

[http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/s\\_cr.htm](http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/s_cr.htm)

accessed 11. 12. 2014

## Incorporating Practice: A multi-viewpoint approach to performance documentation

Rye, Caroline. 2003. Reproduced here with permission from *Journal of Media Practice* 3 (2): 115-123

[Symposium Papers Home](#)

### Abstract

*This article is concerned with the use of DVD technology to address certain problematic issues of documentation and dissemination within practice as research in performance. It will look at the interactive possibilities provided by this medium to produce a 'self-conscious' record and overcome the monocular point of view of conventional video documentation. In addition, the advantages of a multi-data, disk-based format as a mode for research presentation will be discussed.*

This paper arises from reflections made while completing a PhD by practice and further work undertaken whilst working on the PARIP project. PARIP is an AHRB funded research project based in the Department of Drama at the University of Bristol which looks at Practice As Research in Performance; in this context 'performance' refers to the disciplinary fields of performance: theatre, film, video and television. This paper is specifically concerned with the documentation of live performance, nevertheless, some of my observations and suggestions may have consequences for the documentation and presentation of other recording-based performance research practices.

Issues of documentation are of critical concern to the question of practice as research in performance and are particularly charged for two paradoxical reasons. First, because the research maybe concerned with exactly those qualities of the live encounter and the production of embodied knowledges which can not, by definition, be embedded, reproduced or demonstrated in any recorded document. Second, more pragmatically, if one wishes one's research to have a life beyond its original live manifestation, and thus be available to a broader research community, the practitioner/researcher has to engage with the creation of appropriate performance documents. I want to begin by speaking about some of the difficulties of documentation before going on to talk specifically about DVD technology as a means by which to address some of these concerns.

The performance/documentation dilemma has already been well rehearsed by a number of critics but it maybe worth briefly revisiting this argument whilst adding my own particular inflection. 1 I would like to state categorically there are fundamental differences between 'the live' and 'the recorded' which means that there is no simple way of translating between the two. These differences stem from the different relationships these two phenomena have with time and space. Performance frames

time and space as singular and unrecoverable and this is in direct contradiction to a record in which time and space are constructed as fixed and reproductive. Therefore the record is predicated on the idea of a control of time and space: that time and space can be captured, recovered and repeated, which in turn provides the document with a type of convenience and accessibility. The danger exists in that, through this accessibility, an ease of consumption is produced and the record can all too quickly become a substitute for the live event it re-presents, a substitute that cannot provide evidence of exactly the thing it purports to record. To continue this line of thinking, as we know, leads us to abandon any hope of producing an effective record of performance. However, if our practice is to function effectively as research beyond the experience of the immediate performance we have to find types of document that can speak about this inherent paradox: that is, documents that do not suggest an unproblematic transparency between the live event and its record and therefore that the two cannot be conflated.

The confusion of records with their original referent becomes particularly pronounced in the domain of the mechanically reproduced image because of the powerful iconical and indexical relationships this image has with its source. <sup>2</sup> This confusion becomes further embedded within moving images whose real time reproduction of movement creates an illusion of life-fullness at 25 frames a second thereby collapsing the moment of image recording and the moment of image reproduction, ultimately producing a notion of equivalence between the two. Nevertheless video is a very useful tool in the documentation of performance and the medium of choice for most performance practitioners.

This means some form of Faustian pact is agreed whereby the quality of information contained in a video record counteracts the potentially difficult relationship the document may have with its live event. In a video we can see a version of the space that the event inhabited, albeit rendered from 3 dimensions into 2; we can see performers in relation to one another, their gestures, movements, other details. Importantly we can also hear an approximation of the sound (because the argument for the photographic image is equally potent for recorded sound): we can hear the sound in the performance environment synchronized with its accompanying stage action. The differences of speech and music balances, the flows and rhythms of the performance, perhaps even something of a residual 'atmosphere' of the show, all can be shown in a video. These are all qualities that video inherits from the indexical images and sounds that form the basis of its 'reality effect'. Ironically it is also the reason why a video representation is able to become an acceptable substitution for more immediate and more sensorily complex live encounters. However, mechanical recording methods assure a type of visual and aural contingency with the original event that inevitably gives the video record a certain empirical utility. Therefore the question becomes how best to use this medium while resisting its ability to erase the original performance?

Early on, in documenting my own practice in multi-media performance, I became frustrated by the inability of the video medium to handle the multiplicity and simultaneity of live events designed (as they were) to fragment and overload an audience point of view. The camera, and its co-dependent screen image, for all its illusion of plentitude and completeness passed on by the conventions of mainstream film and television, could capture only a small part of what was going on in the

original show. (Normally, a wide angle shot would be used to show the complexity of the actions and geography of the performing space, but these views are often so small and dim as to be of no use). The inadequacy of the record would not have been so perturbing were it not for the sense of 'omnipotent authority' that accompanied the video document which made it impossible even to allude to the fractured viewing positions that were a key aesthetic of the work in performance.

