

KNOWING PERFORMANCE: PERFORMANCE AS KNOWLEDGE PARADIGM FOR AFRICA²

By Mark Fleishman

My work here is to expand Chantal Mouffe's critique of the 'post-political' as a space in which the partisan model of politics has been overcome and there is no possibility of alternatives, to the realm of knowledge production. It questions the prevalent position that there are no alternatives to orthodox knowledge paradigms and suggests the possibility that performance constitutes an alternative way of knowing – both in respect of its representations but also with regard to its embodied practice. It suggests that performance as a knowledge paradigm is particularly appropriate to Africa and argues that it capitalises on our historical legacies and our particular niche advantage in the humanities.

With regard to the former, note the processes of oral and bodily transmission of knowledge through dance, storytelling, poetry and song through communities and between communities – what Diana Taylor refers to as the “so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge” (Taylor, 2003:19) – that persist across the continent despite colonially imposed preferences for the written and the ravages of so-called modernity. With regard to the latter, two prominent African academics have recently suggested in separate newspaper articles that in South Africa at least we should be devoting more time and resources to the humanities than is currently the case. In the *Sunday Times* (7 September 2008) Malegapuru Makgoba suggested that South Africa's strength in knowledge production lies in the humanities and that the humanities should be “our priority national knowledge project for which we have an unparalleled history, icons, and a social laboratory of unique values that should be exploited by scholars” (Makgoba, 2008). Two weeks later, writing in the *Sunday Independent* (21 September 2008), Achille Mbembe argued that “South Africa as a nation needs to do more in the humanities, social sciences and the arts ... [t]o break with a technocratic vision of national development that is blind to the opportunities created by the new global cultural economy” (Mbembe, 2008). Part of my argument here is that performance, embedded as it is in notions of culture, might offer real opportunities for development on the continent that exceed technocratically imposed development solutions.

What do I mean by performance? Performance as a noun constitutes a set of not so much objects, as events that includes theatre, dance, ritual, but also occasions such as political rallies, funerals and the like. In this sense, performances belong to the domain of representations: symbolic expressions of experience. What makes performances different from other forms of representation such as novels or paintings however, is precisely their lack of ‘thingness’ and their apparent lack of durability. Peggy Phelan for example

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suggests that performance is characterised by disappearance. In other words it does not remain beyond the event itself.

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representation. ... Performance's being ... becomes itself through disappearance. (Phelan, 1993:146)

In my opinion this overstates the case. Although performance is characterised by the specifics of the event at one point in time and can never be repeated exactly – that a particular performance is the same but different each and every time it is performed, a difference of degree – this does not mean that it has no durability. As Rebecca Schneider asks: “in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently?” (2001:101). My contention is that the performance event not only remains but gains value over time; but does not remain in ways preferred by the Western academy.

Importantly for my considerations here, performance is also a process, a verb, the doing that makes performance as a noun. It is a set of practices that are embodied and belong to the domain of the non-representational. Non-representational theory focuses on practices that “cannot adequately be spoken of, that words cannot capture, that texts cannot convey – on forms of experience that are not only or never cognitive” (Nash, 2000:655). It is centred on the “body-subject, not the body, engaged in joint body-practices of becoming” (Thrift, 1997:142).³

For me, however, performance is also an epistemology, a way of knowing and it is in this sense that I think it intersects most clearly with what we call research particularly, but not exclusively, in the humanities and certainly appropriately here in Africa. It is in this sense that I am most interested here; the ways in which performance articulates a correlation between the world of places and material objects and the world of ideas and sentiments, a correlation that is achieved from the vantage point of the body-subject and through the body-mind in active engagement with the world.

Performance as a way of knowing challenges at least three major knowledge orthodoxies that are all interconnected. The first is the platonic notion that action is the “inability to contemplate”. For Plato the actions, passions and the emotions were located at the lowest reaches of the human soul whereas the intellect was located at the highest. Furthermore in the *Theatetus*, Plato divided theory from practice. As Bordieu puts it:

3 It is worth noting here that the adjectival form of performance is often denoted as 'performative'. However, as Diana Taylor points out, performative, with its history in the writings of Austin, Derrida and Butler and its sense as a speech act that brings something into being through naming, remains in the realm of the discursive. She argues that in order to capture the non-discursive aspects of performance an alternative adjectival form is required. Her suggestion is the word 'performatic' which is a borrowing from the Spanish *performático*. In her mind it is 'vital to signal the performatic, digital and visual spheres as separate from, though always embroiled with, the discursive one so privileged by Western logocentrism' (Taylor, 2003: 6).

