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Poor Traces of the Room: The Live Archive at the Library

By Joseph Dunne and Anna Makrzanowska

In 1980 the Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990) created his archive Cricoteka – Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor as a resource to develop the fundamental principles of the work he initiated with his company Cricot2:

The house has got a name.

Cricot2 Theatre.

The Archives are called

Cricoteka.

When the house is in ruins,
the archives have to survive-

I speak these words to YOU

My friends, remember about the archives

(Kantor 2005: 327-328).

Cricoteka describe the archive as 'living' to distinguish it from 'the library system' because Kantor wanted his work to be preserved 'in the mind and imagination of generations to come' (Cricoteka 2006) and not purely as a series of objects. Positioning the library as the antithesis of embodied knowledge reflects Kantor's opposition to a permanent set of conditions for artistic creation, but he mistakenly considers library systems as methods of entombment. In actuality, libraries guarantee knowledge does not remain static. If the archive is a repository of the past's remains and the place from which histories originates from, then the library enables this knowledge to be publically accessible.

To mark Kantor's centenary year Rose Bruford organized a series of performances, workshops, lectures and practical demonstrations under the umbrella title Kantor Is Here as part of the college's annual symposium in April 2015. Joseph and Anna devised a site-specific installation entitled The Live Archive as an experiment into how performance offers a method of knowledge accession and transmission pertaining to Kantor's legacy. Part of The Live Archive was performed at Rose Bruford's library to express how Kantor's legacy manifests as embodied acts and as documents. Libraries mobilise both of these forms in order for new knowledge to be produced and are thus vital to the formulation of performance legacies.

The authors of this article contend that the 'archive' – a repository of the past's remains – becomes 'live' when the knowledge it retains enters into the social dynamics libraries and performance processes engender. In this context, documents participate in a process we can label as 'live' if the definition of the medium includes the principles that help to give birth to a performance, and the effect of its continuing transmission, which the library enables.

Live Knowledge

The function of libraries is undergoing a significant change in the public imagination. The relative ease with which information can be accessed online arguably lessens the need for physical libraries because, as Tim Worstall states, 'there's other ways to gain access to reading matter. Any PC, tablet or smartphone has access to tens of thousands of free titles' (2016). The devices Worstall lists have indeed made information more readily available, but providing access to documents is not the only role libraries play. A key part of a librarian's job is to give a collection of documents a context by adding metadata to it, simply defined by Bawden and Robinson as 'data about data' (2012:108), and entering it into a

cataloguing system. This aspect of the librarian's role gives the knowledge a collection holds a social utility. Information obtains a certain vibrancy through its socialisation, which is to say the way it is used, by the public. The accession of documents from a library places information into critical circulation and produces new knowledge through a discursive set of interpretive acts.

Knowledge, here, is distinct from information in that it is constructed by the interaction between documents and individuals, a practice that 'has been the primary context for advancing knowledge within a discipline' (Lougee 2011: 313). Libraries are proven stakeholders in the advancement of knowledge by treating it as a 'social construction [with] no privileged constructor' (Doherty 2005: 12). In this context the library becomes 'a concept rather than a physical entity' (Feather 2013: 191) manifesting in diverse contexts. The contemporary denotation of the term 'library' is a physical, social space, *and* as a component of an 'informational process' (Briet in Buckland 1991: 355) practiced by multiple agents.

But the concept of socialisation is also changing in response to technological advances. The degree of connectivity the web affords us has expanded the concept of socialisation to include joint acts of creation and interpretation. In effect, the web is an example of the library as a concept being put to practical use in terms of how the accessibility of digital information engenders interactivity. As Bill Blake argues, the meaning of 'digital' has expanded beyond technological frameworks by becoming 'an ever multiplying and mostly impossible-to-pin-down referent, with the meanings and cultural conceptions of new media and "digital culture", multifarious and elusive' (2014: 11). Yet despite its diffuse nature the digital's cardinal trait is 'the ideal of a networked, collective intelligence' (ibid: 62). Scott contends that digital connectedness has become such a ubiquitous feature of material reality that 'the spaces between us have collapsed [and] in visual terms...we're crawling

all over each other' (2015: 41). If we consider the social dimension of libraries in a digital context the live acts that occur in them enter into a tangled nexus of knowledge construction, manifesting as the access and interpretation of documents.

