

MIKE PEARSON AND THEATRE/ARCHAEOLOGY



Mike Pearson, performance artist, was in Stanford this week. We wrote the book Theatre/Archaeology together.





He talked to our New Media Workshop about recent work of his, and then to the Archaeology Center about his research into what really went on in the expeditions to the Antarctic back in the early 1900s.

Both were provocative.

In [Carrying Lyn](#), Mike and John Rowley carried Lyn Levett through the streets of Cardiff. Lyn, who was Dave, is a quadriplegic actress. As Dave she played King Arthur in Brith Gof's *Arturius Rex*. Mike and John were dressed in smart dark suits and ties, Lyn similarly formal in dress and heels. Polaroid photographs were taken and video was made of performers and audience/witnesses (who often became co-performers); South Wales Police obliged with footage from their surveillance cameras.

[Polis](#) was another urban piece, an exercise in reconstituting experience. Audience and performers were sent out with instructions to visit, witness events indeterminately staged or spontaneous, gather evidence in the form of video, make reports back at the point of origin, where everything was (re)constituted, or rather where sense was sought in the media fragments. Narratives were framed, connections and coincidences noted, some designed, others happenstance.

Both – theater and performance meeting urban experience in a combination of situationist derive, modernist flanerier and the search for a temporary autonomous zone escaping anomie and state supervision, and all under the watchful eye of the surveillance camera overseeing the street that has literally become Benjamin's scene of crime.

Provocative – Lyn Levett, being carried, being dropped by Mike with a sickening thud as she hit the ground – someone who is “dead” weight because of their quadriplegia. Who were the performers, who the audience? Just what was going on in such a simple walk across a city on a busy weekend afternoon? And the status of the record – the photographs, reports, video. Above all the question is raised of the status of theater itself. We are used now to notions of performance and performativity being used to understand social and cultural experience – we are all performers. The concepts help us make sense of things. And theater has become intimate with the nation and the state, not least in notions of national theater that confirm our relation to where we belong with its sites (theaters and sets), familiar characters and stories. The comforting world of entertainment. But Mike is working in a different historical space, one that asks theater and performance to retain or recover a disruptive role – **an ethics of worlds turned upside down.**

So too in Polar Theater. An archaeology of science and heroism. Mike has been uncovering the evidence for the daily lives of those on the early expeditions under the likes of Shackleton, Scott and Amundsen that explored Antarctica. The usual story is one of heroism in the face of the forces of nature. All the expeditions had a scientific purpose, supposedly, behind them. Extreme science, at the edge of things. But here they are in the photos Mike has found in Cambridge and New Zealand performing in drag and black-face, with repurposed scenery and costume, and according to scripts later found dog chewed in the ice.

In some ways this is a simple exercise in archaeology. The camps are now designated heritage sites and so much is left perfectly preserved in the polar ice. But how should the huts be reconstructed? As sites of scientific heroism – neatly ordered spaces with desks, instruments and supplies? Or as theaters? – what took up so much of their time. Mike tracked the instrumentality of the expeditions – the way they worked with animals (pets, tools, food), the repurposing of equipment, the improvisations around science, acting the hero, and acting the fool. And the class and cultural relationships of officers and other ranks, in expeditions of Britain's

Royal Navy to the ends of the earth.

At the meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists a couple of years ago in Thessaloniki Doug Baliey and I ran a session on critical heresy in archaeology. Mike presented a video about Polar Theater. The night before the Berkeley team excavating Çatal Höyük had presented their own video on the life of their project; it included their own amateur dramatics in the evenings after the day's work of painstaking observation and record. The connection was not lost on the audience. And this, of course, is how real science works. It is not some uncanny communion with the mysteries and forces of nature, of evidence, of archaeological sources. Stories of heroic discovery are glosses on the mundanity of even extreme science. What scientists really get up to in their daily lives is often seen as irrelevant to the science, to the great grand story, or as instrumentality, or it is simply overlooked. **But the everyday needs to be (archaeologically) uncovered, because it is where science actually occurs.**

Theater archaeology is an ethnography of science. **Just as archaeology is the performance of the past.**