“practice” was not helped by Plato who offered intellectuals ... a justificatory discourse which, in its most extreme forms, defines action [one might say practice] as the “inability to contemplate”. (1990:28)

The second orthodoxy is the Cartesian notion that the mind (set off against the body) is the sole locus of certain knowledge. In the *Discourse on the method* (1637) Descartes describes his famous dictum, translated as “I think therefore I am”, as the “first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking”. Later he describes himself as:

a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think, and that for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this “me”, that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if the body were not; the soul would not cease to be what it is. (Descartes, 1970 [1637]:101)

What this suggests is a divided sense of being in which the body becomes at best the carrier of the mind that is alone the locus of thought and the essence of human being. It also suggests that the mind exists somewhere beyond place at a remove from the material world and our body-in-the-world.

The third orthodoxy is the Durkheimian distinction between ephemeral sensation and durable representation. For Durkheim all sensual representations – “sensations, perceptions or images” – are in a state of perpetual flux, “they come after each other like the waves of a river, and even during the time that they last, they do not remain the same” (Durkheim, 1976 [1915]:433). Sensations or perceptions are particular and linked to specific moments, the “precise instant when they take place” (433), and they can never be experienced again in exactly the same way. He argues that even if the circumstances were to remain the same, the person doing the experiencing is always changing over time hence the sensations or perceptions become different. However, according to Durkheim, we have the capacity to represent experience conceptually by catching sensual or perceptual images and lifting them out of the stream of consciousness, placing them on a level apart from the agitation of the sensations in a “different portion of the mind”, one that is more calm and serene. Such conceptual representations “resist change”, they are “a manner of thinking that, at every moment of time, is fixed and crystallized”; they are a stability that remains while consciousness flows on (433). Furthermore, the sensations are individual and private and hidden from others whereas the representations are social and public and therefore available to others. And the means of this making-available is language: “the vocabulary of our mother tongue; for every word translates a concept” (433).

The consequence of this is an assumption that knowledge transfer is dependent on forms of representation that stabilise what is generated through the sensations so as to make them durable and available and in particular available through language. The corollary is that that which evades representation; that which remains in the ‘agitated’ world of the sensations and perceptions beyond concepts and ‘our mother tongue’,

remains hidden, unavailable and unreliably private and subjective.

The three orthodoxies mentioned above, also give rise to a particular geography of knowledge production that initiates a set of distances or gaps between, on the one hand, the investigating subject and the object of investigation and, on the other hand, between the community of specialist investigators and the broader society, often the subject of investigation. In other words, in the academy we set ourselves apart from that which we are studying. This works both materially and conceptually. We create real distances, separate and enclosed sites of knowledge production “which crystallise through spatialisation a separation of Mind from Body, a notion of science as a removal from the world” (Massey, 2005:144). But we also create conceptual distances by for instance, as Johannes Fabian (1983) argues, relegating the object of study to a different time rather than recognising the world to be a space of radical coevalness in which multiple narrative trajectories coexist, in which we are all living contemporaneously but differently. By means of such processes of spatialisation and separation we legitimate and authorise particular forms and practices of knowledge while banishing others to the geographical peripheries and the temporal behinds.

