

Curating Performance

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Performance in the Time of Halting and Transformation

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I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharwarl nation, on whose ancestral lands I am speaking tonight. Wollongong is a long strip of coastline with a steep escarpment behind it about 80km south of Sydney. For a bit less than 200 years it has been an industrial town, first focusing on coal mining and then on steel manufacturing. For thousands of years prior to that it was Dharawal land. This land was never formally ceded, and I pay respects to the Dharawal elders, past, present and future.

I also want to thank Roselle Pineda for inviting me to contribute to this conference. Roselle's generosity, openness and humour provides the clearest manifestation of the philosophy of Performance Curators Initiatives (PCI). PCI explores new ways of facilitating meaningful social action, interaction and reflection to address and intervene within intractable contemporary dilemmas. This approach is based on a recognition that our traditional ways of producing art, exhibitions, performances, etc. are no longer adequate and effective. Deliberately transdisciplinary, PCI takes risks and builds bridges. It encourages uncertain dialogue, participation and action.

This paper represents a very preliminary effort to consider some of the implications of linking performance and curation. My particular interest is in conceiving the relationship between art as a form of action and reflection, and any associated potential for art to intervene within dimensions of the social - working to fulfil its tacit cultural promise.

Algorithms

Just a little about me to start.

I have an interest in philosophical aesthetics and a background in computational media. Roughly eleven years ago the latter led me to pursue a number of projects that involved performing ordinary actions in algorithmic terms. I was curious about what it meant to

perform algorithms - not strictly as computers perform them, but through activities of everyday life, particularly walking. I was attempting to transition from technically focused new media practice to conceptual and environmental-social practice.

One project involved following rules for walking up into the Illawarra escarpment behind my home and removing portions of illegally dumped cars with an angle grinder (Bunt, 2013). Most recently I collaborated on *Walking Upstream*, a socially engaged art project, which involved a series of public walks along neglected creek systems that run, largely invisibly, across the Wollongong urban and suburban area (Bunt, Ihlein, Williams, 2014-2018). Alongside a developing interest in local environmental systems, culture and politics, I retained an interest in the messy relation between abstract systems of opening and determination and the unpredictable character of lived performance. I was particularly interested in the implications of following lines and incipient paths - both the meandering lines of creeks themselves, but also the ways and paths alongside them. I was interested in how an apparent act of attentive following could be conceived and experienced in other terms.

My concern with procedure and attentive following links to a suspicion of the notion of 'the new' in modern and contemporary art. I question the logic and rhetoric of a cultural system that can only conceive time in terms of disruptive progress and space in terms of relentless, dislocating colonisation and expansion. Although computers and algorithms are part of that system, they also incorporate an aspect of unconscious process and repetition. They are immensely complex and sophisticated, but also utterly 'stupid' - proceeding step by step in enduring cycles. I read this in terms of the obliquely legible legacy of processes of human experience and labour that fall outside and resist the contemporary disruptive paradigm - that focus on memory, performance and re-performance, sustainability, and modes of social and cultural transformation that proceed imperceptibly. Against the avant-garde commitment to the singular, radical intervention, I'm interested in how popular and folk cultural traditions chart indissoluble links between inclusive and collective practices of repetition and processes of cultural adaptation and change.

None of this relates to curation as such - at least not to how the field is typically conceived. My environmental projects definitely developed a notion of an illicit 'custodial' ('taking caring of') relation to the local environment, but I never considered my solitary or collaborative procedural performances as curated events.

Performance Curation

However, I recognise that PCI conceives curation differently. Within the context of PCI, curation means more than conventional curatorial practices of museum and gallery

collection, preservation, assembly, display and communication. Curation is conceived instead in terms of a general notion of social and cultural care, in which the curator appears as a social gardener, planting the seeds of social interaction, tending to social relationships, watering and fertilising the green shoots of cultural mediation and communal life. The curator is not only a professional curator, per se, but may just as easily be a teacher, a community worker, an artist, etc. Similarly, performance refers to more than live theatre, dance or performance art. It engages a notion of general performativity, relevant to a wide range of social action, animation and intervention. At the same time, this self-conscious recognition of oneself and others in action suggests a lingering sense of reflective aesthetics. Later in this paper I will consider the relationship between aesthetic experience and performative action in greater detail.

But in any case, putting these terms together, what does the notion of performance curation imply?

- Most simply, and preserving the traditional meanings of curation and performance, it would seem to represent an effort towards the acknowledgment, recognition and preservation of the largely ephemeral tradition of performance art, including dance. This is not only a matter of preserving the tradition itself, but also works to secure the place of performance within the overall field of art practice.
- It also suggests an effort to extend the concept of curation beyond the museum and gallery to other contexts - to social engagement directly, rather than just to traditional circumscribed exhibitions and performances. This suggests new relations between art, curatorship and the public in which the communal character of art is realised without the need of art per se, in which the public, community facilitation of curatorship itself realises what would have strictly been expected by art.
- Finally, the notion of 'curating performance' suggests an effort to conceive and support emerging transdisciplinary activist practices that have their basis in performance traditions. These are no longer restricted to traditional artistically framed performances but still aim to employ aspects of the art-institutional system.

