

ENCHANTMENT AND HAUNTING: CREATING LANDSCAPE THROUGH PERFORMANCE

Report on the AHRC Landscape and Environment Framework Seminar, Royal Holloway, University of London, June 20th 2005

This seminar was designed to provoke and record reactions to the AHRC's 'Landscape and Environment' research programme, with particular emphasis placed on its exploration of the relations between landscape, environment and performance. Three interrelated sets of views were elicited, focused on: the overall aims and contribution of the programme; the intellectual challenges and opportunities facing the programme, including the most pressing research agendas it might support; and the format of funding opportunities the programme might offer. These are summarised below, following a contextual account of the seminar's organisation and participants.

Organisation:

The seminar was organised by the Departments of Drama and Theatre, Geography and Music at Royal Holloway, University of London. The lead organiser was Professor Philip Crang (Geography), with an organising committee of Professor Clive Gamble (Geography), Dr Helen Nicholson (Drama and Theatre), Dr Danae Stefanou (Music), Dr Henry Stobart (Music) and Ms Libby Worth (Drama and Theatre).

There were nine invited plenary panellists. Professor Denis Cosgrove (Geography, UCLA), Dr Julian Johnson (Music, Oxford), Professor Mike Pearson (Performance Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth) and Dr Jane Rendell (Architecture, Bartlett / UCL) identified crucial questions and themes on the relations between landscape, environment and performance from their distinctive disciplinary locations. Viv Corringham (vocalist and sound artist), Liz Swift (of site-specific performance group Void) and Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett (artistic directors of physical theatre and dance group Frantic Assembly) discussed some of their recent performance practices in relation to the seminar's title. Professor Gillian Rose (Geography, Open University) provided keynote discussant's comments, identifying key themes and dilemmas thrown up by the day's discussions.

We regarded the views of delegates as the most important output of the day. As well as the final plenary discussion, these were recorded in the course of two sets of smaller group discussions. The first of these asked delegates to identify what they thought were the most important research questions that the 'landscape and environment' programme might seek to address. Sessions were chaired by RHUL staff from the three organising departments / disciplines (Dr Rachel Beckles-Willson, Music; Dr David Gilbert, Geography; Professor Helen Gilbert, Drama and Theatre; Dr David Lambert, Geography; Dr Tina K Ramnarine, Music; Ms Libby Worth, Drama and Theatre). The second set of discussion groups aimed to deepen discussion through a focus on different thematic concerns and practical orientations through which research questions might be approached: affects, bodies, histories, materialities, sites and soundscapes. Sessions were chaired by invited facilitators, who also produced pre-circulated briefing memos to stimulate discussion (respectively: Daniel

Grimley, Music, Nottingham; John Wylie, Geography, Sheffield; Paul Gough, Art and Design, UWE Bristol; Clive Gamble, Geography, RHUL; Sally Mackey, Central School of Speech and Drama; Martin Dixon, Music, Glasgow). All delegates had been previously circulated with the draft outline programme specification.

Delegate numbers were capped at sixty (the seminar was oversubscribed) and in total, including facilitators and panellists but excluding other invited participants (AHRC personnel, the Programme Director Professor Stephen Daniels, and student reporters), there were eighty-five participants. Those from academia were drawn from a range of disciplines including Geography, Drama and Theatre, Music, Architecture, Anthropology, Archaeology, Dance, Literature and the Visual Arts.