These orthodoxies also establish a certain sequentiality of knowledge production based on an idea that knowledge systems are vertically integrated. In other words they involve an application of a pre-existent schema or concept onto the experience of the world. According to this view, in order to know, we refer our immediate and fragmentary experience or sense-data (lower level) to the pre-existent schema (higher level) in order to render it coherent and intelligible. In other words we produce a kind of cognitive map *before* we use it to find our way. Then as we move in the real world we refer back to the map to check where we are and whether we are heading in the pre-determined direction towards the pre-determined destination. This results in a closing down of the possibilities of the future. It reduces the potential for getting lost and for chance encounters along the way and it restricts adventurousness and novelty and the unexpected discovery. But it also assumes that the world represented by the map is fixed rather than in a state of constant emergence, that the meaning that we seek is suspended awaiting our arrival, and that we are somehow detached from the world, self-contained, stable and fully formed rather than in a constant state of our own emergence in the course of our embodied, practical engagement and involvement with the world. As Ingold describes it:

[T]he world emerges with its properties alongside the emergence of the perceiver in person, against the background of involved activity. Since the person is a being-in-the-world, the coming-into-being of the person is part and parcel of the process of coming-into-being of the world. (2000:168)

Despite decades of criticism of the Cartesian divide and more recent neuro-scientific research exposing “Descartes’ error” (Damasio, 1994); despite phenomenologically-based theories of perception and knowledge production (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Heidegger, 1971; Ingold, 2000) and more recent arguments in favour of non-representational theory (Thrift, 1996, 1997, 1999), it is still very much taken for granted in most institutions of knowledge generation that knowledge arises as a result of distanced, static, dispassionate and self-

contained contemplation, that it is a product of the mind as somehow separate from the body, and that it gives rise to concepts that are durable, stable, available and transmissible. The latter requires a language shared by a community and a particular technology of communicating that language: in this case writing. These assumptions are historical in that they are a result of particular historical processes of emergence in which particular practices are bracketed out in favour of others (art from science, remembering from representation, incorporation from inscription, process from form, fiction from fact); political in that they are designed to turn diversity into singularity and uniformity and perhaps to bring under control a world of nature that includes the body and other parts of our animality; and fictional in that they are not the way things are practiced at all even in the so-called hard sciences.

With regard to the latter, as Ingold argues, based on the work of David Turnbull (1989, 1991), knowledge is not vertically but laterally integrated, formed or in a constant process of formation as we move around in our environment. The knowledge that has brought us (and this includes even the scientist) to one place is put to work in setting off towards another (Ingold, 2000: 229). So rather than applying a map that has been pre-made, the map is produced on the go. In other words, as Ingold puts it, “we know as we go, not before we go” (230). This is not map-making or map-using but simply mapping, an ongoing process of attention and involvement and if this gives rise to artefactual representation these are merely “stepping stones along the way, punctuating the process rather than initiating it or bringing it to a close” (231). It is interesting that while rejecting the idea that mapping is an outward manifestation of the map that pre-exists in the mind of the mapper, Ingold suggests that it is a “genre of performance” (231). By this he means two things: one, that it is an interactive, embodied process of relating to the world by moving through it, and two, that it is a kind of “retrospective storytelling ... the retelling of journeys made (or possibly the rehearsal of journeys to be made)” (232). Whether such a re-telling results in the generation of an inscription (as in the form of a retracing of a journey in the sand or on paper in the course of the performance) is for Ingold incidental, what is important is the performance itself, the process of *incorporation* to use Paul Connerton’s term (1989). This is a process of remembering (putting the body back together or putting back together by means of the body) rather than of representation.

Now in the same institutions of knowledge generation referred to above, it is assumed that body-based practices such as performance whilst being expressive and symbolic, are unavailable (except in the most private and individual of senses) and non-transmissible being both ephemeral, non-discursive and beyond language and textuality. Because of this, despite being nice to have, they have little to do with thinking and knowing the world.

It is my contention however that performance that is active, immediate, on the move, embodied, sensual, fluid, interactional and affectively engaged – that might give rise to representations but is not of itself a project concerned with representation – is a way of acting on the world “probing more deeply into it and discovering the significance that lies there” (Ingold, 2000:11). And that this significance is available to those who are attuned to it and transmissible through the interactional relationships of bodies.

Let me briefly summarise what I perceive to be the principle objections to my position that performance is a way of knowing and that it is particularly appropriate to our location

in Africa. First, performance is considered to be creative in the sense that it layers meaning onto the world rather than finding out about the meaning in the world. Second, performance is supposedly private and non-transmissible because it evades textuality and is therefore not readily available to others. Third, performance is considered playful and play in the West is, as Richard Schechner puts it, “a rotten category, an activity tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make-believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality” (Schechner, 1993:27). Fourth, performance is considered to be devoid of politics and therefore unable to engage with the ‘real’ issues and challenges we face in our world today.

