

*Performing the Archive: Reflections from an  
Archive-aware performance process*

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**Bold text in square parentheses refers to slides of digital photographs that accompanied the paper's delivery at Palatine's *Archiving the Future* Conference on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2010 at Stratford Circus, London, thus [S1].**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

The title of this paper is *A Performing Archive: Reflections on an Archive-aware performance process*, but it might equally be called *Semionauts, Ghosts and the uncertain weight of the archive*.

In it I will:

- (i) Briefly trace *my* Undergraduate experience and use of the archive as a site of enquiry
- (ii) Explore two aspects of Hoxton Hall: the site of the physical archive ELTA has part-digitised, and a final year Undergraduate site-specific performance process informed by these archives
- (iii) And reflect on the process that led to archive-aware student performances at Hoxton Hall, in dialogue with examples of its digital documentation.

I should add that my reflections on the process are as much governed by what I learnt from the students' process as what they learnt from me. *Their* use of the archives easily outshone *my* Undergraduate attempts.

(i)

In 1997, while an Undergraduate at Dartington College of Arts I spent a term-long Module called *Public Project 1* working in the Estate's High Cross House, which holds Dartington's archives of Arts and Education. Derrida's *Archive Fever* had been recently published and a government was in the wings that wouldn't depend on a coalition. Both seem a long time ago. I got lost in the archive, more lost in Derrida; read boxes of correspondence detailing the closure of Dartington School a decade earlier, watched hypnotic, deteriorating video footage of the School made in 1980 by students from Plymouth University; researched Dartington's refugees from 1930s Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. I found a name –Julius Lukasiewicz– and followed its halting trail through the archive until the name stopped appearing. Lack of time meant I couldn't pursue the name beyond High Cross House, and the end of term installation left me with the responsibility of working with *–using–* a name and a life I knew little about. Finding a cold war map of European airspace in a Totnes charity shop, its red lines marking prohibited Eastern European territory, I cut Poland from the map and printed Julius Lukasiewicz's name by his town of birth, but so small it could only be read with a lens attached to the framed map. This responsibility for using another's name, peeling it off one document and laying it down on another, haunted me, with the probable result that the viewer knew *less* about Julius Lukasiewicz, not more.

I can't remember the Tutorial input and guidance I received during the process, and the cutting-edge word processors I used at the time (with their six line displays and floppy disks) have long since failed, taking my early digital forays with them. I know the archivist at High Cross House was accommodating and patient and had structured the archive efficiently, but looking back it feels like I was left to construct my own methodology, with frustrating results.

In *Archive Fever* Derrida mentions the “unknowable weight”<sup>1</sup> of the concept of the archive. Imperial or metric: the weight of an object. But allowing the homophone to double as an unknowable wait, an indeterminate pause, or gap, between events might also be useful here. It’s this unknowable weight of what it means to use an archive, full of gaps where there’s room for more weight to be, that I find challenging, because its hanging questions are: “How much does a name, a fact, weigh?”, and, “How long are you ready to wait before you get to know how to use it?”.

If Dartington’s archive had been digitised in 1997 my halting search for the trail of Julius Lukasiewicz’s name could have taken minutes, not hours. I wouldn’t have had to *wait*, but I *would* have missed the indentations of a typewriter on a page, the nearly perforated curve at the foot of the letter J each time his name appeared in letters to the Home Office, requesting permission to remain. I would have missed the weight of the letter in my hand. Strangely, though, I often feel *more* responsibility towards the digital version, the digital name, because it’s weightless, out there in symbolic space where I can’t really get to it.

Pausing for a moment the task of weighing an individual name to recall Derrida’s initial definition of the archive’s heritage as “A house, a domicile or address”<sup>2</sup>, I found another inkling of my struggle with it. The archive as a lost and perfect home of possibility, full of results that don’t speak for themselves, results that need tending, raising, hearing. Results that require assistance to perform. Assistance in crossing significant thresholds and gaps: from monitor screen to stage, object to body, digital space to physical place. From lost time to momentary plenitude. If the archive is, then, a home for unknowable

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida trans. Eric Prenowitz *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p29

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever* p2

weight, and an unknowable number of signs, but a home that must be left, what must we do there to get away?

