

Rear view mirror: Blogging as a reflective tool for practice as research

Ally: Today I want to highlight the use of online spaces for artists to document, interact with and reflect on the work they make and ask how these spaces can create slippage between artwork and documentation, practice and theory, making and thinking. My paper's themes and content are bound together in this process, I have cut and pasted from blogs and revised the text several times, so the past is now woven into the present, the initial impulse is now an afterthought. It is apt as well that I am absent. My voice is filtered through another, just as a blog is not the work it describes and a map is not the territory. The blog forms the basis of an immediate, mediated reflection on the artistic process through live, online documentation. It is of note that this paper explores the temporality of the live medium through technology, as John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*...

Linford: 'Art when it functions like this becomes a meeting place of the invisible' (Berger 1972)

Ally: I assert that blogs become an active space for Praxis to take place and open a portal onto the practice, a means to make it more visible. This paper provides case studies and comments on the impact of blogs on my subsequent work for a PhD exploring dramaturgy, where a blog enabled an embedded dramaturgy to take place. Fragments of my projects are introduced to highlight the potential of online sites for artists to reflect upon practice and generate new material. This approach resides somewhere between observatory and laboratory, virtual archive and test site. Reflexivity asks for the object and the subject to collide and become one and blogs build pathways through the reflective process, a memory made visible. The problematics of documenting performance have often been noted, from Jacques Derrida...

Linford: 'The theatre is born of its own disappearance' (Derrida 1978).

Ally: To Peggy Phelan...

Linford: 'Performance marks the body itself as loss' (Phelan 1993).

Ally: But I suggest this online space as a vehicle for remembering and reliving actions, reactions and interventions. From a performance in a church hall to the journey of a car over five years to the making of three shows for my Practice as Research PhD. The project blog sits somewhere between the past and the present, the event and the post-event, the process and the product. The use of reflective journals in hard copy form is blending and yielding with image and interactive communication networks of eLearning spaces. I work as an artist and an educator to consider simultaneous sites of production and reflection. I see my art practice and pedagogy as a collaboration, enlivening the process of dialogue and co-production as a method of problematising, creating realisations rather than reaching conclusions. Its materiality exists beyond the limits of the theatre space and the notion of the page has shifted into a new paradigm. The question is no longer what you write but where you write it...

Linford: '*The Long and Winding Road* began on 17 May 2004 when I embarked on a journey in a graffiti covered car from Nottingham to Liverpool. The car was packed with 365 mementoes wrapped up in brown paper and string. The journey lasts until 17 May 2009 when I drive the car into the River Mersey' (Pinchbeck 2004).

Ally: These were the first words from *The Long and Winding Road* – a five-year live art project I undertook between 2004 and 2009. Passengers were invited to join me for a travel sweet as I shared the story of the journey so far via the rear-view mirror. The mementoes in the car were items that belonged to my brother – Robert - who died in Liverpool on 17 May 1998. The packages in the boot represented the metaphorical baggage a personal loss leaves behind. In 2006, I was commissioned by Fierce! to create a one-to-one performance in the car. The car made pit-stops at the Ikon Gallery (Birmingham), the ICA in London and The Bluecoat, Liverpool. I documented *The Long and Winding Road* for 5 years using a blog.

Linford: 'We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future' (McLuhan 1997)

Ally: The blog became the rear-view mirror. This was an online space for mirror-signal-manoevre-style reflections and creative slip-roads. A space where the road behind me constantly foregrounded the road ahead and the past was always present in the future. A space that both driver and passengers could visit, in between pit-stops to reflect on the journey. A space where I could post pictures of footprints left on the roof in Birmingham or a door vandalized in Salford. A space which asked when the documentation becomes the artwork? A space where a sedimentary narrative was composed of layers of research and practice, text and image, cultural theory and popular culture. From MacLuhan to Meatloaf.

Linford: 'Objects in the rear-view mirror may appear closer than they are' (Steinman 1994).