Limitations on space here do not allow a full discussion of any of these objections but what follows are some brief comments. The first objection, that of creativity, lies in a misunderstanding of how performance as process or epistemology has operated throughout the history of humankind and continues to operate. Performance in this sense does not cover the world with meaning it opens up the world of meaning. It is a process of discovery that allows us to penetrate the surface of the world. As Ingold argues:

Far from dressing up a plain reality with layers of metaphor, or representing it, map-like, in the imagination, songs, stories and designs serve to conduct the attention of performers *into* the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement. (2000:56)

This is a process of attentive engagement and an exploratory search for knowledge that is non-representational and in a constant process of emergence. The inability to understand this is based on a textual view of the world that cannot venture beyond representations and the semiotic and hermeneutic procedures that such a view implies. As Dwight Conquergood puts it, “scholarship is so skewed towards texts that even when researchers do attend to extralinguistic human action and embodied events they construe them as texts to be read” (2002:147). What is required is: “A shift from an imagination of a textuality at which one looks, towards recognising one’s place within continuous and multiple processes of emergence” (Massey, 2005:54), and performance is just such a process.

This leads on to the second objection, non-transmissibility owing to a privacy and a lack of textuality. First, performances are never individual, private or simply subjective. Michael Jackson comments that “stories ... are *nowhere* articulated as purely personal revelations, but authored and authorised dialogically and collaboratively in the course of sharing one’s recollections with others” (2002:22: emphasis in original). As with storytelling so with all other forms of embodied performance. In performing the performer attends not only to the task at hand but to the other to whom the performance is directed, and the experience is “*lived through* as a physical, sensual, and vital interaction” between the body of the performer and the body of the other (Jackson, 2002:28: emphasis in original). In this sense performance is always social and inter-subjective and the boundary between private and public is effaced.

Second, why should transmissibility be necessarily linked to textuality at all? There are a vast array of practices and meanings that are transmitted in other-than-textual

ways. What is required is to become attuned to these ways of transmission. But these processes of attunement are seldom covered in the curricula of the Western-oriented academy. For Conquergood, “the root metaphor of the text underpins the supremacy of Western knowledge systems by erasing the vast realm of human knowledge and meaningful action that is unlettered” (2002:147). The hegemony of the text is not politically innocent and this should be of greater concern to academia in Africa than it currently is. As De Certeau would have it, scriptocentrism is a major part of Western imperialism:

The power that writing’s expansionism leaves intact is colonial in principle. It is extended without being changed. It is tautological, immunized against, both an alterity that might transform it and whatever dares to resist it. (1988:216)

He describes a sign above the gates of modernity that reads: “Here only what is written is understood.’ Such is the internal law of that which has constituted itself as ‘Western’” (1984:134). In my view, performance constitutes ‘an alterity’ that resists the hegemony of the text in the academy. It is a transgression that seeks to break down the separation of subject and object, of body and mind, and therefore must be either expunged, silenced or policed by the academy.

My response to the third objection, that performance is playful, is to agree that it is, but to argue that playfulness is its inherent advantage as a way of knowing. As Thrift argues quoting Schechner:

Play is ... a process of performative experiment: “the ongoing, underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming the permeating, eruptive/disruptive energy and mood below, behind and to the side of focused attention” (Schechner, 1993:43) which is brought into focus by body-practices like dance and which “encourages the discovery of new configurations and twists of ideas and experience” (Schechner, 1993:42). (Thrift, 1997:145)

The experimental nature of performance as process, the trial and error method of feeling one’s way towards a goal, open to the possibility of bumping into new discoveries along the way, the creation of imaginary or potential spaces within which to engage with specific questions, is what makes performance able to “articulate complexes of thought-with-feeling that words cannot name, let alone set forth. It is a way of accessing the world, not just a means of achieving ends that cannot be named” (Radley, 1995:13). The problem with this, as Thrift points out and as I have outlined above with reference to Ingold, is that “many academics do not see the world in this experimental way. For them it is already found before it is discovered. But in a world that has never been more mapped we surely still need to set out without maps every now and again” (Thrift, 2003:2023).