Nicolas Bourriaud's *Postproduction* provides the figure of the "Semionaut"<sup>3</sup> as a key to this trope of leaving home. Bourriaud writes "Semionauts [...] produce original pathways through signs"<sup>4</sup>. The gaps in Dartington's archive, like those at Hoxton Hall ELTA has no choice but to replicate, *can* be confronted, rescued, bridged. Rather than turn away from the unknowable weight of these missing bodies the archive hints at, I'm interested in a dialogue with it, a search for the form that includes a dialectic of production whose equation might run *found fact+interpretation in chosen space=x*. I'm still working on the *x*.

As archivists, performers, teachers, researchers and students we're used to finding modes of judging the joins, hinges and hyphens between knowledge and interpretation, but it might be useful to look briefly to the semionaut's relative, the astronaut. To be an astronaut is to experience one's own weightlessness, to be in space, out of physical reach of facts and names below, to look down on a grand archive of atmosphere, on all that storage hidden by distance. Astronauts don't ignore their weightlessness (their zero gravity), they play with it, conduct experiments, engage with the absence of their own weight. Being weightless is to be present at one's own bodily absence, to be bodily absent in one's own presence, which is a feeling the archive often leaves me with.

Bourriaud again: "The 'semionaut' imagines the links, the likely relations between disparate sites [...] producing new cartographies of knowledge"<sup>5</sup>. I'll move on to one of these cartographies in a moment – at Hoxton Hall– but it's the necessity of this semionautical mapmaking

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud trans. Jeanine Herman *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2005) p18

<sup>4</sup> Bourriaud, *Postproduction* Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, *Postproduction* Ibid

combined with radical uncertainty over the weight of the map's underlying territorial signs that define one half of *my* relationship with the archive.

The other half of that relationship lies in the *return* of information, evidence of mapmaking, *to* the archive. At Hoxton Hall I can access –and add to– the physical archive. Undergraduate performances I supervise there inevitably produce documentation, and this often assumes digital form –CDs (audio, photographic, video), as well as scripts and physical objects: small props. Once these are collected they are labelled, boxed and placed in the archive. Unlocking the archive's cage and carrying the box over its threshold I'm aware of the weight of this return, the gift it might resemble, but relaxed about how future cartographers might choose to navigate its contents. (Compare the box's weight to the 2GB card that provides memory for my Sony DSC-H20 digital camera: the card weighs three grams and can store 409 7MB photographs. It weighs exactly the same 'full' as it does 'empty'.)

Perhaps this compensating lack of concern on *adding* to the archive (hence becoming a future semionaut's sign) finds expression in Bourriaud's definition of the work as “No longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributors”<sup>6</sup>. Comfort in belonging to a domiciled genealogy of (mostly dead) strangers, and satisfaction in providing evidence of how one of these “simple moments” was constructed, for future archive users.

To summarise, then: I fret about the weight of a name (which is either the greatest or smallest unit of an archive and, possibly, both), and simultaneously relish navigating the apparently empty space between the name and its appearance in performance. To invoke

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<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud, *Postproduction* p19

Derrida again, “the feeling of getting lost while retracing one’s footsteps.”<sup>7</sup>

But I’d still like to ask Julius Lukasiewicz for *his* opinion.

(ii) [S1]

Walk to the top of Hoxton Hall, turn left through the Palmer Room and enter what’s called ‘The Carpet Room’ and you’ll find the archive. Or rather *one* of Hoxton Hall’s two archives, the second of which I’ll come to. Facing you is a cage. Undo the padlock and a space measuring fifteen feet wide by five feet deep is revealed. [S2] Most of this space is occupied by boxes of assorted documents, magic lantern slides, bills, ledgers containing minutes from committees in spidery writing, Temperance Movement collection boxes, surviving playbills and flyers, and crumbling fragments of original stucco, some of which you might be familiar with in its digitised form on ELTA. [S3] A year ago the archive was moved from a room above the main offices (which now houses Hoxton Street Casting) to its present location, and the cage was installed to protect it.

