GARY HILL’S THEATRE/ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE COLOSSEUM



Rome

Risonanze Oscure
Dark Resonances

We are at the Colosseum, the Flavian Amphitheatre – me, Nick (Kaye) and Gabriella (Giannachi). It is 10pm.

Across the street beneath the temple of Venus we have been looking at flickering images of what look to me like archaeological sediments projected into the foundation arches, behind the protective iron grills.

They are part of a new work by Gary Hill, the Seattle/New York based video and performance artist. It is a work of site specific theatre/archaeology. Gary is one of the artists of our new project – “Performing presence: from the live to the simulated”

Here is my archaeological “reading” of the event.

Location



A ruin – spectacular, yes, but the surface of much of the Colosseum has been stripped away over the centuries – all the seating and the floor of the arena – conspicuously revealing the skeletal sub- structure, the labyrinth of passages for managing crowds, gladiators, victims, the underside of the monument. And, of course, the Colosseum is emblem of all the underside of Rome – crowds, mass media, violence as entertainment, bread and circuses, the barbarism at the heart of imperial civilization.

We find the gate, they look for us on “the list” (there are three), and we get into the Colosseum.

Characters

Rome’s media and arts crowd are here as the audience tonight.
There are performers, sounds, projected images, lights, props. Ghosts – Persephone, Pan, the witch Kirke, invoked in the event. And, of course, the audiences, performers and victims from long ago – neither present nor absent – non-absent.

Episodes

One. Interference and resonance.

Within several of the great supporting arches of the Colosseum have been sited speakers and video projectors. Intermittently, randomly (?), they sound out horns across the auditorium filled with tourists as faint images appear projected up within the brickwork. Ghostly images – we spot an “angel” walking back and forth

with a great curved brass horn.

Images almost invisible. Echoes across the ruin. Horns announcing what? That the past is still going on?

Two. Surface sediment.

Outside the Colosseum at the Temple of Venus – flickering indistinct images of what look to me like excavated surfaces, with spoken commentary. Shown in arches beneath a monument that now exists only as an indication of where the columns and walls once stood – traces in the thin grass of early summer.

The indeterminacy of the trace of the past.

Our contact with the past is all about translations – mediations, like these videos of surface sediment – passages forced back and forth. Forced, because the material resists – we have to dig away and work on what is left. And it is all so indeterminate – what was and is going on?

Three. A face in the underworld.

The audience stands on the second tier looking down into the depths of the arena, actually at the passages and voids beneath. It is dark but we can make out activity in the shadows. Something is going on. On the temporary stage that replaces part of the missing floor of the arena there is a dimly lit structure. It looks like a face staring upwards.

Four. Clapping/flapping.

It begins with clapping, or is it a flapping of wings, white noise. It grows louder.



Is this an echo of crowds? Clamoring for bread and entertainment. Nourishment and numbing narcotic (pharmakon).

Five. Dreams of escape.

The first of the videos projected onto the monument – within the arena and up the sides of the auditorium. A contraption. A radio mast? It looks more like one of Leonardo's flying machines – magical inventions that never flew except in the imagination. A dream of an escape.

Video recordings replayed on these ancient walls – reflexive spaces of difference.

Six. Word magic.

Strings of vowels appear projected up above the arena. They are voiced over and over again on the sound system. More clamoring. And resonance. We can detect no message, except in the performed enunciation, like a magical incantation. Mesmerizing magic – disorienting and misdirecting.

A classical location of dark magic is Kirke's island at the edge of the known world, its name a palindrome of vowels – Aiaia. Where Odysseus's men were turned to farm beasts, where he countered the witch's magic with a drug given to him by Hermes, the god of mediation and interpretation, where he found how to travel to the underworld to speak with the seer Teiresias, to find his way home.

The palindrome comes and goes, works, reads, cuts both ways.

Seven. Goat in a field.

Another projected image. Not a lion or exotic beast. The calmness of country life

and farming? Where bread comes from. But the Goat is also Pan – not a divinity but a disrupting force, of chaos, from a time even before the gods. Whose shout brings panic.

Eight. The dis-invented wheel.

A carriage crosses the arena in a transect back to the stage. It is a struggle to get it there because the wheels are triangular.



The carriage carries goddess Persephone on her way from sunshine and agricultural fertility (her mother is Demeter, goddess of harvest) to the world of the dead, in her cyclical return to the underworld and Hades.

Time and the past here are not an arrow of no return, but symmetrically cut both ways.

As Odysseus found out in his search for a nostos (homecoming), the trick is not finding Hades, but getting back – that needs magic.

Nine. A lament.

Voiced over the sound system.

A lament of what is missing – what never happened, but should have done.

Ten. Flights of fantasy.

A model aeroplane flies quietly round the auditorium in the dark, lands on the stage, takes off again. It carries little fairy lights. Then model gliders are launched from above and crash into the audience. No escape, again.

Augury – to read the future by interpreting the flight of birds. Here mechanical inventions of our intellect.

Remember , with Herakleitos, that Apollo, the god whose oracle of the future is at Delphi, neither reveals nor conceals the truth, but gives a sign.

Eleven. A ghost among us.
Persephone walks among the audience in a circuit around the auditorium, followed by a video cameraman.

Uncanny ghosts – with the uncanny as the return of the repressed, the return of what is no longer the same.

And a deparate attempt to record the unrecordable – how, on earth, is this all to be documented?



These encounters with the past are new to Gary Hill's work. And though we are in the world of son-et-lumiere, this is no post-modern pastiche, but a circuit around the awkwardness of presence – a present past, more precisely non-absent.

No attempt is made to reconstruct a past – for what would that be other than superficiality of Hollywood CGI with its stock narratives like "Gladiator", however spectacular.

There is a deep questioning here of the notion that sites like the Colosseum are somehow â€œsources", somehow the origin of what is made of them, font of understanding the past. Instead the site, as a collocation of fragments, acts as a

frame, parergon, supplement – an exterior that defines, has effect in its non-absence.

The site resists in its materiality and instead we deal in resonances and a geneaology of echoes and Chinese whispers through time.

Theatre/archaeology

PS I wrote this on the flight back home. Here are Gabriella’s outline and Charles Stein’s diary of the work’s creation.