Michael Buckland argues that the knowledge generated by embodied experience, which naturally includes performance, is 'personal, subjective, and conceptual' and therefore must be 'expressed, described or represented in some physical way' to be communicated (1991: 355). The paradigm of the library as part of an expansive communication network necessitates scrutiny in order for us to consider how documents enable past performances to enter into a distributed mode of knowledge production and construction. Moreover, the paradigm also enables a library collection to become a means of stretching the lifespan of a performance beyond its original live manifestation. This reading of libraries negates a definition of live performance expressed as an art form immune to documenting practices:

[O]ne of the deepest challenges of writing about performance is that the object of one's mediation, the performance itself, disappears. In this sense, performance theory and criticism are instances of writing history... [W]hat one preserves is an illustrated corpse, a pop-up anatomical drawing that stands in for the thing one most wants to save, the embodied performance (Phelan 1997: 3).

Phelan's vociferous objection at attempts to preserve theatre and performance is an instructive example of how one might cite libraries as the antithesis of embodiment. The 'bodily co-presence' between performers and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32) becomes in Phelan's argument the counterpoint to its translation into text-based documents. Fischer-Lichte's observation that, for scholars like Phelan, 'live performance seems to carry remnants of an "authentic" culture' (ibid) illustrates the value Phelan places in

the live medium's resonances with death:

The enactment of invocation and disappearance undertaken by performance and theatre is precisely the drama of corporeality itself. At once a consolidated fleshy form and an eroding, decomposing formlessness, the body beckons us and resists our attempts to remake it (Phelan 1997: 4).

In the schema of 'disappearance' text is part of a system of representations that distance those who were not present at the original performance from the now vanished body. The contention that writing about theatre and performance only functions as a means of preserving the past event does not sufficiently address how the meaning of text is subject to multiple contingencies in its interpretation. Post structuralism teaches us that no text possesses an unalterable or incontrovertible meaning. Ascribing a function to a text based on the intention of the author, such as a critic or historian, limits its ability to play an active part in reality. Barthes's statement that text in the postmodern context is 'made and read in such a way that at all levels the author is absent' (1977: 145) is indicative of its unfixity in terms of the meaning it conveys to the reader. The meaning of a text is 'continually moving along on a chain of signifiers' and changes when it is read (Sarup 1993: 33). The reproducibility of a document does not arrest its potential meanings; organizing documents pertaining to the past event into a library cataloguing system vastly increases the amount of meanings the original performance can yield through its public accessibility. In the schema of the library, live acts and their translation into text are generative iterations of knowledge production.

Rebecca Schneider's (2011) and Claire Bishop's (2012) research provides valuable insights into how live performance can function as part of a distributed series of interpretive acts centred on significant historical events. The Storming of the Winter Palace (1920) was a celebratory event re-enacting

one of the most famous episodes of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. The intense theatricality of the spectacle created a 'screen memory' of the episode, 'improving the original events and allowing a secondary incident [the re-enactment] in the Revolution to play a leading part in the collective imaginary' (Bishop 2012: 59). Re-enactments like The Storming of the Winter Palace correspond to Briet's function of a document by acting as transmitters of knowledge in a publically accessible format. If the length of the transmission is confined to the temporality of an embodied act, the source of its transmission, then

being housed always in the live, 'body-to-body transmission' disappears, is lost, and thus is no transmission at all. Obviously, the language of disappearance here is culturally myopic. Here, performance is given to be as antithetical to memory as it is to the archive (Schneider 2011: 99).