Here we have a tangible example of an inherent difference between the live and the recorded event. The camera's monocular vision determines the selection of a particular point of view and an inevitable separation of this detail from its context. Furthermore, with a number of these viewpoints, the conventions of continuity editing mean that each view is located in time in a linear and often progressive relationship with the others. It is difficult in film and video to show events that occur in parallel taking place in the same space. To try to address this difficulty occasionally I would superimpose two simultaneous events on top of one another, and this, in certain instances, seemed a reasonable re-presentation of the given performance moment. This technique does have limitations, however, as the visual field can become rapidly cluttered and confused. (*Figure 1*)



*Figure 1*

Furthermore, there is the reduction of two separate 'performances' into the flattened screen which had not occurred in the original event, does not allow events to be separated out and watched individually, so to some extent this layering of images is a crude approach. Another solution, which interestingly is also a device used in the film tradition to show simultaneous action taking place in two separate and yet connected spaces, is that of the split screen — think of the classical Hollywood telephone conversation. But again this technique does not allow for the separation of the two. Locked in a binary embrace, the two actions can only be read in relation to one another; the tyranny of the single screen is replaced by a dichotomous but similarly

restricted point of view. And one would have to ask if providing two views of an event is really any better than providing just one unless the performance, or part of the performance, was particularly designed around this binary split focus.

This is where DVD, the aptly-named digital versatile disk, enters the equation. As a disk based storage medium it has sufficiently high capacity to reproduce at least an hour's worth of moving images at high quality; and because it is a disk, not a tape, this information can be accessed in a non-linear, random order. 3 DVD as a medium does not presuppose a single, progressive, narrative structure for its texts; and provides the potential for multiple and parallel constructs delivered via a degree of interactivity with the viewer. The medium can therefore facilitate a shift in the way we conceive and create narrative structures for moving images which moves these forms towards the fractured, poly-optic, as it were, viewing positions privileged in some forms of performance. This is particularly important for those of us engaged in the documentation of such performances as there is now the possibility of finding some form of approximate moving image equivalent for this fractured viewing position. On a DVD I am able to provide 1, 2, 3, or even 4 different versions of the same performance moment. The ability to represent the performance as a variety of views, or versions, is important as it prevents the conventional single monocular view of the camera/screen from being seen as the definitive record and thus *the* performance. The restless shifting between perspectives never allows the video text be reduced to one version but remains forever constructed, partial and incomplete. Paradoxically, with every new view added to the DVD an additional awareness of what is not seen by the cameras is created - a sense of what the document cannot document. This multi-screen format could be realized on standard video tape but crucially on a DVD I am also able to separate these perspectives out, to provide a viewer with the possibility of accessing a full screen version of any one of those moments individually, along with the potential to return to the multi-screen version at any time.

Below are some still frame examples of this approach to documentation which PARIP has been working on in collaboration with Simon Jones. This DVD documents a piece of performance research called *Double Happiness* created by Simon and Sara Giddens with their company 'Bodies In Flight'. 4 *Double Happiness* is structured around the idea of a fractured and excessive viewing space and this philosophy is carried over into the document without, one hopes, obliterating the notion of the original live event. In this respect, the record is able to mimic, in some senses, the rhythm and construction of the performance by altering the number of views available to a viewer of the document as the work progresses. By working in consultation with one of the show's creators we can attempt to ensure continuity of intention between the live event and the recorded document. The still frames come from the end section of the show, where the document builds from a single screen point of view through to all four screens which play different yet synchronous material. This crescendo of information reflects a similar development that took place in the original theatre production. (*Figures 2 – 5*)



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

One way that people could use this document would be to watch it in its multiple screen incarnation in order to establish a sense of the overall geography and rhythmical structure of the show and then choose particular views and angles pertinent to their own particular interests to watch in full screen detail, alternating between these views and the four mini-screens. (Figure 6)



Figure 6

Now I am not under the illusion that this multi-screen version is easy or comfortable to watch. Just like the multi-viewpoint performance that it documents, this record can engender feelings of frustration and overload similar to those perhaps provoked by the original performance. This does not mean that because the document reflects certain fragmented qualities of the performance that an equivalence is established between the two. Rather, I believe, the opposite occurs and this approach serves to heighten the difference — the dissonance — between the live event and its record. The screen space of the document, divided into smaller screens, is overtly constructed, which encourages and requires a degree of interactivity, a conscious

decision making from the viewer. Any reader of this document cannot fail but be alert to its constructed nature and the degree to which they themselves play a part in the negotiation of the text. Therefore what is carried between the performance and the document is a certain foregrounding of the act of watching and in this the document and the performance share a parallel concern. Thus it is possible to make a record which provides a detailed variety of visual and audio information about a production, and which, as a document, is sympathetic to the structuring principles of that live work whilst also acknowledging that the event itself, though fundamentally unrecoverable, is still necessary and valid.