Finally, with respect to the fourth objection, that performance has no politics, I would suggest that this has in a certain sense been dealt with through the argument that

performance transgresses the hegemony of the text and the authorising and legitimating practices that it fosters. However, to offer another instance of performance as political, let me return to a statement I made earlier to the effect that performance offers opportunities for development that exceed technocratically imposed development solutions.

Engaging with the world through performance offers a strategy for creating agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. This needs to be understood in relation to Albert Hirschman's concept of 'voice' – developing resources by which to express views and achieve results that are in one's own interest; to contest, debate and oppose (1970). In these terms, performance offers an opportunity to change the story, to reconstitute events so as "no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (Jackson, 2002:15). Storying makes connections between life as it is and life as it could be. Recognising that there are different stories and that stories have multiple interpretations involves identifying the limits of one's own horizons and an interest in seeing alternative perspectives. This is what Arjun Appadurai calls building the "capacity to aspire" (2004; 2007). He argues for the development of "practices that allow poor people to exercise their imagination for participation" (2007:33). He notes that the imagination is a means by which people are "disciplined and controlled – by states, markets and other powerful interests" but he also sees the imagination as "the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge" (2000:6). For Appadurai, the idea of democracy has shifted from developing the capacity to participate to participating in order to develop capacity. What this means is that through active engagement, in this case in particular performance-based projects or practices "that have local cultural force", capacity and agency is developed for participation in other aspects of life (Appadurai, 2004:67).

So to summarise my position, performance involves acts of storying, sounding, moving, feeling and relating that are all embodied and constitute alternative ways of knowing that are non-representational, experimental, and potentially political, both in the sense of transforming knowledge in the academy but also as a means of creating voice in marginalised communities. And that these ways of knowing that proceed from the body give us access to a vast range of ideas that distant and dispassionate contemplation cannot. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "[many] ideas would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility... they owe their authority to the fact that they are in a transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart" (1962:150).

So how does this work? I will attempt a brief explanation with reference to Spinoza. Acts of performance are forms of extension (*res extensa*) in the Spinozan sense as opposed to thought – the thinking thing (*res cogitans*). Now before we go about making simple links between extension and the body and thinking and the mind, and then dividing the one from the other, it is important to recognise as Damasio points out, that Spinoza himself in proposition 26 of the *Ethics part II* argues that:

The human Mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing except through the ideas of the modification (affections) of its own body.

Damasio interprets this to mean:

Events in the body are represented as ideas in the mind. There are representational “correspondences,” and they go in one direction – from body to mind. ... [T]he mind cannot perceive an external body as existing, except through the modifications of its own body. He is in effect stating a set of functional dependencies: he is stating that an idea of an object in a given mind cannot occur without the existence of the body; or without the occurrence of certain modifications on that body as caused by the object. No body, never mind. (Damasio, 2003:212-3)

Damasio goes on to state that Spinoza’s position in this is supported by neurobiological research that posits that the majority of images that arise in the brain have their origin in the sensory modalities of the body – “the mind is filled with images from the flesh” (214). For Damasio these images arise from two sources: from deep inside the body itself, from the viscera, and from closer to the surface of the body, from what he calls the sensory probes: eyes, ears, nose, skin. So from this perspective, the forms of extension are not separated from thought, they are, according to this view, means of enabling thought. “No body, never mind”.

Now all this seems to suggest a relationship between the body, the mind and the material world outside of the body. In what follows I would like to explore this three-way relationship with reference to three specific examples across time and space that link place, material culture and performance in Africa with thinking and knowing.

The first example is that of //Kabbo and the other /Xam men and women who narrated stories to Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in Cape Town in the late nineteenth century.⁴ Most of these storytellers had been brought to Cape Town as convicts to serve prison terms at the Breakwater Convict Station. Their crimes were various, ranging from stock-theft to murder. Bleek recognised that the /Xam were destined to extinction. By 1840 the trekboers had moved all the way up to the Orange River in the North, stealing /Xam land and waterholes, murdering families and wiping out the game on which the /Xam depended for their survival. He wrote in 1875, just before his death:

with energetic measures ... [we could] preserve, not merely a few “stick and stones, skulls and bone” as relics of the aboriginal races of this country, but also something of that which is most characteristic of their humanity, and therefore most valuable – their mind, their thoughts and their ideas. (cited in Skotnes 1999:29)

The collection of stories told by //Kabbo and the other tellers and transcribed by Bleek and Lloyd interest me not only because of their range, the sheer immensity of stories – 2000 notebooks, 13,000 pages – or because of their aesthetic beauty and particularity as stories. What interests me more for current purposes is their performance and the way it reflects a process of thought in action.