Ally: Blogs are a 'rear view mirror' that enact reflections on the process, enabling what visual artist and Professor Emeritus of sculpture at NTU, John Newling, describes as 'abductive logic' to take place, he describes this as the knowledge acquired after the event, post-liminally. As dramaturg, I keep a blog to remember, reflect on process and collate documentation and feedback on the performance. The blog becomes what theatre-makers Louise Mari and Heather Uprichard describe as:

Linford: 'The memory of what's going on' – (Mari and Uprichard 2006)

Ally: As David Williams suggests, the dramaturg...

Linford: '... acts as an aide-memoire, or archivist of the process, an agent of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, ('go backwards in order to jump forwards') or a reminder of what's forgotten, overlooked, misplaced in the headlong rush forwards; a braking mechanism, proposing *festina lente* ('make haste slowly')' (Williams 2010).

Ally: Acts of Communion For my MA in 2006, I devised a performance with an Amateur Dramatics group in a church hall. The performance explored the acts of communion that took place there; weddings, funerals, christenings and plays. At the time, the blog was the solution to the problem of making visible the process. Representing performance *in absentia*. Now after the event, it becomes a posthumous record of a live event, made more poignant by the fact that one of the members of the drama group passed away. Documentation of something or someone that was once present, the blog becomes an accidental memorial to the event and those in it. It captures a moment in time forever. As Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked...*

Linford: 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance' (Phelan 1993).

Ally: This paper explores an online space as a slow space for reflection, a place for thoughts to gestate. An observatory not a laboratory. Tracing the trajectory of the work from offstage to onstage, webpage to stage. Not setting out to exploit the potential of technology but using it as a default mechanism for reflexivity. Decisions are made for you. From the template to the font to the narrative order of posts. Through these parameters the artist is able to filter and monitor the ebbs and flows of their praxis and stasis, chart their creative activity and inactivity. I found myself writing about writing. A film crew following a film crew. I found myself simply writing 'I am writing' when there was nothing else to say. As John Cage said:

Linford: 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it' (Cage 1952).

Ally: I had nothing to blog and I was blogging it. Describing the sound of a kettle boiling as I made myself a coffee. The university porter strumming a guitar waiting for me to leave the studio. What this did was generate impetus, a critical momentum circulating the work as it

was being made. By making the private act public, I invited invaluable dialogue on a devising process that is usually invisible. The blog became as Leslie Hill and Helen Paris say:

Linford: 'A meeting place that is no place at all' (Hill and Paris 2007).

Ally: Perhaps in this place I met myself, or at least could see myself more objectively, than in the studio or in the process of thinking. Perhaps in this place the blog became a critical axis between subjective and objective, the point of praxis between practice and theory. Reflective writing on the project's blog enabled me to take account of the process. As Phelan says:

Linford: 'Writing towards preservation, must remember that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself' (Phelan 1993).

Ally: I asked the Drama Group to describe the places they had lost. The Chip Shop around the corner. The Post Office that had been replaced by a betting shop despite vehement protests from the local community. The shop that sold knitting wool. The hardware store that gave sweets to children before we were told not to accept them from strangers. It was a personal session that brought us together in remembering, an act of communion itself. That night I entered the list of places on the blog and realised the narrative of nostalgia invoked.

Linford: 'Big D. Jansys. Tesco in Top Valley. The doctors on Portree Avenue. The dentists on Dunvegan Drive' (Pinchbeck 2006).

Ally: I realised as the text emerged that it developed a rhythm of remembrance reminiscent of toasts. Toasts at a wedding, a christening or a funeral. Remembering someone or something no longer there. So that was how the text was used in performance. A list of eulogies to the places of our past and the way their shadow fell upon the suburb. An attempt to summon the spirit of a community now waning. It was as Heathfield describes...