The more radical aspects of performance curation correspond closely to the notion of socially engaged art, which unlike gallery focused relational art, aims to literally intervene within the social - to frame contexts for dialogue and to model and and explore alternative social formations and modes of cultural interaction and being.

Curation and Community

It is worth saying a bit more about curation as it is ordinarily understood.

According to David Balzer (2014), the role of the curator emerges late in the 19th century allied to the growth and consolidation of the modernist avant-garde. Beyond any particular cultural conception of the curator, the role services the needs of an expanding industry. As the economic and social institutional system of art becomes more complex, differentiated and specialised, new roles, new intermediaries, new layers of management and communication are needed to sustain this developing edifice. The role of the curator is plainly a contentious one. For artists, curators appear as powerful gatekeepers, star-makers and, often enough, ogres. They can make careers or end them. For audiences, curators are the impresarios of the public theatre of modern art. They are regularly lampooned for introducing another layer of opacity; evident for instance in the grand biennale theme that makes as little sense generally as it does to the understanding of any particular artwork.

I don't really want to add to these jaundiced critiques, because, clearly enough, any issues here are not simply the fault of the curator. They emerge in relation to the underlying social contradictions shaping the complex market and social institutional identity of modern and contemporary art. This is most plainly evident in terms of art's putative role in manifesting dimensions of community while at the same time facilitating and serving as an alibi for social inequity and difference. Most prominently prefigured in Kant's conception of beauty as a 'common sense' (2007, p.68) and Schiller's notion of the 'aesthetic education of man' (2004) - not to mention Plato's notion of the sung and danced *polis* (2012) and Aristotle's conception of the close relation between *mimesis*, social order and catharsis (1996) - aesthetics has been centrally concerned with how art contributes towards the experience of commonality and community. The tradition of modern art, for instance, regularly dreams of discovering direct means of communicating to people and modelling new forms of sociality, while at the same time regretting its marginal and opaque voice. Within this context, the figure of the curator appears as a potential bridge, as one who can assist in making the social promise of art more real and accessible. If the curator fails to deliver on this promise - if the message is inevitably compromised - they can at least lend public visibility to this gesture of communal return.

Alongside the regular critiques of curatorial hubris - the recent efforts, for instance, to downplay the role, to refer to 'directors' and 'organisers' rather than curators (Judah, 2016), we encounter proposals for a new political practice of 'curatorialism', which can provide a vehicle for elaborating at a felt, aesthetic level the singular space of radical politics (Berry, 2015). In this context, Jacques Ranciere's notion of the aesthetic dimension of politics is pertinent - the capacity for art to manifest a 'redistribution of the sensible' (Rancierre, 2004, p.12). Considered in these terms, the actual articulation of space, of the specifically public space in which art is experienced, depends as much upon the curator as the artist. The curator is charged with literally realising features of community - with bringing people together in a common space and time. It is this emphasis on realising features of common experience and community that links the role of the curator to the socially engaged artist. Both act as social facilitators and provocateurs. The socially engaged artist may have a

greater focus on social participation and particular, ephemeral, dialogic events, but there is the same emphasis on framing social contexts of interaction and engagement. To use an old-fashioned, formalist language, the distinctive features of their mediums overlap. Socially engaged art attempts a shift away from the ordinary indirection of art - the summoning of community at a distance through the mediation of the artistic work. Instead communal social interaction is figured directly. This aligns socially engaged art with the curator's efforts to establish an actual communal exhibition or event space.

I'm interested in this idea of bypassing art altogether, of considering social facilitation directly. Yet at the same time, art is not entirely absent within the conceptual economy of performance curation. It is relevant within the texture of performance itself, which is always at once literal and framed, incorporating a gesture of distance and reflection. Some notion of art is also intrinsic to the notion of curation, which assumes the curation of some order of things, which assumes some body of created work. Here, however, within the context of performance curation, the work is not substantive in the ordinary way. It is typically processual, open, ephemeral and permits no external space of viewing. So, there is plainly a need to say more about performance, about the specifically aesthetic character of performance - particularly in as much as it risks being indistinguishable from social engagement as such.

Performance/Action/Aesthetics

I want to consider the aesthetics of performance in relation to Kant's classic conception of aesthetic experience in his 'Analytic of the Beautiful' (Kant, 2007, p.35-74).