The contributions and aims of the programme:

- There was a **great deal of support for the programme in toto**, not least for how it might demonstrate distinctive arts and humanities contributions to our understanding of the bio-physical world, human relations to it, and their current constellation around both various environmentalisms and politics of place. At the broadest level, an emphasis on the combination of the material and the imaginative was frequently drawn upon to describe this distinctive arts and humanities contribution.
- There was a strong appreciation of the draft outline programme specification's **highlighting of performance** as an important part of this distinctive arts and humanities contribution.
- There was great enthusiasm for the programme's **potential to reconfigure existing boundaries of knowledge**. In such a view, a crucial legacy of the programme should be a transformation of existing arts' and humanities' approaches to 'landscape and environment'. This was apparent in speakers' and delegates' emphases on conceptual and methodological innovation, and in wider calls for experimentation and risk taking to be supported. There were also many suggestions that a priority area for support was work that combined theory and practice. In the same vein, there were calls to avoid the perceived tendency of other research programmes to dot 'i's' and cross 't's' of already established research agendas, or to look to fund across a 'shopping list' of identified topic areas. Generally, the programme's combination of concerns (landscape *and* environment) was seen as particularly important and helpful in this regard, bringing together different emphases, topics and research communities. There was interest in how this combination could be transformative rather than simply additive (i.e. how existing work on and understandings of landscape might be transformed through attention to 'environmental' approaches, and vice versa). More specifically, 'performance' was strongly endorsed as a conceptual and practical terrain that worked across this combination and thus as a focus that would stimulate the desired innovation.
- There was also a related emphasis on the contribution of the programme in **developing genuinely 'interdisciplinary' work**. Such interdisciplinarity was defined not as any combination of researchers with different disciplinary affiliations, but in terms of rigorous collaborations and engagements of different approaches, methods and practices. For example, using cutting-edge developments within architecture as a case study, plenary panellist Jane Rendell argued that the 'multi-disciplinary' nature of current interests in landscapes and

environments could and should be developed into innovative 'inter-disciplinary' forms of work deliberately exploring the spaces between established bodies of expertise and knowledge (in her case of architecture and the built environment, this meant historical work, creative practices and arts, and bio-physical design and engineering). Julian Johnson, reviewing work in musicology, likewise identified a pressing need to develop exchanges between existing research communities focused, respectively, on the interplays between musical performances and their environments (within ethnomusicology, as well as anthropology, cultural geography and acoustic ecology) and on music's imaginative landscapes (as addressed in text-based analytical musicology and histories of musical aesthetics). For Johnson, working across these approaches would prevent both reductions of music to context alone and separations of music from other modes of social experience.

- Relatedly, there was wide consensus on the **opportunities for practitioners** to bring important insights to the programme, and on the need for the programme to support practice based research, a range of practice based 'outputs', and collaborative work between academics and non-academic practitioners. Such 'non-academic' practitioners were recognised as being present both within the performing arts and within communities of landscape and environmental practice (whether codified as landscape 'producers' or 'users').
- There were, though, recognised to be **possible dangers** associated with an emphasis on reconfiguring established fields and communities of knowledge. Discussant Gillian Rose summarised these in terms of the fear that a concept such as landscape – which during the 1980's had been codified into a 'way of seeing' with specific histories and geographies – would become 'flabby' and 'saggy'. One of the group discussions conjured up the image of 'sludgy', 'brown' thinking emerging from an undue emphasis on mixture. More practically, inevitably some of the thematic discussions on the day itself demonstrated how true intellectual engagement can struggle with inadequate mutual knowledge, being replaced by the recitation of differently understood vocabularies and 'buzzwords'. However, the majority of opinion was that rather than suggesting a retreat into existing separate communities, these difficulties argued precisely the need for the programme to support sustained and rigorous intellectual exchanges and collaborations. Rigour and reconfiguration need to be combined. One particular suggestion in this regard was that 'interdisciplinary' collaborations might be helpfully focused on particular spaces / places or 'real world' issues or conflicts, thus giving them a purpose and direction beyond intra-academic conversations and conceptual exchanges. There was also recognition of the need for slow and careful development of such work (see funding section below).

