

The Artefact of Performance
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“A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook, P. 1968, p.11). The people we meet, and the jobs we do are all part of this broad term, Performance. I am performing right now. 'Performance, alone, does not exist.' It is not tangible in the same respect as a book or a film, yet for the moment it is presented, it has a life, or a meaning. The presentation paper will discuss what 'performance is...' in relation to the interpretation that we give it. *Huis Clos* – work that combines installation art and performance theory – explored the push-pull scenario associated with the tangible and ephemeral nature of art. The objects remain, while an implosion of analysis becomes the fundamental part of performance. It is not a question of how well we perform, but what we interpret the work to be.

Literary criticism suggests 'the reader creates the meaning'. This is true for all performance; first night only happens once. Walter Benjamin (1973) has argued that digital performance has pushed the 'original is out of reach'; an audience is no longer watching something that has a life in front of them, but retains this existence in an alternative form. *Huis Clos* [DVD], what you are watching behind me, presents itself as a symbol of something that may or may not have happened. Technological involvement in 'performance' reconstructs its ontology to tangibility, thus involved in deconstruction of understanding that performance happens 'here and now', for its audience. The appearance through film reduces live performance to false authenticity, as a record or simulacrum.

I will talk about some of the principles behind *Huis Clos*, which was presented at the Cornerstone Building in Liverpool and why these principles are self destructive in the creation of the work. *Huis Clos* came from an exploration into existentialism and how performance is an existential concept. The work had 3 plant pots, painted white, in 3 tightly focused pools of light that slowly filled with water over the period of 5 days. It is worth pointing out known that the performance has never been completed. *Huis Clos* followed the life of 3 characters, Garcin, Inez and Estelle, all having banished to hell. It was based on the play, *Huis Clos* written by Jean-Paul Sartre

The context of my research starts with the body. If we have nothing else in the world, we have our physical self. It is the most important part of life. Before we come to the artefacts and the importance of them, we have an idea of our own body and the bodies of others. I know my body; I have known my body for 23 years and have been through what my body has been through all this time. Sartre stated: “Man and the world are relative beings.... It follows that the first relation proceeds from human-reality to the world. To come into existence, for me is to unfold my distance from things and thereby to cause things 'to be there'” (1957, p.332). This does not refer to just the image, for example the clothes that we wear. As you can see, I am wearing a white shirt and jeans and this says something about me. But my actions, my personality, my identity, have grown as part of the body that is standing on this stage and present to you. I am performing to you now, because I have a relationship to the world. From this deep and somewhat philosophical stand point, I rely upon my body in my engagement with the world. I return again to the statement 'Performance is...' My interpretation of Sartre suggests performance is the existence in the relation of beings and their experience.

Huis Clos plays upon the stuff encapsulates the way we learn through experience. The reason you have come to this conference, to listen to me talk about this topic, makes an informative impression on who you are. It becomes part of your past, your history, and your understanding of the world. Sartre (1957) calls this term 'engaged knowledge'. Things we know because we have engaged with the world. Once the audience entered the space of *Huis Clos*, they became engaged with the work, interpreting what was in front of them. This is the result of the decision they made to see the installation. When they entered the space, they found that nothing was going on, no story, and no narrative. The audience being there created the work, it was a process of interaction that contributed to the learned experience or the engaged knowledge. The people who came to see *Huis Clos* made the decision to come, there was something they wanted to find out, they wanted to see what was going on, they wanted to engage with their environment. So what happened?

What should the audience have done? Can the work engage with an audience when no narrative is present? I believe the installation allowed the audience to transcend from the physical into a nothingness. The installation invited the audience to think about themselves and poses more questions than it ultimately answers. The lack of a

narrative means that the audience has to find a story, they have to find some representation, to find out what the work is about. I think the work is about the experience of being in the same time and space as others that are in there. Lehmann (2006) recognises this as: “an intentionally, unmediated experience of the real (time, space, body)” (p.134).