Hoxton Hall is 147 years old, and the surviving weight of its physical archive does not reflect its age. Much is missing, much for a semionaut to navigate. Given that Hoxton Hall only functioned as a Music Hall between 1863 and, at most, 1872, was then vacant for seven years until William Palmer bought it for the Blue Ribbon Army, and survived the Blitz, we should be thankful for the volume that did make it. Antony White, Hoxton Hall’s historian, continues to make

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida *Archive Fever* p69

inroads into what *A Short History of Hoxton Hall* calls its “dark years”<sup>8</sup>, and John Earl’s exhaustive 2006 *Historical Assessment and Conservation Guidelines* is a major study into the building’s use through analysis of its built structure and architectural alterations.

For the last two years I’ve delivered a Third Year Undergraduate Site-Specific performance Module at Hoxton Hall. Hoxton Hall’s partnership with UEL’s Community Arts Practice Degree is likely to result in more term-long residencies there. Aware of the slender weight of surviving archival material, my supervision of this process has developed two unforeseen curatorial objectives: firstly to keep some material ‘in reserve’ for future student use, and secondly to integrate strategies to collect ‘new’ material for deposition in the archive into my Module teaching.

(Hoxton Hall’s second archive lies at the other end of the building, in a disused photographic dark room beneath Hoxton Street. In here are several large boxes full of thousands of photographs. [S4] They’re waiting to be catalogued and identified. Pictures appear to date from the early 1950s onwards, perhaps earlier. [S5] Many are obviously taken in Hoxton Street, some feature bomb damage, and there’s an astonishing set taken in the 1970s, well before Hoxton’s gentrification, replete with pro- and anti-National Front graffiti, long queues outside Anderson’s bakery, and rehearsal shots taken in Hoxton Hall. Perhaps these were developed in the dark room they’re now stored in. Although Hoxton Hall is undergoing a renaissance under the Direction of Hayley White, who has secured significant capital funding for major refurbishment and redevelopment, this second archive deserves wider exposure.) [S6]

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<sup>8</sup> Terence Goodfellow, *A Short History of Hoxton Hall* (London: Hoxton Hall, 1977) p14

In 2008 Hayley offered Community Arts Practice a commission: to research, produce and deliver a “30–45 minute performance/tour of Hoxton Hall”<sup>9</sup> for a public audience. The brief asked the students to “Provide a script with historically accurate facts, stage directions and costume/prop list –so that the performance can be recreated.”<sup>10</sup> The commission’s budget paid for students’ travel costs, their lunch and refreshments, marketing and performance costs.

The Level 3 Site-Specific Module Aims ask students to “Engage with theoretical notions of site, space and place”<sup>11</sup>, and “Employ appropriate research methodologies in order to ‘excavate’ meaning from the site”<sup>12</sup>, both obviously amenable to archive-based enquiry. The Module’s student cohort numbered eight students. Performances were to be delivered over the final two weeks of the Autumn Semester, leaving nine sessions at Hoxton Hall –totalling twenty-seven contact hours– to complete the process.