The transmission Schneider mentions is a type of knowledge that exists as memories of utterances and gestures, but it is also present in the artefacts performances may produce (scripts, costume, stage set, etc.). These materials are not consigned to archives in order to formalise past performances into a homogenous, reproducible form; their existence is testament to the live event's capacity to transmit knowledge outside of its original manifestation through the acts of interpretation the remains engender. The archivist's, and indeed the librarian's work, aids in the transformation of the knowledge past performances transmit in order that it may be used in the future by 'put[ting] this record in the hands of those who would use it' (Lerner 1999: 211).

Kantor's manifestos are a key part of his legacy; as an artist, director, painter and performer he constantly experimented with unorthodox approaches to art-making. He rigorously reflected on his experimentations in essays such as The Autonomous Theatre (1956/63), The Informel Theatre (1961), The Zero Theatre

(1963), Emballages (1957-65), Theatre of Death (1975), Reality of The Lowest Rank (1980), Memory (1988) and Silent Night (Cricotage) (1990). Whilst the manifestos provide insights into Kantor's philosophy of art and theatre, Noel Witts (2010) emphasises that they do not in and of themselves constitute an explicit methodological corpus that can be applied in the studio verbatim. Witts suggests that the lack of a comprehensive methodology or practical workbooks meant Kantor 'never considered that he had pioneered or originated a way of creating theatre which could be passed on' (Witts 2010: 28). Whilst it is true the manifestos leave the reader with poetic metaphors with no overarching context to bring the assorted elements together, it does not follow that Kantor believed his theatrical principles could not be transmitted to future generations. Instead, Kantor anticipated that artists must discover their own methodology by using the metaphors as a springboard for experimentation.

The artists from Cricot2 Teresa Welminska and Andrzej Welminski regularly direct performances and workshops based on the principles initiated by Kantor at Rose Bruford College. As actors who worked with Kantor for many years, they have maintained his legacy by continuing to experiment with his approaches to performance-making. The metamorphic nature of memory means the Welminski's experience of working with Kantor is not preserved like an artefact in a museum but is an active, applied knowledge that allows them to undertake experimental approaches to performance-making.

Alongside the manifestos, other significant documents pertaining to Kantor include Michal Kobialka's A Journey Through Other Spaces (1993) and Further On, Nothing (2009); filmed performances of The Dead Class (1976), Wielopole, Wielopole (1984), Let the Artists Die (1986), I Shall Never Return (1989), Today Is My Birthday (1991), Rehearsals, Only Rehearsals (1992); and the documentaries The Theatre of Tadeusz Kantor (1991) and Kantor (1985). Interpreting these documents will always generate different performances owing to their

variations in form and content. The performances, in turn, allow the principles that govern them to be responsive to the conditions they are practiced in. The documents and the Welminski's teaching enable the knowledge Kantor's performances transmitted to have a manifestation in contemporary reality and in the future. The specific approaches to the ways the knowledge transmission is enacted are of critical importance in determining how Kantor's legacy is perceived and experienced by contemporary audiences.

Unfixing Meaning

The notion of change, exploration, experimentation with new territories and moving into new unknown and unfamiliar spheres was key to the *Cricot2* creative process. The many bags, backpacks and suitcases present in much of Kantor's theatre symbolise the artist's endless search for their place in life; Kantor considered constant pilgrimage to be part of the artist's condition. One of the most important principles for *Cricot2*'s approach to theatre-making is an investigation into the conditionality of a particular object as a way of determining the actor's actions and the events onstage. Kantor argued that the object was seen as 'a MEDIUM through which passes a strong feeling of DEATH and the condition of DEAD. A model for the Live ACTOR' (in Kobialka 2009: 236). In *Cricot2* theatre, found objects – influenced by the Duchampian tradition – act as readymade devices. Kantor named the types of objects he used as 'poor' to describe his process of subverting an object's intended functionality in order to lay bare its inner-life: 'The condition of being "poor" disclosed the object's deeply hidden objectiveness. Bereft of externalities, the object revealed its "essence", its "primordial function"' (Kantor 1993: 74). Objects have an equal importance with living actors in Kantor's theatre. The optimal level of symbiosis between them allows objects to take dominant, authoritarian and leadership roles, where 'the substance of the performance [is] created by the "inner life" of the OBJECT, by its properties, destiny and imaginative scope' but 'without an actor, the object [is] a lifeless wreck'.

