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Stephen Bottoms , Aaron Franks & Paula Kramer

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Editorial: On Ecology

STEPHEN BOTTOMS, AARON FRANKS & PAULA KRAMER

HOW DO WE LIVE ON EARTH?

That was the animating question in our call for papers for this issue of *Performance Research*. It's a play on words, certainly, but with hindsight the more familiar phrasing might also have been more forceful: 'How on earth do we live?' At a time when global events and planning are haunted by problems as vast and 'wicked' as potentially catastrophic climate change, exponential population expansion, threatened food and energy supplies and so forth, the basic challenge of living within the planet's means is (or should be) a daily concern (Hulme 2009: xxi–ii). But what might performance studies have to offer in response to such overwhelming concerns? That humbling question provides the absurdly wide remit for the contents of this edition.

There was, to be sure, a somewhat tighter agenda in mind when the three of us first met. 'On Ecology' extends, in part, from our participation in the 2010–11 research network project, 'Reflecting on Environmental Change through Site-Based Performance'. This title was indicative both of the umbrella concerns of the funding body (the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council had initiated a programme of networks under the heading 'Researching Environmental Change') and also of our own key, conceptual challenges as researcher-practitioners. Could site-based performance, which frames and highlights the environments in which it takes place, be used as a means to explore specifically 'environmental' questions? Could the impact of our global carbon footprint, for example, be conceived of afresh through the lens of (literal?) footprints left in a particular

site? Three contrasting locations were chosen for the network's meetings in order to focus these deliberations. During the course of the project, however, we began to suspect that the question itself might have been premature. Did it perhaps assume a certain instrumental purpose for performance (humans doing stuff to alert each other to human impacts) but without really stopping to ask the site what it had to say about things? This is not to deny the fundamental importance of reconsidering our behaviours as they impact on our surroundings, but is there also a conceptual log jam in that very differentiation between 'us' and 'the rest of it' (how do we live on *earth*?).


In their lead article for their recent, 'Environmentalism'-themed edition of *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Dee Heddon and Sally Mackey – two key members of our group – track in detail some of the network's evolving thinking. They also provide an excellent bibliographic resource and a persuasive case for their titular use of that particular 'ism' within the context of *RiDE*. Our own choice here of the word 'Ecology', however, reflects an emergent emphasis in this *Performance Research* edition on how materiality and space are always co-implicated in making beings, things and places. In contrast, definitions of environment refer to 'surroundings', or 'external conditions', implicitly reaffirming humans as the centre of the conceptual equation. 'Environmental theatre' and site-based performance practices have sometimes framed their given surroundings as the scenic backdrop to an anthropocentric drama. Ecology, on the other hand, is by definition concerned with relationality, with networks of interdependence.

In ecological terms, the human is not central but simply a constituent element. Dependent for our very survival on water, weather, oxygen, animals, vegetables, minerals and each other, we need to think in terms of responsibility but also of humility.

Let's zoom-in for a moment to a soggy strip of land overlooking a saltwater loch in the West of Scotland. It's February 2011, and the network's members have converged at the Cove Park artists' retreat, on the banks of Loch Long. Surrounded by a nature reserve, this site was ostensibly the 'wildest' of the three we had chosen for the network meetings (as compared with central London and the Fountains Abbey world heritage site in North Yorkshire). In fact, the ground we were standing on had once been a US military base and weapons dump, and the inhabitants of the loch itself include the UK's Vanguard-class nuclear submarines, prowling between the nearby naval bases at Faslane and Coulport. These geopolitical connections were foregrounded in the solo site responses developed by some of our colleagues. But the specific, material substance of the site itself was equally attended to. Paula, for example, spent time lying face down in dirt and wet leaves, beneath the horizontal offshoot of a tree trunk directly above her, alongside a rushing, downhill stream. Her starting point was 'being-not-being a tree', and in the emergent interplay of movement and stillness, alongside leaves, rain, tree-trunk, river, sticks, she was seeking a 'non-assuming materiality' and 'open stability'. What this meant in relation to notions of 'environmental change' she both thought about and chose to ignore. There might be, she surmised, a specificity of understanding, timing and physical expression emerging from a mover's body that directly engages with the changing materiality of one's surroundings – acknowledging, but not necessarily beginning with, its meaning, history or narrative. Paula's sense was that a thing, a site, a tree has something to offer that can be received and worked *with*. Rather than directing our actions and creative making in this world, with 'head above water' as it were, we can perhaps

become more fully implicated and affected by also practicing receptivity, immersion and playfulness (because how directly can one engage with a tree, really?) in our living, dancing and being within ecology.

Just downstream from Paula, Steve was pursuing a more representational, metaphorical line of thinking, in negotiating the relationship between the site's residential pods (former transport containers, refashioned as white-walled living spaces) and their surroundings. Large picture windows direct the residing artist's gaze towards the loch and mountains beyond – as if the 'landscape' is being presented at a safe distance for a reflective but separate, elevated consciousness. Yet to reach these pods, one has to interact physically with the landscape, by walking downhill from the site's meeting hall and car park and crossing a bridge over a marshy patch of land where a network of small, tributary streams weave themselves together on their way down to the loch. With the sloping green hillside thoroughly spongy underfoot from winter rain, Steve was struck by a precarious sense of standing on land composed in large part of moving water – of water as an active, dynamic agent in the landscape. In his performance response, with spectators standing on the bridge above, he picked his way down into the marshy delta area, before attempting to walk (and jump) a lattice-work of crossings over the various streams. Heavy overnight rain had made the ground even wetter and more slippery than anticipated, but he eventually succeeded in making his way across this waterscape and back uphill to the other side of the bridge. Here, he noticed that the gravel path he was about to step back onto was itself being cut into by a fresh network of rainwater rivulets – as if in miniaturized representation of the terrain he had just negotiated. It hit him that, on a much larger scale, the bar of land we were standing on – the Rosneath Peninsula – had also been carved out by the movement of water, from above and around. Pointing out that network of rivulets in the path to his observers, he felt at once very big and microscopically small.