There are two separate Coursework outcomes for the Module, equally weighted: *Coursework 1* is an individual 2,000 word Project Proposal coupled with a theoretical engagement into one of the following: “‘Reading’ a site –approaches to engagement and archival resourcing [...] ‘Writing’ the site –approaches to documentation and its use in performance”, and “‘Performing’ the site –approaches to practice.”<sup>13</sup> *Coursework 2* comprises “Continuous assessment of devising process and [...] Performance(s).”<sup>14</sup>

Discussing the brief with students, and following initial research in the physical archive and on the Beta version of ELTA, it was felt that

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<sup>9</sup> Hayley White *Performance Brief* September, 2008, p1

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Mark Hunter and Conan Lawrence, *PA3102 Module Guide* (London: University of East London, 2008) p2

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Hunter and Lawrence *PA3102 Module Guide* p3

the extent of the archive's gaps would make the performed *tour* through Hoxton Hall's labyrinth an accurate reflection of process, and allow for greater audience exposure to Hoxton Hall as a multiplicity of sites. Rather than a recreation of scenes whose content they couldn't uncover, and which would have made claims on authenticity the available documentary material couldn't substantiate, students began to develop their own performance model.

My Module Evaluation states, "The performance [...] took place on the penultimate and final Thursdays of the Semester, [...] with matinee and early evening showings. It took the form of a tour [...] with promenade elements [...] being drawn from student research conducted throughout the process. The tour included moments of durational performance, sound installations, and adaptations of historical material drawn from Hoxton Hall archives, local archives, local voices (interviewed and recorded for the installed elements) and wider contexts (the British Music Hall Society, for example)."<sup>15</sup>

My Tutorial input consisted of a four week research phase comprising a solitary lecture, guided intensive investigations into the archive, architecture and immediate surroundings of Hoxton Hall, and close readings of key texts. It ended with students having produced a large amount of site-writing, and initial performance stimuli. Following this phase the eight students began working in pairs (a self-directed choice): one pair concentrated on the script and continuing research, two pairs developed five separate moments of performance between them, with the fourth pair concentrating on technical management, interviews, sound, editing and props. To give you an idea of its complexity six CD players and laptops, as well as two digital Dictaphones were required for the sound effects alone.

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<sup>15</sup> Conan Lawrence *PA3102 Module Evaluation* p1

The second phase of my Tutorial input, following the submission of *Coursework 1*, took on the mentoring role that befits a Third Year Undergraduate group: advising, questioning and reviewing performance enquiries and development, but not directing or controlling the shape of them. I was always careful to stress the process's commission, which the students responded to with varying degrees of ownership.

[S7] The performance model the students developed hinged on a Guide/Narrator who would lead an audience through most of the building, highlighting architectural facts and encountering durational moments of historicised performance at key points and spaces in the journey. The Guide would explicitly foreground the process's interventions, its edits, its play. Her voice acknowledged its responsibility in speaking for missing weight.

Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson's *Theatre/Archaeology* proved the most fruitful text for developing the creative digging the process required of students. Reading –and writing– layers, strata, thresholds: the frayed ribbon of presence that a name or a crumbling brick might yield. I adapted Shanks and Pearson's negative *Past-as-wished-for* to trigger students' emotional links with the site and process, encouraging them to explore gaps in their own histories and memories they'd want to be able to recall. Two of them responded by interviewing and recording Charlie Young and Anne Flack, both of whom had known and used Hoxton Hall since the 1930s.

Lists were made: names, colours of paint, stairs, doors, rooms, owners, builders, job titles (past and present), dates, voices, bombings, smells, furniture, performers and performances, music hall songs, activities (past and present), texts, architectural details, licences and costs. All reflecting what Sifundo Msebele –the

performance's Guide and co-writer- called the "Diverse and splitting"<sup>16</sup> work of accounting for fact, and speaking for lost voices. Or, as she also wrote, "History [is] a fragile thread, if you hold on *too* tight."<sup>17</sup>

Before all this, though, the students discovered Hoxton Hall's inevitable ghost. I say inevitable because I've worked in many theatres over the past twenty-five years and every one of them came with a ghost. I've never *seen* a Theatre ghost, but have definitely resembled one after a particularly long week. Payday in a Theatre is still often announced with the phrase, "The ghost is walking", usually a reflection of the insubstantial weight of the sum involved. To lightly open up a followspot to pick up your target before the cue begins is called "ghosting". Hoxton Hall's ghost is reputedly a young girl who fell to her death from the Gallery while watching her Mother sing on Stage, and handily photographed in 1985 [**HH Ghost**]. This photograph is incidentally interesting in that it appears to show the Hall in 'worship' mode, perhaps for a Quaker meeting. The benches now form audience seating in the lower balcony.

