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Repeating Singularity: Archiving Performance Art

Archive Fever, according to Derrida's eponymous study (1994), arises from the archive's reference to 'commencement and commandment', i.e. its compulsion to repeat (to remember) and its simultaneous desire for a place of origin which precedes the regime of repetition. For the past two years I have been afflicted with an acute case of this condition. My research project "What's Welsh for Performance?" (www.performance-wales.org) aims to archive Wales's hitherto invisible history of performance art by collecting its visual and other traces. Yet in seeking to question the established genealogies of the genre that art history has made available and the way they have marked out a canon of 'important' works, I am finding myself attributing certain art works with singularity (claiming them as 'original works', which are 'overlooked' and need 'uncovering') to ensure their place in a future history of performance art, whilst simultaneously having to identify them as representative (i.e. repetitive) of a particular cultural context.

This paper will explore the disciplinary investments in such gestures of singularization and repetition by referring to performance art work from the early 1970s (taken from 'my' archive), a period in which the emergent genre attempted to assert its originality against the traditions of fine art on the one hand and theatre on the other. I will consider how such 'archontic' acts of identification and distinction are being repeated by theoretical approaches in an attempt to establish certain discourses, genealogies and disciplines and whether a performative archive may offer opportunities to unsettle them.

Panel abstract:

Archival Events and Eventful Archives: In-Between Performance and Document

Participants: Paul Clarke, University of Bristol: "Ephemera: Performing the Archive"; Mike Pearson, Aberystwyth University: "Theatre/Archaeology: visualising past performance"; Heike Roms, Aberystwyth University (Convenor): "Repeating Singularity: Archiving Performance Art"