4 The remarkable story of the origins of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection can be found in Bank (2006) and Skotnes (1996 and 2007).

The stories for //Kabbo do not reside in his head but in the landscape of his place. His people move around that place and visit each other and while visiting they relate stories they have gathered on their way. These stories come from the landscape and they float on the wind, coming from a distance, behind the backs of mountains and along well-travelled tracks. They drift towards those who are alert to them, those who sit waiting for them to float into their ears. In other words the stories are available to those who are attuned to them. And the stories that he gathers are not representations that cover the landscape with meaning, they are in a fundamental sense *the* landscape imbued with meaning, that enfolds those who dwell within it as well as “the lives and times of predecessors, who over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation” (Ingold, 2000:189). So if the stories are the landscape then the telling of the stories connects the teller to the landscape.

When //Kabbo was telling his stories he was not so much transmitting information as mapping, recalling an itinerary of journeys made, his own and those of his ancestors – those who had walked the same paths through the landscape before him – and rehearsing potential journeys to come. What was important was not the stories (as they were for Bleek and Lloyd) but the performance, the ongoing practice that linked him to those that had come before. By so doing //Kabbo was not only participating in a salvage project designed to conserve the body of stories in the face of the inevitable destruction of his people and his culture but also desperately trying to maintain the connection with his place. The longer he stayed in Cape Town the harder it became for him to access the stories and the more disconnected he felt from home. It is interesting to note that another of the tellers, Diakwain, described the fading connection with the land as a break in the “thinking strings” that seems to suggest a connection between the embodied act of telling and the act of thinking and the link with the material world beyond the body-mind.

What is also striking is the way the stories were often told in relation to particular material artefacts, “natural history exhibits, photographs, copies of rock paintings, children’s picture books and an assortment of homemade artefacts” (Riley, 2007:295). What this suggests on one level is that the artefact operates as a kind of mnemonic prop facilitating the recall of a particular story, but on another level it suggests the possibility that performance might be a process of unlocking meaning inherent in the artefact itself. I will come back to this a little later.

This relationship between performance and material artefact leads me on to the second example, that of Tshibumba Kanda Matulu the most prominent Katanga/Shaba genre painter in the 1960s and 1970s, and his narrations to the anthropologist Johannes Fabian.

According to Fabian a Katanga/Shaba genre painting:

was valued for its capacity to remind the viewer of past events and present predicaments, specifically for its becoming the subject of occasion to tell a story. (Fabian, 2007:74)

In his conversations with Tshibumba Kanda Matulu he heard many such stories that arose and were performed in relation to paintings produced as part of Tshibumba's *History of Zaire*, a series containing more than a hundred individual works. Tshibumba insisted, according to Fabian:

That his work as both a painter and a historian was in essence to think, *-waza*, to express ideas, *mawazo*, rather than simply to recount and depict. (Fabian, 2007:74)

In telling stories in relation to the paintings it seems that Tshibumba was not journeying across the surface of his painting but leading the listener into the painting itself – piercing the surface – to reveal the meaning beyond the outward appearance. Again he was not conveying information, explaining what the painting meant, but using a body-based performance genre as an opportunity or means to open up the material artefact. And the artist-historian describes this as a process of thinking. Elsewhere he comments that the past must be thought while the present must be remembered. Fabian explains this as follows:

Thinking and remembering are, to say the least, difficult to keep apart. Inasmuch as thought/thinking evokes rationality, it belongs to the realm of truth and judgement (which, incidentally, may be what Tshibumba meant when he said that his task as a historian was to think the past). Remembering, especially in the hortative sense of commemoration, that is something that is to be done, performed, or fulfilled, calls for stories to be told (songs to be sung, rituals to be performed, plays to be staged, images and monuments to be created). (Fabian, 2007:99-100)

In other words, the process of painting the past is a process of thinking but the present task, the embodied performance that opens up the painting, is a process of remembering. A remembering that is less about the need to forestall forgetting than it is about putting back together the body that is broken – an altogether more active process. This resonates with the idea that the telling of stories by //Kabbo and the other /Xam tellers is an active process of recall, a re-tracing of steps, of journeys made, that it is “not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past” (Ingold, 2000:189).