Research agendas:

- **What performance brings to 'landscape and environment':** As noted above, there were felt to be different emphases in these two central concerns of the programme. Denis Cosgrove described landscape as strongly pictorial and distanced, environment as more fully sensual and embodied (as Julian Johnson elaborated, etymologically associated with ideas of en-tangle, en-gulf, en-circle, en-fold, en-snare etc.). In that context, performance plays a crucial role in working across these two defining terms of the programme. This, it was argued, makes performance a particularly important and intellectually exciting area of potential funding within the programme as a whole. An attention to performance

was described as **animating landscape** studies, preventing its equation with fixity rather than fluidity or transience (here an interest in mobility and landscape was seen as having particular potential by some delegates); as emphasising **sensuality**, allowing development beyond the solely visual (a particular theme of the seminar was the importance of soundscapes and music) and critically considering hegemonic separations of selves and scenes; and as centring questions of **embodiment** (exploring both embodied relations to environment – including but not limited to visibility -- and the role of performance in extending the body into its surrounding spaces).

- **What 'landscape and environment' bring to studies of performance:** It was also felt that studies of performance had much to gain from sustained attention to questions of landscape and environment. These contributions included the following. First, current preoccupations with '**sites**' of performance could be deepened. These emphasise environments of performance and performative practices concerned with engaging landscapes. They address how performance responds to and marks the places it inhabits. Here, questions were raised about the varied relationships between performance and its settings, including reciprocity, entanglement, indifference, conflict, dissonance and resistance. There was also recognition in the '**sites**' discussion group of the need for sites themselves to be seen as complex, palimpsests, relational, in flux, and contested, something that performances can be particularly adept at exploring. Second, there was enthusiasm for how established fields concerned with landscapes of performance, such as **scenography**, could be integrated into wider landscape debates through recognition of it as landscape production. Third, an emergent interest in **ecologies of performance** was highlighted for its concern with relating epistemologies of performance and ecology, and for mobilising notions such as sustainability and recycling in performance studies. Fourth, there was an interest in investigating site-based or site-inspired 'eco-theatre', various environmental and land arts, and the **role of performance in environmental education and environmentalism more generally**.
- **Performance and performativity:** There was a distinction made between performativity in the general sense (in Mike Pearson's words, as a 'trope of the transitive') and performance more specifically (as aesthetic, 'extra-daily' practice, whether undertaken by 'professional' performers or others through participation in periodic events, festivals and so forth). Attention to the latter, as well as the former, was seen as a crucial element of the distinctive 'arts and humanities' contribution to work on landscape and environment. A consistent theme of the day was the need for expert understanding of specific performance aesthetics and languages (something often absent from social scientific evocations of performance in general). However, the tenor of discussions was not towards the simple opposition of performance and performativity, with the latter, for example, partitioned off as a matter for social scientists. Rather, there was particular interest in performances that aimed to evoke, uncover and explore everyday performativities; and in research that would combine expert knowledge of performance aesthetics and languages with wider appreciation of their social contexts.
- **Enchantment and haunting:** These terms were generally seen as enticing signals of three important areas for further research. First, they were seen as designating the **emotional qualities** of landscape and environment. Clearly, their emotional registers differ. Enchantment is suggestive of captivation, seduction, sensuality; haunting of disturbance and the uncanny. In both, though,

there is recognition of the need for research that attends to the emotional as well as the intellectual, the immaterial as well as the material. Second, enchantment and haunting emphasise the role of performance in evoking the presences and absences of landscapes / environments. Enchantment involves the bringing (or more literally 'singing') into presence of the magic inherent in an object. Haunting is also an altered state, but evokes the sensed presence of more generally untold stories, buried voices, forgotten subjects. A recurrent theme in the day's discussions was therefore **the role of performance in unsettling our usual presences in landscape**, in making the absent present, and the politics of it doing so. Examples discussed on the day ranged from: Viv Corringham's 'shadow walks' in Cork, where local residents' sited memories were combined with her own vocal performances and 'chantings' in recordings that could then be walked around the city; Mike Pearson's discussion of the 'Haxey Hood', a transgressive, traditional topophilic performance in rural Lincolnshire, and his own guided tour of the palimpsest landscape of his childhood in the same area, 'Bubbling Tom'; Denis Cosgrove's discussion of the Low Kee Hong Noh theatre project, and its incantation of the ghosts of the 'cleared' area of Sago Lane in Singapore; and Frantic Assembly's choreographed evocation of the sexual and professional identities performed in a (now deserted) hotel in Brighton. Third, in consequence central themes of the day included **the relations of performance to place, memories, narratives and voices**.

- **Place, space, scale:** Whilst the plethora of terms in the seminar's title was at times a source of concern, there was also reference across the seminar to a number of other concepts that mediate between landscape, environment and performance. Chief among these were place, space and scale (with associated notions such as genius loci, boundaries, thresholds, liminality, transgression, connections, flows). Their consistent presence during the day suggests, perhaps, some of the resonances between the 'landscape and environment' programme and that on 'diasporas, migrations and identities'. Substantive questions thereby raised include: the relations between landscape, environment and placed identities; the relations between landscape, environment and dis-placed identities; the ethnicisations of landscape and environment; and the implications of the distinctive spatialities and temporalities of performance forms for their relations to landscape and environment.
- **The politics of landscape and environment:** It was regarded as important that the politics of landscape and environment were attended to. Priority areas for research were seen as including: the plurivocality of landscapes; the institutional production and regulation of landscapes; hegemonic ideologies of landscape and their naturalisation; transgressive inhabitations of landscapes; marginalised landscapes and environments; the 'more than human' quality of landscapes and environments (thus opening up the politics of post-humanism).
- **Empirical coverage:** There was a resistance to any equation of landscape and environment to particular genres of place (e.g. rural rather than urban), national contexts (e.g. Englishness) or agencies (most notably in an emphasis on the non-human as well as human).
- **Methodologies:** Generally, there was recognition that centring performance might sometimes require sources and methods beyond the textual. Areas such as ethnomusicology and anthropology of theatre were seen as traditionally divided between AHRC and ESRC on the basis of methods with, for example, ethnographic research directed towards ESRC funding. There was a strong feeling

that in order for this programme to engage seriously with the research agendas identified as priority areas, various forms of 'social research' with people might sometimes need to be deployed, and that their would not weaken the programme's distinctive arts and humanities orientation.

- There was much discussion of the **international scope** of the research to be funded. It was recognised that the histories and geographies of 'landscape' might be usefully interrogated by work beyond the UK and indeed British imperial space. So too might notions of 'performance'.

Forms of funding:

Related to the intellectual discussions summarised above, various suggestions for the character and organisation of programme funding were made. These included:

- The AHRC's existing policy of **funding a range of research outputs** was strongly endorsed in the context of this programme. This included strong interest in less purely academic outputs (performances, exhibitions, creative pieces and texts, and the like) and the possibilities for research processes and practices themselves to be outputs (so, for example, site-specific performance work to be a central output). Generally, it was felt that the AHRC's pioneering support of practice-based research would be particularly important to this programme.
- The potential of the call for funding applications to **depart from a 'shopping list' model**. For example, rather than listing a series of topics across which coverage is desired, the plenary discussant Gillian Rose suggested briefer definitions of key concepts to which applicants could then respond.
- The need for a **'slow-burn' or a 'marinading' process** for the most innovative and effective forms of inter-disciplinarity. This might involve earlier funding of focused network activities leading into later funding calls for larger research projects, or an explicit use of small grants to fund innovative pilot projects (perhaps in the spirit of the AHRC's 'innovation awards'), which could then bid for later, greater funding if successful. To reiterate, allowing time was seen as crucial for effective support of innovative work.
- There was seen to be potential for the AHRC's Fellowships in the Creative and Performing Arts to be used as a model for **staff exchanges between different communities of practice in the fields of 'landscape and environment'**. As well as allowing practitioners without a permanent academic home to work with academic communities (as in the existing fellowship scheme), the AHRC might consider the potential for academic applicants to work with and in non-academic settings (becoming 'academics in residence' in performance and arts settings, and in other non-academic communities of practice in landscape and environment).

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