up on both generic and specific levels.

Performing the unNameable provides the specific issues such as: the premise of the anthology, the kind of artefact presented, and the relationship of the events to the book and the book to a reader. "Performance", "documentation" and "writing" provide the generic contexts for thinking in the round. The panorama supplies both scope and detail that exceeds our ability to process it all in a single take or frame. Although it is a lot to expect that a panorama could be concocted here, perhaps a Claude glass can be offered instead. The landscape paintings of 17th century artist Claude Lorraine were so remarkable for their ability to re-create the effects of light that a fashion was started. On daily walks through the countryside you would arrive at a beautiful vista, take out your Claude glass - a handheld blue mirror - turn your back to the scene and view it through the portable artist's vision. This is the suspected but unverified origins of the lawn ornaments you might see as you drive through rural America.

We must choose our mirrors knowingly and continually make connections between historical and social dimensions of our views and re-views.

The Name game

Performing the unNameable is the name given to the need for access to live events, while at the same time recognising that these events and their possibilities are hard to document, hard to put into context, hard to get funding for and hard to excavate. Archaeology is the metaphor that the editors, Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman use to inform the approach to this anthology. *Performing the unNameable*, is also the name given to a condition. It defines a category that defies the conventional use of elements, forms and genres. This name identifies a challenge for documentation and its relationship to works of art that are not made for mechanical reproduction.

Performing the Unnameable requires a performance.

Because its format is not explanatory, chronological, or scene based, it uses the genre of the book to stage a situation where our readership and engagement with this information is not yet formed. A tension is created between our desire to comprehend stories and our ability to cross-reference texts. The degree, to which we can orchestrate the situations, descriptions, and conceptual contexts outlined by the artist statements and photos, determines whether we become spectators or participants in the possibilities offered by the text. To flesh out these we must perform our own circumstances and share complicity with the texts. For those who have experience with this kind of extrapolation, the translation may take place quite vividly.

The Up side

The greatest contribution this anthology makes is in providing rich and ample slices of works that investigate the lived experience. It is also a valuable resource, which recognises the issues and processes of contemporary arts practice. For those of us who would have seen the pieces included in the book, the renewed experience is like an interference structure of memory and improvisation. For those of us coming to these works without prior knowledge it provides an enticing playground, point of engagement and creative possibility. The value of this opportunity shouldn't be underestimated as most books inflict a stronger desire for coherent overview instead of presenting an open space. Granted, this open space has limitations in its own formats and agendas but the benefits outweigh the problems. One such benefit is that already many of my students have mentioned this book to me as a resource. They are hungry and need access to works. This alone makes the book important and influential. A key factor might be

that as the number of higher degrees sought in the arts increases so does the demand for documentation of ephemeral works as sources of reference and citation.

A Hesitation

Allen and Pearlman set themselves several difficult tasks, some of which are acknowledged and other which remain blind spots amid the matrices of relationships that "performance" evokes. Already as we move from the title to the subtitle issues start to arise and become confused. *Performing the unNameable* implies an emphasis on representing performance, and *An Anthology of Performance Texts* implies the separation and selection of one element. The status of the texts' relationship to the performance is uncertain. In addition it leaves the impression that the unnameable quality to which they refer, is an attribute of the genre of performance. Whereas very little argument would be made against the infinite permutations of creative acts, it is still possible to name sources, lines of influence, histories of investigation that constitute genealogies of contemporary works. There can be a re-searching and re-viewing of repeated attempts to endanger the staid and over-determined expectations for creating and receiving live work.

In his article "European Sensibility Today", Donald Kuspit (1) delineates the difference between European, particularly German, and American sensibilities in an effort to show how within the same epoch similar starting points are taken up differently. For example, the American sensibility equates information with facts, considering them as things generated and administered by information systems, while the European sensibility mistrusts facts, seeing them as historical biases and therefore always connected to memory. The results are two different senses of reality, which is paramount when considering how each sensibility constructs or uses information to represent reality, history or points of view. It seems that one task of any anthology of Australian performance texts would be to describe an Australian sensibility rather than allude to the mystery of the creative process.

