RESPONSIVE MEDIA – IMPROVISATION, NEOSEMY, AND SYNAESTHESIA

Sha Xin Wei visited our New Media group (Mellon funding) yesterday – Wednesday.

He is an old friend of many of the group – did his PhD at Stanford. Is now a part of the Topological Media Lab at Georgia Tech.

He was talking about his work on “responsive media”. Particularly with the performance group tgarden.

Begin with a gesture. Gather information about the gesture using sensors (motion detectors, accelerometers, whatever) acting on the bodies of the performers. Filter and transform this information concurrently with the gesture and feed it back to performer as sound and visual patterning (synthesised sound, projected imagery). To which they respond with further gesture.

People jump around a dance floor to music, reacting to the grids projected on the floor and computed from sensors taped to their bodies. And they are wearing strange garments that constrict and direct movement.

You are looking at a video camera. The video screen, monitoring what the video sees, shows your arm melt into red vapor as you wave.

It is the Photohop paradigm. Treat the source (it is an image of course in Photoshop) abstractly as information (ignore any mimetic function, that it may "represent" something). Perform operations upon the image (computation, "filters"). View the result as a representation, an image carrying meaning and significance.

But what is the mode of signification in the photoshopped images? It is that quandry of trust I mentioned last week in connection with faked pictures from Iraq. [Link] Raised are all sorts of questions about representation and authenticity (in the digital image who or what is the witness of that which is depicted).

I liked so much of this.

Neosemy – how new signifying gestures might be produced. People conspicuously play in these set-ups, playing around in order to manipulate the feedback of sound and vision. Exploring how they affect things – and get a response. Gesture – that which evokes response. This is a phenomenology of learning. No words. Pre-expressive creativity.

Material synaesthesia – gesture becomes sound, becomes texture, becomes image.

The refusal of a mimetic understanding of gesture – that it signifies something, in analogy with some kind of language or grammar.

A primary focus on (abstract) materiality (the gestures and the feedback of images, sounds, altered environments), rather than signifying systems.

That this materiality forms a continuous field that is only secondarily interpreted (individuated) as discrete gestures, individuals in a room jumping among sounds and colors.

And this is “play”, “experiment”, and almost pre-expressive, as I said.

In theatre/archaeology, my project with Mike Pearson (book 2001 from Routledge), we tried to tackle some related fields.

Mike Pearson and Peter Brötzmann [Link]

We asked – what comes after an event (of performance, whatever)? This was our generic way of posing the question – how do you document a piece of performance art? Especially when there is no dramatic text that might be taken as the origin of the performance. The archaeologists faces the analogous question of what comes after the past has happened, or, more specifically, how you archaeologically document the past, in the absence of textual sources. Mike and I share with Xin Wei a refusal to treat this as primarily a problem of representation. We refuse to treat the remains of the past as somehow a representation of the past, or its expression (I aclled it the expressive fallacy" in my book Art and the early Greek State). Performance refuses reduction to any single signifying system. Videoing a performance just raises questions of viewpoint and all the qualities of the medium, before you see through to what it purports to represent. At best such media only evoke what some think they represent. When revisiting the performances of his early career Mike would point to the scar on his forehead and tell the story of his bad knee, sharing memories with members of the audience who had been witness thirty years ago. As Schechner says of performance somewhere, there is only ever re-performance. Reiteration.

So too the (material/archaeological) past refuses reduction to any signifying

system. There is only ever reiteration and remediation, circling around the remains of the past, reworking the remains into new presents. We cannot say what the past was.

Corollary. We think archaeologists dig up ancient sites and artifacts. These are but secondary crystallizations of the flows of sediment, decay and ruin that is the past, in the dispersal of what the past never was. A life becomes shattered vessel on a floor that becomes silt, a home that becomes rubble that becomes sand, a mirror that is passed on as cherished heirloom.

Corollary. There are no origins, of humanity, of agriculture, of cities and civilization, of the state, of the west or of Europe, of modernity. Only genealogies, tracks back and back through generation after generation of reiteration after reiteration.