Throughout the performance of *Huis Clos*, I found it interesting to watch, as some decided to leave the installation directly after entering, shouting, 'How can universities be allowed to let students make work like this!' The 'unmediated experience', that Lehmann (2006), spoke of, lies in the radical performance structure that this work presents. It does not follow the beginning, middle end structure of Aristotle's dramatic philosophy. This narrative structure plays into the existence of another reality and the performance we see when we go to the theatre. The lucid structure in *Huis Clos* invites a crisis to arise and this comes to a conclusion by the end of the performance in the knowledge, when they leave. The actions presented in the work, was significant, it showed a crisis emerging and being resolved within the structure of the narrative of their life but didn't allowed for further development in the engagement with the work. They decided to engage in some other part of their life. From their previous experiences *Huis Clos* didn't form to their idea of art or performance, and therefore, rejected the engagement with the work, rendering it essentially non-existent.

It seems appropriate to suggest that performance exists only through engagement and that is why the context separating the artistic from the anthropological of the action is of importance. Erving Goffman (1959) invited the idea that man's “activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory fact that might otherwise remains unapparent or obscure” (p.40). Every action became significant in the story that *Huis Clos* told. Those wishing to engage with the work further, found an intriguing expectation that a development in the narrative would pursue with their being there. This was not the case. What was be known to them, their presence in the space, the actions they undertook became a source of interest and the narrative. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where the character's juggle with the fundamental question of being while the characters waited for Godot can be assimilated to *Huis Clos* through the fact, nothing happened. Essentially the performers are waiting for the work to end.

The actions of the audience's body extended to the body of the performer. Who is the performer and who is audience when both become an important part of the development of the event? The performance is the event itself, with the boundaries and roles being blurred to such an extent that if we were going to use the same principles in this presentation, you would be informing me, as much as I am informing you on the subject I am talking about. *Huis Clos* became a discussion, as this conference is, each participate taking its turn to make its mark on the event. I, as the artist, didn't know the narrative, it was an improvisation based upon this conversation. The performers of *Huis Clos* follow a commonality of existence that is shared with those that witnessed the work. The 'performers' are sharing the space, they share each other existence (as objects) and they are sharing a development in the narrative. Sartre argued, “this appearance always takes place in a particular perspective which expresses it relations to the ground of the world” (1957, p.341). The world of the performance and the world we inhabit are created through this engagement. So I will return to my original statement that I'm discussing, Performance is....the authenticity of the discussion in the context that is present to them.

If performance is a discussion into the structure of its own (and your) existence, what is the artefact, what is the tangible nature of performance? Is there one? I would argue there is no tangibility to performance. This performance, this discussion or conversation that we have, won't have any lasting evidence past the moment that it occurs. It is liminal process, or a process of engagement by which we gain knowledge. The structure of performance can only exist in the time and space because when the audience engage with event they are going through a process of gaining this knowledge. When you leave this hall, after I have finished, you will know more than when you came in about the structures and the philosophies of performance. Your bodily presence in this space has reinforced the relationship with the world. From this I can return to Sartre to express the ephemeral nature of performance; “the structure of the world implies that... we can *not* act without being *acted on*” (1957, p.347).

The digitalisation of *Huis Clos* can be seen behind me. How does this differ from the installation that I have discussed in the presentation previously? One response can be that the DVD is a representation of the world in virtual form. When we sit down to put on a film, we are not watching real life as it happens, we are not even

watching real life as it happened. Film and image is open to editorial processes. The body is excluded, from the engagement through technical functionality. If I were to present this paper via a digital recording then you cannot engage with me like you have done throughout this presentation. I cannot change or adapt my performance to the needs of the audience. The audience is separated from the work and creates strict and authoritative rules for you to follow.

Did *Huis Clos* actually take place or is a figment of my imagination? Only those that came to see the performance presented in May 2006 can answer this question with any certainty. The digital representation that you are watching may have been manipulated for the purpose of research but your interpretation of this event is through the trust of the director. Jean Baudrillard would argue the images “abandons 'the real' for the hyperreal by presenting an increasingly real simulation...” (Nunes, M. 1995. P.314). Was *Huis Clos* real or just a copy? He is suggesting we live in a world that is void of substance, the images were all that has left, which in our brief discussion of existentialism would leave nothingness in the relation to the world. The interpretation would only be remaining without the sign. Our body is rejected from the form and from that we can conclude, Performance...is a connection with the body, in time and space.

References

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