(Kantor 1990: 133). Objects dictate onstage spatial arrangements and the composition of actors' physical scores; both the actor and the object have the same degree of agency and are treated as dramaturgical material. The demand for both components to co-exist as equals led to the development of Kantor's concept of the bio-object: 'Bio-objects were not props...[or] part of the scenery where acting takes place. They become inseparable from the actors. They radiated their own autonomous "life"' (Kantor 1990: 132). The ontological status of the objects is to exist in a 'state of unrest' (Kobialka 2016). This quality of 'unrest' was central to Kantor's artistic philosophy. In his lecture Tadeusz Kantor Is Here – A Journey Through Memory Spaces Kobialka reflected on his meeting with Kantor in 1985:

At that moment, at the age of seventy, Kantor...abandoned many of his concepts and ideas about theatre to start thinking about something new... I remember what intrigued me – a young, impressionable undergraduate student – how can you at that age abandon what you have been doing for such a long time and start something completely new?

This 'relentless' search was not the sign of an unordered mind but stemmed from Kantor's desire to 'unfix meaning' in theatre:

In one of his essays he says theatre is an activity that takes place where everything is pushed to its final limits where all the words and concepts lose their meaning and right to exist and where you begin to think of them anew...Language is a mode of thinking that is always responding to contingencies of historical pressures and contingencies or imminencies of time and space...Even though certain ideas and words remain the same, they keep changing...meaning at various different stages of the practice (Kobialka 2016).

If Kantor had written a transportable methodology this would run the risk of future generations replicating or re-enacting his theatre rather than creating work in response to present political, social and cultural realities. The unfixed nature of Kantor's work is present in both his theories of theatre and his approach to directing. As Wieslaw Borowski discusses in Tadeusz Kantor (1982) Cricot2 performances were always in flux; the dramaturgical fabric was exposed to shifting and changeable stimulations provided by the director or his collaborators. This quality of unfixity is also present in the conception of Kantor's archive.

The former director of Cricoteka Krzysztof Plesniarowicz explains that the name Cricoteka comes from the merging of 'cricot', which when read backwards in Polish spells 'this circus', and 'teka', referring to the ancient Greek term 'theke', meaning a place to hide (in Kaucz and Zarzecka 2015: 19-21). In Polish, 'teka' means the collection of archived documents and a collection or package of folders. 'Teka – Place to Hide' relates to the concept of 'emballage', a French word describing the use of materials in an action of rapid packaging or wrapping. Kantor defined emballage in terms of preservation and shelter, the action of wanting 'to hide something deeply' (Kobialka in Kantor 1993: 81). As Plesniarowicz underlines, linking an archive with a circus makes its function ambiguous, but this ambiguity alludes to an opposition that is consistent in Kantor's artistic practices (establishing the sacrum through the profane, elevation through humiliation, expressing life by recalling death).

Kantor's notion of an object possessing an inner-life troubles the dichotomy between the transience of the live medium with the durability of its translation into documents. In Kantor's theatre, the radiance of poor objects does not wither and die the moment it leaves the stage but exists as a potential force in future performances and in future research. If we link the live medium with a notion of vitality akin to living, transient experience, it can be said poor objects

are infused with the capacity to participate in multiple performances by being adaptive to specific contexts and treatments upon them. The poor object's durable form – a vital quality of its conditionality – enables its inclusion within the knowledge construction practiced in libraries. A library collection can therefore act as a catalyst for historical discourse and, indeed, theatre-making.