Context (sensibility)

By way of contrast a book like *Performance, Live Art Since the 60s* written by RoseLee Goldberg (2) with a foreword by Laurie Anderson, does attempt a survey of performance and explores the variety of configurations from both thematic and disciplinary standpoints. It also positions itself as a historical interpretation of emergent forms and describes a context for the relationship of various working approaches and historical conditions. Anderson is very clear about the difference between document, representation and work by titling the foreword: "this is the time and this is a record of the time." She elaborates,

When live art is documented through film or audio recording it immediately becomes another art form - a film or record - another rectangle or disk. This book covers an immense amount of work in many media and extremely diverse styles. Tracing the trends and links, RoseLee Goldberg has let the work resonate through its images. (p 7)

Never is any one element positioned to represent or stand in for the work, the document remains at all times distant to the work. Despite Anderson's suggestion, the images are more like photo opportunities, which have become emblematic of some of the better-known events. Goldberg's survey gives a broad field in which to place the information in *Performing the unNameable* and the particular way that performance has developed in light of various trends, innovations, places and times.

Performing the unNameable should be commended for giving the voice back to the works and the artists. However it must then rely upon surveys of performance as required homework. The issue becomes more confused when the idea of performance is so closely tied to the relation of text to work. The confusion is exacerbated in the introduction of the anthology where Allen and Pearlman voice a frustration in regards to the submissions for the anthology and the discomfort of the participants who feel that "to prevent a work's disappearance is to corrupt it". Here the editor's archaeological rationale of "authenticity of fragments" is brought in to smooth the rough fit. Whereas they celebrate the possibility that "text" would be used "the way designers might add colour" ultimately they were disappointed not to be able to include evidence of "descriptions of actions, maps and other forms of printable document" deciding ultimately on "attributes common enough among **texts** in performance" (my emphasis).(3) So part of the absence of other approaches lies in the artists' lack of clarity when submitting works for inclusion and in part the editorial need to decide upon a focus and format. Unfortunately the focus on text preselects, leaving the concept of the unnamable half excavated.

RE: context (Australian sensibility today)

Though Allen and Pearlman's anthology does not directly address the notion of an Australian sensibility, indications may be found in the information presented to trace the genealogies underwriting many of the selections. Any description of an Australian sensibility must include the strong influence and significance that storytelling remains as a line from traditional to emergent live arts forms. The texts in this anthology resist being theatrical scripts while

toying with the resemblance. They align more with oral tradition while at the same time consciously working against traditional notions of unity. What emerges is fragmentation on every level, which instead of oppressing us with other people's ideas of Unity, can have the effect of making us question our own Unity. The fragmented and episodic structures are event driven even when the story has been located outside of the work somewhere in common knowledge. The effect is a wonderful open market of forms and contexts for the utterances that freely draw upon story, script, poem, discussion, soap opera, oracle, etc. Comfort with discomfort is a prerequisite for contemporary audiences.

Allen's own text for "Thursday's Fictions" and the text from All Out Art Ensemble are exceptions, each with different influences and leanings. The first is aimed more at Language and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry experiments reflected in Allen's use of systems, phrases as ciphers, parenthesis and the space of the page. Though there is the veiled reference to Defoe and a story of discovery, it is couched in attention to conditions more than events.

The All Out Art Ensemble uses a Retro approach to apply the Situationist International's promise to overthrow all situations despite the dissimilar conditions of cultural production (from the 60's to the 80's). It employs a critique and commentary style so effective as an analytical scalpel in the time before cultural studies. The Art Ensemble text is used here by the editors to overthrow the anthology's own format.

Equally influential in making a description of Australian sensibility is the running interest in physical theatre whose inclinations begin with circus and vaudeville and move toward dance, instead of vice versa. The way of life in Australia and the strong connection to landscape predisposes artists and audiences to respond to the body under extreme conditions. Indigenous forms of ritual and Asian forms of theatre influence this swerve away from other histories of performance making the Australian emphasis on story and physicality into commonly understood and heightened vocabularies. The combination of these two lineages creates a unique line of investigation in live work separate from yet connected to developments in Europe and the Americas.