It is worth stressing at the outset that Kant's theory of beauty is not fundamentally concerned with art objects or the sphere of art generally. Most of his examples come from everyday life - encounters with nature, buildings, wallpaper. While he does discuss art and the notion of genius, this is only after he has explained the distinctive characteristics of aesthetic experience more generally as it is relevant to our ordinary experience of the world. Kant is not concerned with beautiful objects, but rather with a specific aesthetic mode of being that can be distinguished from both sensible-appetitive and logical-rational being. Aesthetic experience represents the vibrating, irresolved modality of cognition in which the differences between the sensible and the conceptual are at once reconciled and registered in their essential difference. Only in this restricted realm of mediation can they meet. This mode of animated, receptive and reflective being is important not only as scene of reconciliation, but also as a sphere of human freedom.

A key point is that Kant regards the sensible and the conceptual as dimensions of human determination. The first is associated with material-animal determination (appetite), while

the latter is associated with logical and ethical determination (either the a priori laws of rational thought or the moral categorical imperative). In this manner, freedom eludes us at both the level of lived sensible experience and at the level of conceptual understanding and ethical action. Our only genuine freedom is found in the energetic passivity of aesthetic experience, which in its disinterest and lack of conceptual or ethical determination represents an unfettered form of being and engagement.

Kant's conception reveals obvious tensions and contradictory tendencies. It promises reconciliation and freedom, but only in the awkwardly positioned, practically uncertain and untenable context of subjectively based experience. This can have no relation to ordinary 'interested' modes of being, thinking and behaving, but somehow provides the underlying rationale for them. If we work, if we consider things rationally, if we behave kindly to our fellow human beings, this is due not only to the various necessary features of sensible, conceptual and ethical life, but also, at a more global, evaluative level, in terms of a fundamental, common (universal) experience of human freedom and aesthetically based human community. However tenuous this conception, however marginal its practical social purchase and dubious its claims to social inclusiveness, it informs the contradictory social character of aesthetics, which can conceive the social relation only in terms of receptive passivity and a withdrawal from social engagement. If Kant's aesthetics cannot comprehend performance, it is less at the level of the temporality or ephemerality of performance than in terms of its active and social character. The dynamism of the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience is inextricably linked to a suspension of ostensible action, to a contemplative reserve and passivity. Aesthetic experience represents a pause in action - precisely in order to facilitate an inner energetics. Kant's privileging of the 'higher' senses, and of sight particularly, links to establishing the conditions of distance from practical, active life.

I should stress here that it is not as though active movement cannot be regarded aesthetically, it is rather that aesthetic experience itself as an internal movement is not conceived in terms of any wider movement of the aesthetic subject. So, for example, it is perfectly possible that the flight of a bird, the movement of a dancer, or the general flow of everyday life may attract an aesthetic response, but the reflective subject themselves remains still. They experience an internal play of the cognitive faculties - an internal motion - rather than themselves partaking of any movement or engaging themselves in any particular action. The issue then is of how to conceive the aesthetic character of engaged action within the texture of forms of engaged social action that do neatly distinguish between attentive aesthetic subjects (as consumers) and social actors (as producers). There is also plainly a need to consider forms of experience that extend beyond the isolated subject, that focus on social dialogue and participation.

Kantian aesthetics manifests a central dilemma: the awkward relationship between the particular character of a disengaged mode of subjective experience and its universal

character - its capacity to summon an intuition of 'common sense' and community. This can be linked to the contradictions of emerging bourgeois identity (Eagleton, 1990). The discourse of aesthetics works to sublimate more popular, subaltern conceptions of freedom and lived community - to re-articulate them in terms of a new discourse of social difference that focuses on the interior world of the individual, delineating coarse and refined sensibilities, as well as modes of freedom and communal identity that can never take adequate social shape. So, in the sense of this necessary play of internal distance, the aesthetic can never entail literal action, but only reflection and mediation.

Conclusion

The uncertain aesthetics of performance curation and socially engaged art suggests that we are still negotiating this dilemma, still trying to find ways to mediate between dimension of active reflection and literal action. Making sense of action, of the possibility of action, of making it felt, heard, visible and intelligible, remains our key concern.

It is worth adding, within the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, in which so many jobs in the arts sector have disappeared, that beyond any conceptual, philosophical and aesthetic debates about the notions of 'curation' and 'performance' the conjunction of these terms produces new forms of social activism and new associated professional roles. More precisely it provides new means of supporting activism, of including it within the general scope of state, NGO and independently managed social programs. This is worth acknowledging because it provides the vital social, material and institutional context for the alliance of the two constitutive notions.

The emergence of new, transdisciplinary creative idioms - performance curation, socially engaged art, social practice, etc. - is indicative not only of various efforts to negotiate novel relations between art and social action, they respond to fundamental problems affecting the scope for critical social action itself. Traditional forms of political activism now no longer appear effective, pertinent, or sufficient. Our pressing economic, socio-political, cultural, epidemiological and environmental problems demand new forms of intervention and response. If art risks veering from anything recognisably aesthetic in all this, if it exploits art for other purposes, if it drifts away from art altogether, this is justifiable within the context of the seriousness of current local and global challenges.

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