Fabian goes on to indicate that Tshibumba refers to the stories he tells in relation to the paintings as “lies” (Fabian, 2007:100). If they are lies then as Camus reminds us, they are lies not because to lie is to say what is not true; “it is also and above all, to say *more* than is true” (1970:336).

This short discourse on remembering brings me on to my final example, one that I have drawn from my own work on “Remembering in the postcolony” that focuses on performance events that engage with key “sites of memory” in and around the city of Cape Town. The term is taken from Pierre Nora (1989) and refers to a conglomerate of physical, material and archival sites that function to concentrate remembrance in a world in which, to paraphrase James E. Young, the more we monumentalise, the more we seem

to have “divested ourselves of the obligation to remember” (2000:94).⁵

To date the project has produced four productions based on four sites of memory: 53 *Degrees* (Robben Island), *Onnest’bo* (District Six), *Rain in a Dead Man’s Footprints* (the Bleek and Lloyd Archive) and *Cargo* (the archive of slavery at the Cape). These have been performed for paying audiences in and outside of mainstream theatre spaces in metropolitan Cape Town and elsewhere. It has also produced a fifth project (also based on the Bleek and Lloyd Archive) that is different to the others in the series in that it is an 8-day participatory arts residency for school learners in the rural town of Clanwilliam that in its current form has operated annually since 2001. The latter project is an attempt to repatriate the body of / Xam stories back into the landscape from which they had come and to use the stories to engage with transformation amongst young people in the community. One of the key foci of the broader project is the revelation of subjugated histories; that which is silenced in the archive, buried under layers of official text.

Each project begins with an extended process of gathering traces or fragments, because as Nadia Seremetakis reminds us, the memory of the past comes to us in pieces, it does not show itself all at once, in wholes (2000:310). These fragments include documentary traces: the deposed testimony of eyewitnesses, the records created by those who are ‘witnesses despite themselves’ and images passed down from previous times, paintings, drawings, etchings, photographs and cinematic records.⁶ They also include material traces, the kinds of fragments usually dealt with by archaeologists, shards of pottery, old coins, furniture, clothing, architectural remains.

For Carlo Ginzburg (1989) there are testimonies and there are clues. The testimonies testify through written words; the clues “testify” through their muteness” (Ricoeur, 2004:174). Ginzburg proposes a “conjectural paradigm” that involves using clues to penetrate the opaque surface of reality (1989:123).

Ingold also refers to clues in discussing the ways in which novices are called to pay attention to aspects of their environment.⁷ In his discussion he distinguishes between clues and ciphers. He suggests that in attempting to discover the meanings inherent in the environment, the novice is:

provided with a set of keys ... not as ciphers but as *clues*. Whereas the cipher is centrifugal, allowing the novice to access meanings that are attached (“pinned

5 It is worth emphasizing that in the sense that it is intended here, a site need not be a place, it could just as well be an object or a set of objects, an archive of documents or images, or a piece of music, or combinations of all of these.

6 The notion of ‘witnesses in spite of themselves’ or ‘involuntary witnesses’ refers to those who create records of some aspect of society in one period that become a testimony in another period without this being the intention of the ‘witness’ (Ricoeur, 2004: 170 -171). Bloch argues that ‘in the course of its development, historical research has gradually been led to place more and more confidence in ... the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves’ (1964: 61).