I took some convincing over the ghost theme's inclusion in the performed tour, but it provided a useful trope for the reincarnation of several figures. Another useful link was found in John Earl's *Historical Assessment and Conservation Guidelines* where he writes, "The flank walls of the music hall exhibit [...] interesting peculiarities, on the least visible part of the east flank, a ghost line seems to be a trace of the steeply pitched farmhouse gable that Hoxton Hall was originally built against."<sup>18</sup> This 45 degree ghost line, faint sign of the missing other, Hoxton Hall's own Derridan "spectral response"<sup>19</sup>, clearly visible to the

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<sup>16</sup> Sifundo Msebele and Hilary Williams, *The Sixth Line* script (December, 2008) p8

<sup>17</sup> Sifundo Msebele and Hilary Williams, *The Sixth Line* script, p9

<sup>18</sup> John Earl, *Hoxton Hall Conservation Management Plan*, Volume 1: 'Historical Assessment and Conservation Guidelines' (London: Tim Foster Architects, 2006) p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida *Archive Fever* p62

naked eye once highlighted but which has so far defeated my attempts to photograph it, gave the performed tour its title, *The Sixth Line*. The other five belonged to the senses, which were crossed throughout:

- [S8] Sight: especially dressing room mirrors, where the audience faced themselves as well as the performers
- [S9] Touch: performers and audience inscribing their responses and names on the Art Room windows with chinagraphic pencils
- Sound: Harry Champion's Music Hall favourite *The End of My Old Cigar* looped on a digital recorder, placed inside an old upright piano at the back of the Main Hall; interviews conducted by students with Hoxton Hall users: Charlie Young who took refuge in the air raid shelter beneath the stage; Anne Flack's Blitz narratives; Judith Rockwood's 1980s childhood memories of Hoxton Hall, and Carolyn McBain's ghostly "Don't let them in" playing in a storage cupboard as the audience walked by.
- Smell: Damp in the basement, paint and turps in the Art Room where the interviews were broadcast on concealed CD players; mulled wine for the post-tour conversations.
- [S10] Taste: Apples offered by "19th Century Apple-Wives: they would sell apples to theatre-goers [...] sometimes the apples would be eaten, other times thrown at the performers."<sup>20</sup> [S11] This time they were mostly eaten.

*The Sixth Line* offered quantitative exactitude (all those lists) in lieu of lost form. But the semionaut's impatience with gravity was also balanced with gravitas.

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<sup>20</sup> Msebele and Williams *The Sixth Line* p3

In the photograph you're looking at the audience have been introduced to Hoxton Hall and given a luggage label each. The label bears either a performer's name found in the archive or a resident of Hoxton Street from the 1883 Shoreditch Street Directory. The audience member is asked to wear their given label so they don't get separated from the Guide, an obvious reference to the evacuation of children from wartime London, but also delivering the brief, unsettling experience of the weightlessness of identity. Having been invited onto the stage and offered an apple, which you can see Ananda Breed tucking into, the audience are given titles of events from Hoxton Hall's past to read out, mostly from playbills you can find on ELTA. A light-hearted sequence follows, with Music Hall song titles listed until someone volunteers to sing one. From the moment the audience enter the Main Hall they're unaware they are being videoed from the Technical Gallery (the Hall's highest tier): they are recorded climbing onto the stage one by one. When the tour is complete the audience are led back into the Main Hall and see the video footage of themselves recorded earlier projected onto the red drapes at the back of the stage. More ghosts, more archive.