This is one possibility that a DVD presents in terms of the treatment of video documentation of live performance. There is, however, an additional asset of this technology which I believe makes it of interest to researchers working in our field — the DVD disk's ability to handle a variety of data types, not just video sounds and images. Prior to joining PARIP I completed a PhD by practice and was looking into appropriate forms of submission for this work. I had completed eight practical projects in the course of my study, four of which formed the key material for my argument and these were mainly represented as still images and two hours plus of video documentation edited using a multi-viewpoint, synchronous screen approach. Alongside this was a 68,000 word thesis and similar-sized appendices of case study notes. The problem was a very practical one: how could I combine a written critical analysis with the evidence of my practical work given that each of these practices was informed by the other and both, I believed, contained an analysis of the thesis I was investigating? I was concerned not to give priority to one or other media of documentation, images or writing, particularly at the expense of the live performance which grounded the research and already has a fragile relationship with documentation. Ease of access to one or other of the documenting forms would create a hierarchical relationship between the written critique and the practical performance work that was not present in the research process and indeed potentially undermines the principal of practice-based research. In the first instance, I was faced with the possibility of presenting a printed text including still images and an accompanying VHS tape and the separation of these two objects seemed to reinforce exactly the hierarchical relationship that I wanted to avoid. The written text is physically easy to access; however, to watch the video a player was required and then, if you didn't work sequentially through the writing, referenced examples could only be found by randomly searching through the tape — a near impossible task. I needed a presentational format that allowed me to place both discourses in the same viewing space, thereby making them equally accessible, whilst also maintaining a sufficient difference between them in order to acknowledge the different types of knowledge they provided, which, ultimately, could not be reduced to a simple illustrative relationship with one another. I therefore produced a DVD which not only facilitated my multi-screen answer to the difficulty of producing performance documentation on video but could also reproduce my written text whilst maintaining the look and structure of a written thesis.

This submission united my argument in one physical object. Certainly, in order to read it a computer with a DVD drive is needed, but then both halves of the document are equally accessible. There are no PC/Mac compatibility issues, the writing is an Acrobat document with Read software also included on the DVD disk, as is a READ ME file which offers instructions on how the reader should proceed. (*Figure 7*)

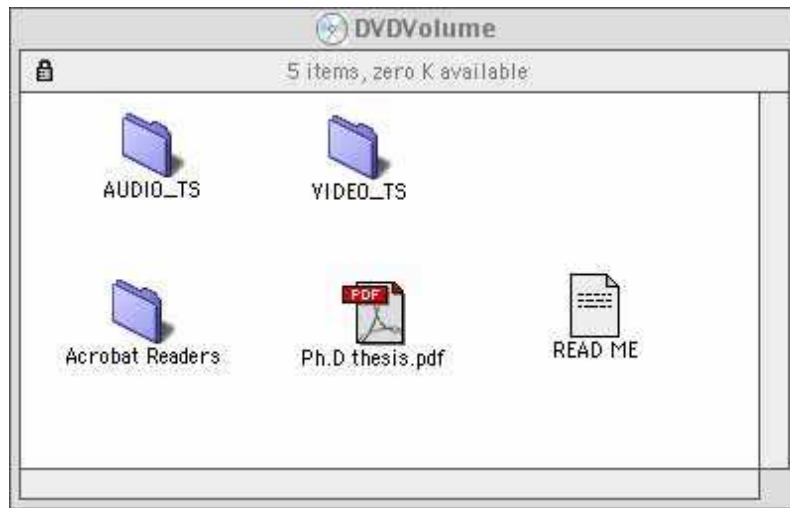


Figure 7

After inserting the disk into a DVD drive the Acrobat PDF file can be opened. This is laid out as a conventional thesis with an index on the left of screen. The text in this electronic format lets the reader move around it quickly and it is also possible to print all or parts of it to avoid reading from the screen. When the reader encounters a section which makes reference to the video work it is then possible to launch the DVD playing application on the computer and navigate through the video part of the DVD to find the relevant example, which can be watched as a multi-screen and/or single screen presentation before returning to the written text of the PhD. (Figure 8)