7 The idea of an ‘education of attention’ passed on from generation to generation is taken from James Gibson’s *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979: 254).

on”) by the mind to the outer surface of the world, the clue is centripetal, guiding him towards meanings that lie at the heart of the world itself, but which are normally hidden behind the façade of superficial appearances. The contrast between the key as cipher and the key as clue corresponds to the critical distinction ... between decoding and revelation. (2000: 22)

Once the fragments have been collected, a repertoire of dramaturgical tools and methods, gathered and developed over time, are used to work on the fragments. It is a kind of forensic archaeology performed by the body interacting with a fragment. What we hope to do is to prise open the fragments to reveal meaning rather than to interpret a meaning “pinned on” to the outside of the fragment. The intention is to create what De Certeau calls a “breach in the text” through which:

the voice exiled on the borders of discourse, might flow back, and with it, the murmur and the ‘noises’ from which the process of scriptural reproduction distinguishes itself. In this way an exteriority without beginning or truth might return to visit discourse. (De Certeau, 1988:236)

So like the /Xam storytellers who performed in relation to material artefacts and Tshibumba whose paintings provided the opportunity for performance, my dramaturgical method uses the body-mind and play to unlock meaning inherent in the material world. At the heart of the work is improvisation, a particularly playful and experimental approach. Western discourse around improvisation centres on the concept of ‘spontaneity’ – the removal of all blocks or impediments to responding immediately in the moment – and the idea of “remaining in the present” (Spolin, 1963; Hodgson and Richards, 1966; Johnstone, 1981; Steinman, 1986; Frost and Yarrow, 1990; Johnstone 1999; Johnston, 2006). Much emphasis is placed on not predetermining the outcome, not deciding on a ‘text’ and then setting out to realise it in the improvisation but rather on responding as truthfully as possible to proposals in the present moment.

Traditions other than the Western and particularly oral traditions in which improvisation plays an essential role – performances are composed in the moment of performance – don’t quite see it in this way. In these traditions, improvisation involves a play or dialogue between certain core elements of the existing tradition and the spontaneity of the moment. The performer engages with the specifics of the environment – the context, the space, the audience – and these determine the particular innovations of the tradition in each particular performance event.

My own current thinking on theatrical improvisation is more influenced by this latter way of thinking. This is also to some extent supported by neurological research, particularly by Antonio Damasio, on our perception of the world around us (1994 and 2003). The improviser responds to propositions in the present moment (what Damasio calls “perceptual images”) originating in the archival fragments, in the other performers, in the space. At the same time, however, the improviser is also engaged with what has been discovered at earlier stages of the research (what Damasio calls “recalled images”). The process of improvisation thus involves a

relationship between these two sets of images in what Shannon Rose Riley (2004) describes as “an intentional process of layering”. She goes on to argue that in such a process:

attention is not split so much as layered and in a state of ongoing dialogue and change. ... [E]mbodied processes focus on becoming attentive to recalled images and their dialogical relationship with perceptual imagery offering the actor a method for becoming attuned to the polyphonic connections between body and brain, organism and environment. (454)

This highlights the particularly embodied and sensory nature of the improvisational process and relates to Ingold's notion that we perceive the environment through active, embodied attention and participation from which thought arises; we don't think our way into the environment (2000:185-188).

Now that we have looked at some of the ways in which performance as a way of knowing operates, indeed has always operated in African worlds, let me return once again to where I started, to Chantal Mouffe. By suggesting that performance constitutes an alternative way of knowing particularly appropriate to Africa I am not suggesting in some naïve way that performance will or should simply replace other forms of knowledge in the academy. In Mouffe's terms I am not proposing an antagonistic relationship, one between “friend and enemy”. What I am proposing is what she describes as an “agonistic conflict”, one between adversaries or “friendly enemies” (in Miessen, 2006). Such a relationship involves a conflictual consensus rather than outright dissensus. It is not a simple revolution but an ongoing interruption that disturbs any easy assumption about what knowledge is and how it should be practiced; the idea that there are no alternatives to playing the one game in town when it comes to knowledge production, a game whose rules and practices are often inappropriate, problematic and detrimental in our location. Knowing performance, not in the sense of ‘knowing about’ but more importantly in the sense of ‘knowing with, through, or by means of’ has the potential to transform knowledge production by closing the gap between subject and object, between body and mind, between the academy and society.



Figure a: *Clanwilliam Arts Project*, Clanwilliam. Photograph by Mark Wessels.