Embodying the Transmission

Kantor's theories and approach to directing have been taught at Rose Bruford as practice-led modules since the early 2000s as part of the BA (Hons) European Theatre Arts degree (ETA). Final year students have two separate taught modules focused on Kantor's legacy: European Theatre Research I and Devising Project: Alternative Dramaturgy, both of which are led by Anna Makrzanowska. Anna did not work with Kantor directly, but has studied his practice since 1997, seven years after his death. Her engagement with Kantor's practice is from the perspective of the post-communist generation in Poland. Anna's interpretation of Kantor's oeuvre is therefore imbricated within the contemporary socio-political conditions of the art world.

The performers with whom Anna and the Welminskis work with at Rose Bruford thus enter into a mode of practice that stretches back over half a century. It can be said that the performances they create and the knowledge they gain over the course of their studies is an instance of Kantor's legacy in action. This is not accomplished by re-enacting past performances or replicating the exact methods of devising that Kantor initiated; each piece the students devise exemplifies an artistic response to contemporary knowledge of Kantor's theories and practice. Like Derrida's spectre (2006), Kantor's writings on theatre haunt all of the performances the RBC student's devise. The unfixity of Rose Bruford's library collection is made manifest when the

student's practical experience of Kantor's work, transmitted by Anna and the Welminskis, informs how they interpret information pertaining to Kantor that the documents listed above transmit.

[[figure 1]] [[figure 2]]

The Live Archive acted as means of challenging Kantor's conception of the library's rigidity by demonstrating how all knowledge, both embodied and documented, exists in a state of unfixity. A group of alumni [[note 1]] were invited to come back to Rose Bruford to re-perform the characters they had played during their studies of Kantor. Joseph and Anna asked the actors to bring fragments of their characters into the studio in order to activate their memories of the original pieces. [[note 2]] These fragments included objects, costumes and musical instruments from the shows, or any object that resembled the originals. The performance was 'poor' in a Kantorian sense because the remains of the pieces were stripped of their original function.

At the start of the one-day rehearsal the actors assembled in one of the RBC studios and placed their objects in a pile on the floor. Each actor was asked to explain the significance of their object and what memories it triggered for them. These triggers were not intended to act as mnemonic aids but instead provoked imaginative resonances for the other actors to work from. The process was focused on how elements from distinct yet aesthetically and thematically linked shows can collide and interweave to produce live acts that give a performative form to the transformational process knowledge undergoes in libraries.

After sharing their memories of the show they had performed in and the significance of their object(s), the group sang songs used in the past rehearsal processes and in the final performances. They were then instructed to focus internally on a fragment they felt was missing from their character –

this could have been a piece of costume or another actor – and use the songs as a way of expressing this absence. Working alone each actor played with the songs’ vocal rhythms and melodies as they moved about the space using the songs, their memories and objects as catalysts to imbue their original characters with new qualities and attributes. Anna and Joseph directed the group to think of these absent fragments as traces that needed to be interacted with in order to be transmitted in the context of [The Live Archive](#).

[[figure 3]] [[figure 4]]

[The Live Archive](#) was performed at various nodes by four sub-groups at staggered times across the Rose Bruford campus. At each of these nodes a film played on plasma screens. The footage was taken from past devised shows and edited into a collage of sounds, images and voices. The aesthetic choices of the film were greatly inspired by Blast Theory’s interactive installation [Jog Shuttler](#) (2013). The company edited some of the vast video footage they had amassed over the years and looped it into fifteen-minute clips. The audience was invited to select from sixty videocassettes to play in any order or combination they chose. The company accurately describes this process as a ‘re-purpos[ing]’ of material because it was not produced with the intention of being used to create new artwork (Blast Theory 2016). Likewise, the films we worked with for [The Live Archive](#) were originally produced either for marketing purposes or as a record. The editing and mixing of the footage created a new artwork that was both distinct from the originals and yet remained inextricably linked to them. When Joseph edited the footage he was directed by nothing more than the desire to create a visual composition of sequences by juxtaposing images and sounds.

