

# MIKE PEARSON



Mike Pearson died last week.

It is quite a shock to his many friends and colleagues. I'm composing a tribute to his extraordinary qualities, talents, works. I hadn't quite appreciated how much there is to say and it is taking longer than I anticipated.

In the meantime here is a short statement that appears alongside others in

*Nation.Cymru* [Link].

It was more than 30 years ago that Mike arrived at my archaeology lab in Lampeter, a small rural campus of the University of Wales, with a video to show me. It was called *Pax TV* – an experimental work from his theatre company Brith Gof [Link]. Layered frames and scanning cameras offered windows on a Welsh farm house and the woman who lived and died there. In a mélange of memory, media, and event (her death), Mike appeared as an angel, as Hermes. I was puzzled – why was Mike showing me this? I did not expect his reply. He said that this video was actually about archaeology – just as described in a recent book of mine about the archaeological imagination (*Experiencing the Past*, 1991). I didn't know what he meant, and so started the conversation and collaboration between us that has been interrupted, that has taken such a sad turn with his death last week.

Mike was a performance artist, theatre director, theorist and philosopher, scholar and teacher, and, above all for me, an archaeologist, one who works with remains. We were both fascinated by the world of the eighteenth century antiquarians who could mix intimate

appreciation of natural history, with folklore, archaeology, geology, political commentary, family genealogies, and anything else that might occur. The frontispiece to Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1769) reads *non omnis moriar*, as the Roman poet Horace put it – death is no end to *poiesis*. Mike has touched so many of us in sharing creative energy.

My reference here to Graeco-Roman antiquity is clumsy. Not inappropriate, because Mike was always fascinated by the legacies of prehistory and antiquity. Traces in a landscape, the revitalization of the Welsh epic *Y Gododdin*, a radically reimagined recital of Homer's *Iliad*, reworking Ovid, a site specific performance of *Coriolanus* Shakespeare clashing with Brecht in an old aircraft hangar. And Mike was never clumsy.

Always deeply composed. Mike realized, embodied, performed what so many merely talk about. How to connect the arts with research and cultural critique – research creation, research as arts practice, scholarartistry. Mike's works informed so many agendas in critical theory, media and arts practice. A deep deconstructive questioning of the category of the human, of corporeality. Performance design as an

intervention in cultural politics, a transdisciplinary questioning of concepts such as landscape and belonging, urban dwelling, surveillance and social justice.

Mike's works were sometimes spectacular and epic, sometimes small-scale multi-faceted gems. Big themes and topics, and often also a personal voice – a production of Aeschylus on a military training range, an intimate chorography of a Lincolnshire village. Very often they were produced with a wonderful team of collaborators, so talented in their own right.

Simply great and engaging, Mike reached diverse audiences in so many ways. There is such a vital energy in this body of work – I have been so lucky to have shared the nomadic exploration, the incessant experiment, the intellectual roller-coaster.

At the time of his death Mike and I had just about finished a new book – *Theatre/Archaeology: Concepts and Practices*. It will be published next year.



Ontological theatre – Autosuggestion and the archaeological automobile – Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, Stanford California, 2013



Ramblings in prehistory – Lordenshaws, Northumberland 2016