Linford: 'A personal archaeology, which placed me at the centre of events, as both narrator and the subject of narration, and which dramatised 'the familiar past'' (Heathfield 2000).

Ally: I introduced the piece and delivered 'housekeeping duties' as part of the performance. Pointing out the hand-painted fire exit signs blutacked to the walls, part of my familiar past as I painted them as a child, reminding the audience to switch off their mobile phones, indicating where the toilets were. I said:

Linford: 'The Church on Rise Park Drama Group presents Acts of Communion. The setting - The Church Hall. The time - now. The Drama Group will be playing themselves' (Pinchbeck 2006).

Ally: It raised interesting questions about presence. We were there but we were not there. We were playing ourselves but we were not ourselves. We were onstage but we were pretending to be offstage. We were offstage but we were pretending to be onstage. We were the Church on Rise Park Drama Group and we were performers but we were performing ourselves not characters. As one of the group, Kath, said:

Linford: 'It's like that show where we had to play six different characters except one of those characters is actually me' (Pinchbeck 2006).

Ally: This line stumbled into the performance text via the blog. These critical insights demonstrate the role the blog played as dramaturgical tool throughout the devising process.

Linford: The Trilogy

Ally: The rise of the online space as a means to develop and document a process has arguably taken place alongside the timescale of my practice and my approach mirrors the model of embedded criticism now championed by bloggers such as Matt Trueman. I will now discuss the role the blogosphere has played in democratising and flattening the hierarchy of the devising process with reference to recent debate of the dramaturg online.

Linford: 'Frustrated with the limitations of popping in at the last minute, seeing a show and responding, embedded critics spend time in rehearsals or workshops and document or respond to the on-going creative process, as well as the final piece' (Trueman 2013).

Ally: We could argue that the dramaturg is an embedded critic of the process, or a 'thinker-in-residence' to use the phrase Andrew Haydon employs when embedded in the devising process. The 'thinker-in-residence' of today is not too different to Victor Lange's description of the original dramaturg, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who diarised life at Hamburg theatre

Linford: 'He bridges the gap between theory and practice. Like a poet, he thinks in our presence' (Lessing 1962).

Ally: However, the diaries have simply become blogs. Arguably, the relationship here has not changed but the technology that enables the relationship to exist has, and will continue to do so. It still 'bridges the gap between theory and practice' but there are now more tools to use. I envisage a world in which the dramaturg can visit a rehearsal space remotely and a new economy emerges where the embedded dramaturg replaces the face-to-face contract between artist and outside eye, the blog replaces the publication. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt refer to the dramaturg using this image:

Linford: 'We might consider the dramaturg as a builder of bridges, helping the company to cohere' (Turner and Behrndt 2007)

Ally: New technology enables the embedded dramaturg to build bridges, both between members of the company, and the work and its audience. It is a virtual bridge that makes the process public and loops back to play a marketing role as much as a dramaturgical role. Arguably the bridge has not changed but the means of crossing it has. I want to share an anecdote about the role of the blog in the creative process. On performing *The Trilogy* (2011) at York St. John University, a member of the audience took one of the index cards I leave onstage and posted a picture of it on their own blog. They wrote they had witnessed most of my work for the last 10 years in a blog post that wove a dramaturgical thread between various projects. In doing so, they offered an embedded criticism of my work and...

Linford: 'Thought in its presence'.

Ally: This is what I have tried to do for you all today. I end this paper with the last words from *Acts of Communion*. Kath reads a note she left behind for the Drama Group. I realise now, 10 years after the event, that her epitaph sums up the blog left behind after the project. This text is the last post on the blog. From webpage to stage, from stage to webpage again.

Linford: 'To the Church of Rise Park Drama Group.

By the time you read this I will be gone.

The show will be over.

The curtain will fall.

The actors will leave the stage.

The audience will leave the building.

Nothing will be left but words.

Words on a page.

Words on a stage.

Thank you and goodbye' (Pinchbeck 2006).

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