In one section from [Traumaticon](#) (2011) two characters box in the middle of the restaurant. In the original version the action is rushed and harried in keeping with the atmosphere of a real boxing match. By slowing the film and the audio

down the scene acquired a quality of incompleteness resonant of the fragmentary nature of memory. The original scene was metamorphosed even further by overlaying a photograph of a monster from Against Nothingness (2014) over the film, creating the space for the audience to attach new meanings and significances to the remains of the originals.

One of the studios acted as a base for the sub-groups to return to after they had finished their score. The spectators were allowed to enter the studio at any point during the 101 minutes long duration (the duration's time was chosen specifically to mark Kantor's 101st Birthday). The studio was used as a space to exhibit fragments of Kantor's manifestos, which the actors directed the audience to write a response to (see below).

[[figure 5]]

This component of the installation acted as means of expressing the active, live nature of accessing Kantor's legacy on the intellectual and physical levels. Placing the text inside the performance was an invitation to consider how library documents interact with the activities in a drama studio.

To express the library's active role in the formation of a living legacy, the final part of the installation was performed in Rose Bruford's library. All of the actors gathered the audience's responses and scattered them throughout the space. Placing materials borne out of a live event inside the library acted as a way to perform the continuum of the live to the documented and back to the live. The Live Archive gave a form to the metamorphic presence of the past – Tadeusz Kantor's theatre – that exists at Rose Bruford in memory and in documents.

[[figure 6]]

Expanding the Transmission Online

The next phase of the Kantor Is Here project is the creation of the DECODER website: Digital Entry and Connections_Old Dramaturgical Experiences Revisited. DECODER has two primary functions: as a repository of documents pertaining to theoretical and practical applications of Kantor's work, and as a virtual meeting space to facilitate knowledge exchange amongst artists, thinkers and scholars working in the fields of performance, fine art, film and music.

Whilst it is tempting in the context of this article to describe DECODER as a new form of library, it would not only be an inaccurate description but more importantly would unjustly diminish the role librarians' play in our digital culture. Discussion concerning the effect the web and digital technologies have had and will have on the library profession is sometimes couched in terms of decline and retreat, an argument that might be permissible if the librarian only acted as a guardian of knowledge. Librarians today – especially in universities – are responsible for teaching library users how to source and retrieve information, meaning that they 'are passing on to their users some of what were traditionally regarded as their own unique professional skills' (Feather 2013: 186). As the levels of information literacy increase the function of libraries and librarians will likely change by enabling users to strengthen their degree of participation in a wider networked society. A performance practice underpinned by the principles of knowledge production through social and networked dialogues that a library collection holds can give a form and shape to these intangible connections, and in so doing expand the methods of knowledge production.

The Live Archive was an experiment into how a performance could constitute a form of participation in a distributed network of social exchanges. Whilst the installation successfully re-purposed the material the past Kantor performances had produced, it needed to form part of an ongoing

performance process to continue the transmission. The pieces of text spectators created in response to the extracts from the manifestos symbolise how a performance can be designed to produce material through the socialised interactions libraries facilitate. These texts will be digitised and uploaded to DECODER.

Performance practitioners can make the construction of knowledge a live system by designing a continuum of responses to a subject through social systems of interaction. These systems can produce documents and embodied acts to interpret the present state of knowledge available in the public sphere. As the library demonstrates, both as a physical space and as a concept, this latter condition is vital to sustain the transmission

Endnotes

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2. Pages from the Book (2012), The Portrait Firm (2013), Against Nothingness (2014) and Today Is My 100th Birthday (2015).

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