THE GENERIC ISSUES: two hands

Performing the unNameable raises two key issues: on **the one hand** there is the difficulty of defining the genre of performance, on **the other hand** there is the genre of documentation. Most of the time these are opposite directions of representation. As the definition of performance increasingly involves convergence and complexity, subtle distinctions disappear under categorical ones promoted by documentation. This is compounded by our inability to "name" what it is that performance does.

On the One Hand (performance)

By isolating *how* we receive and frame information-experience, "Performance" makes demands upon our where-with-all. Just as media specific genres require familiarity, interest and engagement with the medium in which it is presented, the investigation of lived experience, newly conditioned, requires no less. The technological media of digital works and multimedia become less invisible over time and therefore more opaque and constructed. That is to say, it ceases to be convincing on the level of a truth effect and becomes a platform for cultural expression.

The approach of "performance" utilises the popular, the elitist, the esoteric and the everyday (disciplines, discourses and genres) as vocabularies, to speak from and about the conditions of lived experience. One way to have knowledge of lived experience is in the flesh. Do not mistake this idea of lived experience as non-technological, quite the opposite, it includes the multitudes of temporalities and alternative or supplemental embodiments which technology provides -- and investigates them in the presence of others.

The shift from the traditional frame of performing arts to performance, outlines the last thirty years of re-evaluating of art. The resulting processes are decentred, disrupted, non-linear, multi-disciplinary. The premise of performance is to jump between genres, to present slices and conic sections of Modernist unified fields and use forms and formal systems to construct events. This shift is the difference between a Perspective versus Points of View (POV). Hal Foster states in his introduction to *The Return of The Real* that artistic and cultural production has shifted "from media specific elaborations to debate specific projects due to the ethnographic turn in art and theory"(4). This means that form, media and genre take on qualities related to the way they are used, becoming POVs that no longer describe a worldview or world-values, but situations and local vistas. Location in spacetime is crucial. This reappropriation of genres allows artists to inflect, in a deliberate way, the structures they inherit. For these reasons performance works can be elusive and frustrate viewers still looking for values generated by interest in forms and the conclusions that those forms generate and make real.

On the Other Hand (documentation)

In an ethnographic study of sacred place, Bruce R. Caron uses the term "doubt management"(5), suggesting it is a vital factor in the promotion of places. Documentation also tries to manage our doubt when promoting certain

qualities of the events through the experience of reading. Hidden agendas and coded relationships become visible when we look at how experiences are substituted for each other in the relationship of text to work. The genre of the document constructs and reinforces an orientation to the things documented, establishing relationships between desired values and conventions of the genre.

Performing the unNameable reinforces the love of text and the storytelling lineage by textualising our access to the events. We struggle with the discrepancy between the archaeologist and the paramedic. These performances and their texts are the living dead, not quite artefacts but not body quick, though their echoes reach today's work. The events are on life support or in the text's frozen animation. In both cases however, we are happy to suspend our disbelief and welcome Martin Guerre home, a hero just for returning. Texts perform heroically when they lend their face to experiences. We go along not because we cannot tell the difference but because we want to be there. Why don't we feel this way when looking at musical scores, lighting plans, drawings of set designs and maquettes, or director's notes; because the distance is too great with too little transparency? This confusion occurs most commonly with texts; they do not appear represented but present. In our culture the "authentic value" of texts floats to the surface like cream.

The problem is augmented by genres of documentation. Most of the hard labour of documentation falls to text and photo, then video, etc. Should areas of practice that invest value in experiences opposed to reading, be documented by texts in a traditional book-form? If, for various reasons, funding or otherwise, the book-form was the only way to make this anthology, should supplements or alternatives have been included, such as a CD-ROM or web pages? Should the medium represented (performance) and the medium representing (document) embody each other? A final but lingering impression of this anthology is the tension between the divergence of this genre of **documentation** and the **performances**, which although mentioned eats into the good work.