As these performance experiences confirmed for us, there is no fixed outside ('the rest of it') to human experience, no reverse face to our place-in-the-world – only a perceptual outside. As Elizabeth Grosz states, 'the outside is the transmutability of the inside' (2001: 66). In terms of making – and performing – relations, can we reverse that and say that the inside is also the transmutability of the outside? Performance can broach the question of an inside/outside boundary in many ways, but whether we begin with the interiority of subjecthood or the exteriority of relations and 'being-in-the-world', we are already in the middle, and we are already implicated. It is as if the ubiquity and enormity of the relations we find ourselves in has become, to borrow a tired phrase, 'the new normal'. So perhaps to be ecological is to be both enormous and already on the inside, of ourselves and other beings. In etymological terms, as Lavery and Whitehead point out in their essay, ecology is *the study of household, habitat or dwelling place* (from the Greek *oikos*): it is the pain and blessing of our time that we know so much, that the household we might write of, perform about and in, can be so capacious (see Morton 2010: 36).

Aaron wasn't present at Cove Park, for reasons relating to his own household. At that time his life, and work, was a series of interiors, strewn equally with fantastic things (and people) and piles of strange crap. In shambling community halls, the cluttered office of a writing-up doctoral student, in the spare bedroom of friends that is also their storeroom, he found himself proximal to, and 'inside/outside', a thousand and ten things at all times. He was learning that you must be playful in order to stand seeing and being with so much. For *what may be ecological* can be traced, moved with and thought about in the city as in the woods, in the body as in the mind, across a river and within it, at home and in outer space. Here in 'On Ecology' it is engaged with through the body, through text, through creative practice, through imagery. And what we as editors perceive in the diversity of this grand mix is a welcomed leaning towards dealing with things and

materiality, a desire to touch, turn over, dig in, step on and think about as *directly* as possible, rather than considering only (but rather also) the meaning or representational force of things and experiences.

Inspired by our network experiences, we sent out our 'call for papers' as a message in a bottle and sat waiting to see what would wash up on the beach in response. Some of what came in, written by our network colleagues (Dewsbury, Heim, Kershaw, Nicholson and of course ourselves) reflected aspects of the process we had been through. Other submissions came, as it were, from right out of left field. Amid the chaotic diversity of this *littoral zone*, the three of us have cobbled this issue together, sometimes with water pouring in from all sides, sometimes trying not to get our feet wet. Coming from different disciplines (theatre, dance, geography) and all at different ages or stages of our careers, we conducted a three-way conversation about the development of the contents herein, grounded at each turn in the submissions the call had prompted. What we have been able to include in this issue reflects, we hope, a broad variety of approaches and insights into performance practices that take on and deal with the stuff of earth as something *alive*. Yet this aliveness spans dead trees, also called snags (Thomson), bings of burnt oil shale (Bayly), polluted water (Vasuvadan) and the wrong brand of coffee (Franks); as much as alien species in a glasshouse (Stalpaert and Verdoodt), volcanoes that dictate human flight patterns over a meadow meandering path (Kershaw), and pollen that shimmers as art installation (Battista). There is site-specificity aplenty here, for it turns out that being both enormous and intimate doesn't erase places and things into a levelled-out limbo: if anything, the practice-based engagements with places and things in this issue foreground the distinctiveness of each. These practices, which include print-making, climbing, dance, videography, touching, drawing, smelling, reading, and even getting married (in the case of Stephens and Sprinkle), attempt both to trace and sensitize us to specific

changes – not just to ‘environmental change’ as a general condition. And with change comes the (essentially ethical) impulse to learn – or to at least exercise the best of our curiosity amid the ‘mesh’ (Morton 2010: 28–38).

We have arranged the contents of this edition into three cycles of six pieces (or as Allan Kaprow might have had it, *18 Happenings in 3 Parts*). Each cycle opens with an article (Kershaw, Kubiak, Nicholson) that maps out some key concerns for the region to be traversed, and closes with a set of artist’s pages (Donald, Brown and Irvine, Liberate Tate). In between these bookends we have placed a mix of pieces considering specific practices and practitioners, punctuated by provocative, ‘joker’ articles, which shake things up theoretically (Bayly, Dewsbury, Heim). These structural games are, of course, to a large degree playfully arbitrary, as indeed are the cycles’ sub-headings: ‘Falling’, ‘Relating’ and ‘Learning’ all represent eco-systems that seem constantly to migrate into each other’s territory (as eco-systems tend to). There are knots of convergence within these groupings, but there are also rhizomatic off-shoots that tangle together the urban and rural, the physical and conceptual, the healthful and the toxic.

Some vistas here involve grander theoretical sweeps (indeed, they may be knowingly ‘ridiculous’ in their ambition); others offer a microscopic lens on the intimate or everyday. None of them positions theory and practice as separate, and all have excited, moved, challenged and enlightened us as we were reading and discussing, considering and wondering. May you be equally enticed by the material you find, and may this issue be used, leafed through, read from, taken apart, taken along and left behind; may it be good company and leave its traces, as we all continue to deal with the stuff of this world.

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