

1. Research Process, Contribution and Insights

The Pub Under the Stairs was created and directed by myself as part of The Broken Plate project, a site specific digital performance installation held at the new University of Greenwich building in Stockwell Street, London SE10. This award winning building is home to the university library and School of Design; the performance installations were open to the public and repeated over two days in May 2016. I was invited to be part of the wider project a year before by collaborating company Emergency Exit Arts and digital media academic colleagues. For my artistic contribution, I was intrigued to ask an initial research question: How can I create a contemporaneous real world and digital world that feels physically intact?

I spotted a local news item regarding the curious objects that had been dug up when the site of this architecturally innovative building was being excavated. I then contacted Pre-Construct Archeology who were responsible for identifying the finds, discovered in three brick built wells dating from the 17th and 18th century and later used as rubbish pits. The archeologists gave me permission to use documentation and images from their research to inform my own¹. My idea to use the archeological material suited the remit of the wider project as it spoke to local community interest and spatial-historical questions. This led to a successful bidding process: the project was funded by Arts Council England and University of Greenwich. My practice research took the form of writing and directing an original theatre piece between March- May 2016, titled *The Pub Under the Stairs*. I worked with a group of five actors and in collaboration with film and sound artist, Ed Currie, so I could experiment with and incorporate projection, moving images and pre-recorded sound amidst the live action.

¹ One object was a broken plate, depicting two redundant grave diggers relaxing while a mechanical digger is at work. This became the title and emblem for the overall project.

The dig had discovered the remains of an 18th century malthouse which supplied malted barley to local inns for making their own beer: this led me to contrive a fictional 'pub' space where characters from multiple eras could meet. It fitted the logic of what I aimed to be an 'other worldly' performance that the audience would be customers in the pub, standing around or leaning against a bar where beer is served throughout eternity. I chose a basement, under the stairs area of the 4 storey Stockwell Street site for my 15 minute performance slot, because the space lends itself to a subterranean atmosphere that interested me in relation to the developing thematic and aesthetic of the work. It had two potential surface areas for image projection, and an intimacy that is oddly enhanced by knowing viewers could spy from above the stairwell if they did not come downstairs and into the 'pub'. The performance was to be repeated multiple times.

As I led the intensive devising and rehearsal process, we explored the images of the old objects through animated film projection, alongside a collection of real, similar objects explored through touch and improvised use. Fork handles, a comb, glass bottles and other personal or household items that had been reclaimed at the site were of particular interest to me, evoking an everyday materiality and suggestion of objects handed down through time. The actors found rhythms and gestures in response to the objects: the slow repeated combing of hair; the action of pouring. We used the archeologists' descriptions of the artefacts as a source for spoken text, playing with delivery as factual information or whispered gossip and secrets shared. This led to the filmed close ups of mouths giving this text in the film projection, interspersed with live delivery and echoes of the same text. We tried objects passing from the digital into the material world. Working with the actors, the importance of human presence became apparent. As we developed more specified 'presences', five characters emerged and with them a refined research question: **How can the bringing together of characters and objects from the past and present, enhanced by the use of digital imagery and sound, create a loosening sense of time?**

Researching the history of the found objects and the people and buildings that had once occupied that space showed that the Stockwell Street site, now a place for higher education, had been the Spread Eagle pub and coaching stables in the 17th century. It had also been a place where a WWII bomb was dropped, blowing off the top of the malting kiln; and Humphries House, a 1960s council building that housed ground breaking computer technology. This led to creating the presence of Mary the elderly customer who had lived through it all, plus a barmaid who is skeptical of change and serves beer whatever drink you request, and three other fictional characters associated with that multiple yet singular site. These were a convivial malster who shared his stories of the malthouse working day; a less welcome person from 'the Council' on a mission to improve local services; a knowledge hungry student from now. During the devising process it was discovered that the characters 'know each other because they know each other' when present in that space. I learned that the impossibility of their co-existence was overcome, or at least helped, because in the moment of performance the sense of place was secure, rooted by the site itself. The traces of people, their buildings and everyday objects interacting and existing together in a confined space hold the audience in a particular realm. As Deleuze quotes, in his rethinking of Bergson's concept of time:

'What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or, if we prefer the expression, simultaneity. No doubt external things change, but their moments do not *succeed* [...] one another, except for a consciousness that keeps them in mind.'
(Bergson in Deleuze, 2011:48)

This expanded experience of time was embellished when I was able to identify and position recurring images within the performance. The archeology team believed that the discovered sternum of a parrot was probably from a Lilac-Crowned Amazon. This struck me as a useful performance motif for movement and travel, but also an interesting connection to the wild parakeets now seen in Greenwich parks. The birds appear displaced but still somehow belong to their environment, much like the characters and

objects themselves. I assembled a compositional score of the piece with scripted sections, then re drafted and edited the material into a final piece. The parrot sternum featured as a passing image and spoken reference, and the living parrot became a link throughout time, connected to the older woman in the hat as she mentions its visits and hopes for more. She herself is a witness to historical events as a perpetual customer. Though the only person given a name, her reliability is unknown and a key moment in the devising process was discovering the different tensions *between* the old lady and the other characters. The student girl is keen to hear the older woman's stories; the Council lady is unsettled; the malster indifferent; the barmaid an equal player who is complicit in the shifts in time. The barmaid blurs the older woman's truths, deliberately, when she corrects her with the final line about the existence of wild parrots these days, gently saying 'They're parakeets, Mary'.

The multidisciplinary nature of the devising and rehearsal process gave research insights as to how digital images (of the old artefacts and buildings) and the use of pre recorded sound (of the clinking of cutlery and glass, the chattering of voices) aid the expansion of a conscious understanding of duration. Deleuze suggests, in a response to Bergson, that 'Space itself will need to be based in things, in relations between things and between durations' (Deleuze, 2011:49). He argues that in this way space is delimited and has a meaning that is more than a simple place of external measurement. In this instance of a *performative and performed in space*, this research process found that the presence and traces of people immersed in the 'pub' (both characters and audience) were integral to these relations.

References

Deleuze, Gilles (2011) *Bergsonism*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Zone Books

2. Watch the performance here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf-6BAZqa44&t=11s>

3. Audience Responses

There were 6 performances of *The Pub Under the Stairs* over two days, on 20 May, 4pm-6pm and 21 May, 6pm- 8pm. These were some of the comments that support the research findings:

“magical

not rushed

layered

lovely, I really enjoyed it. I remember that place [Humphries House]

there was interaction between the different times so it felt that they were all linked

oo [a child, when the parrot flew]

you wonder who really lived here, not just famous people

I liked the immersive nature, people passing near me, I was involved in history

There’s an interesting dynamic created by thinking about the detritus of history – the random, homely, rusty and broken bits and pieces found in the ground – in the setting of a sleek, sparse modern building recently planted in that same ground. This quirky, engaging performance tapped into this dynamic well. There was a cleanliness and clarity to the presentation of the material, even while the material itself was grimy and chaotic. Audiences were welcomed and entertained but were also provided with an encounter with the past which was as strange and disorientating as such an encounter, to be genuine, needs to be. The standard of the staging, film and performances was impressively high.

I didn’t understand how it all happened, but it happened”