The documents in *Performing the unNameable*

Having rubbed raw the skin of the anthology with the ointment of general discussion, perhaps it is now more difficult to come to the actual works included with all of this in mind. But, this is the burden of interest and of valuing many approaches over one approach, for it demands that we stretch our capacity to take on information without having to believe or commit to it, or make it change our lives. History and "mystory" (6) require that we do our homework to know how to place any activity that takes shape. Yet this is what art works do best; use creative media as the grammar of homework.

What follows is a selection of the works in the anthology that begin to operate as maps, actions and other textual indications. My commentary is focused on bringing out the aspects that move away from the textual emphasis and towards a broader range of considerations that performance negotiates. I have deliberately tried to draw attention to the works and information in the documentation that indicates other con-texts.

- "First and Last Warning" by the Sydney Front utilises the audience's consent to make them aware of their complicity with art works by setting up a class separation based on participation. The lower class or the cheap seats endure (willingly) an ordeal; the upper class buys out of the situation to remain distanced voyeurs. The price of the tickets defines and encourages these differences. Here repetitive violence is reminiscent of dance theatre and the yellow text tips its hat to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.
- "Quick Death" by Richard Murphet is the entry, which in its texts provides representation, instructions and descriptions beside the words of the performance to map out an experience or imaginary dimensional environment. It layers stage directions, lighting, FX, and spoken voice into a text giving them equal weight. It sets up a structure for the simultaneity where others give only juxtapositions.
- "Sum of the Sudden" by Open City involves a lighting cycle that has its own autonomy. The construction of the work pushes this separation of art form to exploit the different meanings they can generate. This becomes a conceptual structure rather than a hybrid work.
- "Things Calypso Wanted to Say" by Margaret Cameron turns up the volume on the intertextuality. This work is the one in the anthology that is hard to get a fix on in terms of what the performance might be. It offers mostly content and the wonderful Balthus visual quote, making that contorted pose look peculiarly possible.
- An interesting subtext from "Nobody's Daughter" by Sidetrack Performance Group is the commentary on culture wars, which in this case is illustrated by the discussion on audience development. The story boils down to a decision to become more experimental which resulted in a significant funding drop and the inability of the group to continue as an ensemble company.

- "Beautiful Mutants" by the Ex-Stasis theatre Collective - despite the text being an adaptation of the Deborah Levy novel - the interest for me lay in the appropriation of a reconstructed Elizabethan theatre transforming it into a contemporary space by flooding the pit with a metre of water.
- In "Undiscovered Land, Voyage 2" by the Kenetic Theatre Company - they offer approaches to training as contextual information which is noteworthy. They emphasise interdisciplinary performing skill and the compositional craft of the actors themselves (without technology). The parenthetical qualification is their insertion, and positions them quite clearly within current attitudes to performance.
- All Out Ensemble directed by Nick Tsoutas was the entry that most resisted the book's format. The representation of their work is not in evidence but has to be extrapolated. It is a demonstration. It is the least forthcoming and the most demanding, for not only does it not supply the content or context of a performance, it requires that we apply the operation from this instance of text to an imaginary performance setting.

Writing

In all there are 17 works in the anthology. Differences appear mostly in the way the texts position the reader: whether one is invited to reconstruct a work, interact with the process, experience a text out of water, or move the furniture and perform in your living room. The value of the writing is always in-situ since performance sets up writing to be appropriated by contexts (comprised of material qualities, spatial proximity, tonal resonances, vocal and acoustic capacities, current events, persons involved, persons attending, etc.). Should performance texts betray this interdependence? Yes and No; yes, the separation of the writing can go a long way and be appreciated for its strength, innovation and discovery; no, the most memorable or well turned is not necessarily best suited to a given performance approach.

Richard James Allen and Karen Pearlman find their way through a difficult challenge. *Performing the unNameable* provides excellent examples of performance work that carves strong indications as to the context of performance in Australia. They succeed in producing information environments that extend beyond the texts alone by asking for a variety of additional statements. Most importantly this anthology makes available a necessary measure for performance and writing for performance that will inform participants and public alike.

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