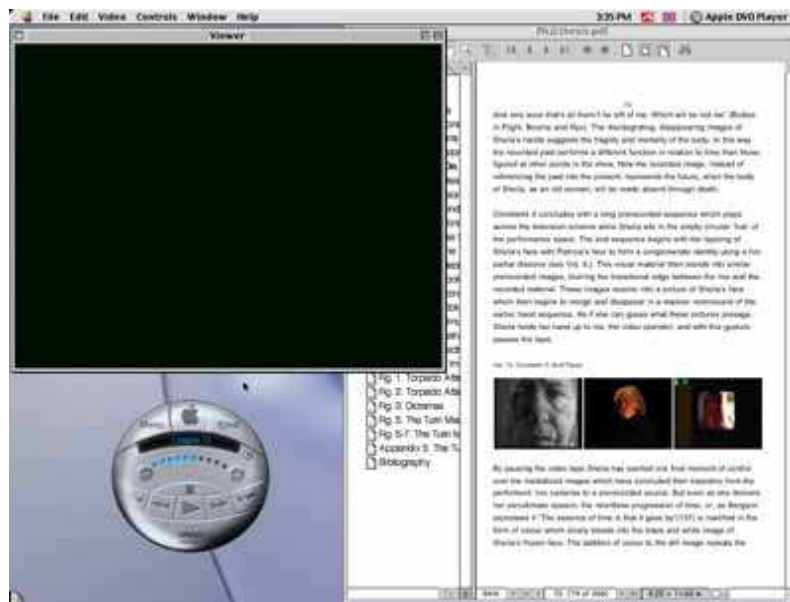


Figure 8

By constantly moving between these two modes of discourse the viewer/reader shifts between the two modes of research active within the study. They are separate because they are different but they are united in one viewing space because they represent a unified piece of research work.

New forms of research methodologies inevitably produce new types of knowledge and in order to recognize this difference new types of submission will have to be devised. A multimedia document is appropriate in its ability to contain a variety of diverse discourses: writing, sound, photography, video. Like the multi-view point principle of video documentation this plethora of expressive forms does not suggest an all-encompassing totality but recognizes that not everything can be conveyed by one single medium, be it the screen, writing, or performance. It acknowledges the differences between things and the different types of knowledge that different forms of expression can provide.

#### *Note on Author*

Caroline Rye works part time at the University of Bristol as a research associate with the PARIP project where she is primarily concerned with the uses of new technology for the documentation of performance. She also has a practice as an artist working in multi-media performance, time-based installation and video. She holds a PhD by practice in multi-media performance from Napier University, Edinburgh.

#### *Acknowledgements*

This is a revised version of a paper given at the PARIP Symposium at the University of Bristol, Department of Drama, November 10/11th 2001. I would like to thank my colleague Angela Piccini for her helpful advice on preparing this paper for publication

#### *Footnotes*

1 I am thinking of the writing of, amongst others, Auslander, Kaye, Melzer, Pearson and Phelan. My PhD thesis includes an analysis of the performance documentation debate and its implications for practice-based research presentations.

2 Perhaps most famously discussed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (Vintage, 1993), and Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, (Dell Publishing, 1973). A useful overview of these terms and their application in film theory can be found in R. Lapsley and M. Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, (Manchester University Press, 1988).

3 A DVD disk is physically the same size as a CD but is capable of containing up to thirteen times as much data. There are three pre-recorded formats, DVD Video, DVD Audio and DVD ROM. DVD-R is a write-once disk and DVD-RW and DVD-RAM are both rewritable. The storage capacity of these disks varies from 2.6 gigabytes (DVD-RAM) to DVD-18 which can store up to 17 gigabytes of material. For more information about DVD visit [www.dvd-forum.org](http://www.dvd-forum.org) or [www.disctronics.co.uk](http://www.disctronics.co.uk).

4 *Double Happiness* was a collaboration between 'Bodies in Flight' and the Singaporean performance company 'spell #7' which premiered at The Black Box, Fort Canning Centre, Singapore, October 2000.

#### *References*

Auslander, P., *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Routledge, 1999.



Kaye, N., 'Live Art: Definition and Documentation', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2.2, 1994, pp. 1-7.

Melzer, A., 'Best Betrayal: The Documentation of Performance on Video and Film', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol.XI, no.42, 1995, pp. 147-150.

Melzer, A., 'Best Betrayal: The Documentation of Performance on Video and Film', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol XI, no.43, 1995, pp. 259-274.

Pearson, M. and Thomas, J., 'Theatre/Archaeology' *The Drama Review*, 38.4, 1994, pp. 133-161.

Phelan, P., *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993.

Rye, C., *Living Cameras: A Study of Live Bodies and Mediatized Images in Multi-Media Performance and Installation Art Practice* (Unpublished Ph.D.) Napier University, 2000.

### *Keywords*

Performance, Documentation, DVD, Multi-perspectival, PhD, Research Presentations.

### *Artifacts*

DVDs of both Caroline Rye's PhD, *Living Cameras* and the performance document *Double Happiness* are available for reference by arrangement from the PARIP project. Please address all enquiries in the first instance to [c.rye@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:c.rye@bristol.ac.uk)