Later, in the Palmer Room upstairs, the audience are shown the ghost line from the bay window. [S12] Facing it two students perform a cyclical choreography recalling the abrupt change of use Hoxton Hall underwent after William Palmer's 1879 purchase. [S13] In Quaker silence they've centred themselves architecturally in the room, one body forming the apex of two intersecting lines of wool that run to the four corners of the room and held down by needles, while the other traces their fragile outline before exchanging roles. [S14] Olive Yarrow's recollections of Hoxton Hall's Quaker pastimes informed this moment, where knitting features heavily. The audience has to step carefully over the lines to leave the room, in contrast to the ghost line on the wall outside.

Leaving the Palmer Room the audience is led to the Theatre Balcony, the stage and auditorium in blackout. While the Guide recalls Hoxton Hall's original licence allowed an audience of 1,000 a second world war air raid 'all clear' siren sounds loudly over the PA. [S15] Unseen in the blackout both original trapdoors beneath the stage have opened, two performers have emerged to stand in the openings while they are lit from below. [S16] The all clear lasts forty seconds, during which the two performers (called 'War Survivors' in the script<sup>21</sup>) simply move their heads from left to right and back, scanning time. Uplit by powerful PAR 60s they, too, look like ghosts [S17]. There *was* an air raid shelter beneath the stage, Hoxton Street *was* hit in the Blitz, Hoxton Hall *is* a War Survivor, even if much of its archive has not been so lucky. Charlie Young, who used the shelter himself in 1940, was present.

As I hope this brief recollection of an archive-aware performance has demonstrated, the process and outcomes were heteroglossic throughout. The many dialogues that informed its development also crossed lines: student-practitioner, tutor-facilitator, archive, text, audience, interviewee, theory, place. The Guide's playful framing of the performed tour did not disguise the care with which it was constructed, or of the students' awareness that theirs was not a reproduction of already established form, or a revisiting of already existing narratives (a luxury they had to do without), but a narrative concerned with the act of choosing and linking. Or, to return to Bourriaud, "Navigation which itself becomes the subject of artistic practice"<sup>22</sup>. Each object –each digital or analogue proposition of fact–comes with questions: ten or so of these objects is enough for a narrative. What's left is to curate the gaps, find the present register between them.

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<sup>21</sup> Msebele and Williams *The Sixth Line* p9

<sup>22</sup> Bourriaud *Postproduction* p18

*The Sixth Line* was performed four times: twice each on December the 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

(iii)

[S18] *The Sixth Line* fulfilled Hayley White's brief. The performed tour lasted forty minutes, engaged with the Hoxton Hall/ELTA archives, and left behind the documentation that would enable it to be re-performed. [S19] As well as hard copies of the script, technical and stage management requirements, it also produced eighteen CDs of digital material. These include:

- Four extended (unedited) interviews with Hoxton Hall users
- Sound effects (air raid and all clear sirens; footsteps, ambient recordings of Hoxton Hall and Hoxton Street)
- One hundred digital photographs taken during rehearsals and performances
- Two CDs of original Music Hall 78 rpm transfers
- E-copies of all relevant process files.

Completing *The Sixth Line* box, which now resides in the Carpet Room archive at Hoxton Hall, are the unused name-labels and chinagraphic pencils. [S20]

The PDF of the *The Sixth Line* now resides on the Module's *UEL Plus* web-based learning platform, available as a peer learning resource.

Module Feedback from Students indicated that they gained "new insight into researching using archives"<sup>23</sup>, and were stimulated by both the "Site itself and exploration of [its] deep history."<sup>24</sup> Further comments noted that "Hoxton Hall was the perfect place for the

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<sup>23</sup> Conan Lawrence *PA3102 2008 Module Evaluation* p3

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

module to take place”<sup>25</sup>, and that “The product that came out of our work [...] was something to be proud of.”<sup>26</sup>

I have questions for this afternoon’s open space session, questions that arose during this process, and which have informed other Modules and *their* engagements with archives, but I’d like to end this case study with the thought that these digital networks we move information across may not put on weight in the transference, but they *do* soak up our attention, and I’d like to thank you for yours. Thank you.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid