

UC Irvine

2016 Conference Proceedings

Title

A path from Irvine: Theatrical and anthropological explorations of self-knowledge

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24n07548>

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Publication Date

2018-02-04

Peer reviewed

BODY **of** **KNOWLEDGE**

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Proceedings of A Body of Knowledge - Embodied Cognition and the Arts conference
CTSA UCI 8-10 Dec 2016

Gey Pin Ang and Caroline Gatt

The workshop

The contribution Ang and I presented at the Body of Knowledge conference took the form of a workshop. Gatt led the workshop and Ang participated from the UK via video conferencing. The workshop was held in three parts. For the first part participants were invited to carry out certain theatre training tasks proposed by Gatt. In the second part Gatt gave a talk. In the third part Ang, by means of a talk and work demonstrations, shared with participants her experience of working at the University of California in 1992, in what was the last phase of the Objective Drama programme.

In the first part of the workshop Gatt invited the ten participants to remove their shoes, she gave them an extract from an anthropology text by Schieffelin 1998 called “Problematizing performance”, a mirror and asked them to find a seat in one of the chairs along the perimeter of the room. The room had been cleared so that we could move around in the space. The participants were asked to read the extract from the reading, holding the mirror. They were asked to pay attention to how they responded to reading the text, to note whether the mirror, as they held it and explored it tactily, participated in some way in the forming of that experience. After a short while for this experiential reading, Gatt invited the participants to find a space in the room where they could move about freely, and demonstrated a task in theatre training called the sphere. In this task, with one’s feet anchored to the ground, one imagines that they are surrounded by a sphere. The task is to fill this sphere with colourful dots. The dots can

be made as if injecting colour into the sphere, or drawing the dot, or merely leaving a trace with one's finger tips. In the task it is important to constantly check that the sphere is being filled in equally, with the dots equally distributed in upper and lower quadrants, in front of the body and behind it. What colours are the dots? What texture are they? Of course the dots are imagined, however the task invites participants to actively see those dots with ones' eyes open, to check whether they are distributing the dots equally throughout the sphere. Subsequent tasks included making imaginary lines instead of dots, then taking these imagined lines across the room, one's feet no longer anchored. Of changing the imagined medium of their movement: Are they drawing these lines in air, water, honey, wood or iron? All through two things are asked first that the participants pay attention to different levels (high up, mid level, down low), to both in front and behind themselves, to close to their bodies and stretched as far as their limbs could go. Second the participants were asked to carry out these tasks with as much precision as they could manage. If they were to draw a straight line it would be straight and not wavy.

A further task involved string. The participants worked in pairs tying a string between them at the level of their hips. The very simple task is to move backwards and forwards in the room keeping the string taut, and communicating only by means of the pull on the string.

The participants included three professional performers, one literature scholar, an anthropologist, two scholars from the department of computing and informatics, a musician and music scholar, and a medical student. All of the participants dived into

the various tasks with what I can only describe as a mode of research. They all engaged with curiosity and determination in the tasks offered.

The talk

To start off I'd like to give you a little background about my work. I began my theatre training in parallel with my undergraduate studies in anthropology. As I continued my studies in anthropology, I carried on participating in workshops with people who as it turned out worked with Grotowski, or with someone who worked with Grotowski. At the time I was mainly interested in how theatre could contribute methods to anthropology. This is still one of the main threads in my current work. However the other thread in my work which I want to focus on today is the question of *encounter*, specifically how to engage mutually across difference or alterity. The question of human diversity is central to anthropology as a discipline and in this talk I want to share with you a bit of the history of a major debate in anthropology about encountering otherness. My motivation for collaborating with Gey Pin has a lot to do with this history. The focus of the collaboration between myself and Gey Pin is to explore how the way of knowing, the epistemology of theatre enquiry and that of anthropology could mutually nourish each other.

Gey Pin Ang

Let me also introduce Gey Pin Ang, she has recently completed a Practice-as-Research PhD at the School of Arts, University of Kent. She is currently teaching a

praxis course at the University of Plymouth. Her research draws from associative connection to her Chinese roots through song search and Taijiquan practice. Ang performed lead roles within the Project *The Bridge: developing theatre arts*, of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards, Italy where she was based for just over 9 years. Since 2006, she has taught internationally via *Sourcing Within* worksessions and collaborates with intercultural and interdisciplinary artists. Gey Pin's current ongoing research explores the notion of 'care of the self' and the discoveries of the performer's potentiality through one's physical and vocal embodiment in a performative work.

Knowing from the Inside

My project and the collaboration with Gey Pin is part of a broader project called Knowing from the Inside, led by Tim Ingold and based at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. www.abdn.ac.uk/research/kfi/ I just want to read a short extract from the project description to give you an idea of the overall context for the work we're sharing with you here:

“This project seeks to reconfigure the relation between practices of inquiry in the human sciences and the forms of knowledge to which they give rise. Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is not created through an encounter between minds furnished with concepts and theories, and a material world already populated with objects, but grows from the crucible of our practical and observational engagement with beings and things around us in the very processes of thought. Knowledge, we

contend, comes from thinking *with*, *from* and *through* beings and things, not just *about* them.”

The crisis of representation

So KFI is the context of the current project, but what is the history that leads to this interest in doing studies *with* others rather than *of* others, as most anthropologists do?

Academia is always involved in some way in the dominant forms of any particular time. At the time inception of the discipline colonialism shaped a lot of what anthropologists did. Even when it became a professionalised academic discipline and so anthropologists were less directly involved in colonial governmental work, the colonialism became epistemological – who had the authority to explain the social world.

Martin Holbraad (2012), an anthropologist involved in what is currently being called the ontological turn, writes:

the story of the discipline during this period can be told as a series of competing attempts to account for the (always self-evident) fact that the people anthropologists studied should so often and in such varied ways get the world around them wrong (myths, rituals, magic, and all the other odd “beliefs” that went with them) (*ibid*: 26).

However, prodded by post-colonial and subaltern scholars anthropologists could no longer ignore the subjugating effect of their writing. By the 80s this led to what is referred to as the 'crisis of representation' (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Anthropology turns to theatre 1.

This crisis of representation involved a thorough self-scrutiny across large swathes of the discipline, in fact it's also called the reflexive turn (Whitaker 1996). Ethnographic writing was the main focus of this self questioning, trying to understand and redress the exoticising effects of writing (Marcus and Cushman 1982). But it also included a focus on the subjectivity of the anthropologist as the vehicle for producing anthropological knowledge (Okely 1992). This led to an interest in performance and went beyond writing practices.

At this time there were a number of experiments between anthropology and performance. For example Jerome and Diane Rothenburg organised a meeting called the symposium of the whole in 1983, where there were academic papers and round tables but also poetry sessions, music sessions, performance sessions. However, most well known experiment at least in the UK are Victor and Edi Turner's experiments with performance and pedagogy (Turner 1979, Turner and Turner 1982, Turner 1985). Also through Victor Turner's collaboration with Richard Schechner (1981) the field of performance studies emerges.

However, these experiments sort of petered out. Performance studies for instance has not really been heard of in mainstream anthropology since then, except, for instance to distinguish an ethnographic approach from a performance studies one

(Schieffelin 1995). What remained of the experiments were domesticated and folded back into conservative academic practice, into the writing of texts.

Resonance

When we consider the career-complex of the discipline, the craft of anthropology remains 'instrumental':

As anthropologists we are not truly implicated in the world of other people. It does not really matter all that much if we understand them or not. Our misunderstandings are not likely to resonate with crucial effects for us. We are concerned to produce effects on the anthropological community, and only secondarily on the natives whose language we are trying to grasp.

(Wikan 1993: 206)

While the entire point of fieldwork is to bring to awareness our own assumptions, because of the orientation towards the academy and not the people we work with, what tends to happen is that what we might learn through fieldwork gets reformulated into concepts and arguments and in this way very often the very assumptions that might have been shaken up through fieldwork may simply get sedimented all the more solidly.

An anthropologist turns to theatre 2

So in my work I have found myself exploring how to allow my entire craft of as an anthropologist to be open to a different way of knowing. I turned specifically towards

working with research theatre, both because of my own training but also because in I found in Grotowski's legacy a really rigorous curiosity about encounter, and how it is not an obvious thing at all.

However, right from the very first times I heard about Grotowski I found that there were some aspects of the ideas that inspired and others that actually repelled me, they are at odds with fundamental positions in contemporary anthropology. I found this struggle with the traces or echoes of Grotowski's work challenging and productive – they force me to question in a very real and tangible way how I can deal with difference – and not necessarily a difference that I am neutral towards.

Here let me say right away that I have no special familiarity with Grotowski writings, or his work. I certainly do not set out to analyse his ideas or his work. The only reason I'm referring to Grotowski is because of the way these ideas influenced my specific trajectory working with theatre and anthropology, and they acted as a springboard for this current work.

Grotowski in Irvine

From 1983 until 1986, and then for shorter visits until 1992 Grotowski was based here in UC Irvine (Schechner and Wolford 1997, Wolford 1996). There are two buildings on the campus, the barn and the yurt that were dedicated to his project 'Objective Drama'. For me the ideas which emerged during this phase of Grotowski's research hold that productive tension most acutely. Grotowski is quoted as saying that the Theatre of sources, the phase before he came to Irvine, focused on "that which precedes the differences" (Wolford 1997:). For most of anthropology's history the key focus was exploring so-called 'human nature', precisely that which precedes

difference. However from at least the 60s, anthropologists came to think of *the very capacity for difference as human nature* (Geertz 1966). What makes us human is our great plasticity, our adaptability to different contexts of upbringing. This idea has far reaching political implications. So to me the idea of searching for some unchanging common core of humanity goes against everything that I have learned to hold dear through contemporary anthropology. But, and this is key to my argument here, I had got to know of Grotowski's *ideas after* having started my training, and somehow the training had already claimed me. There was something in the work that was not the same as the ideas.

Grotowski goes on to compare theatre of the sources to Objective drama where the focus was attention to traditional techniques was “not in order to synthesize ... but rather to test the efficacy of precise technical elements when applied in a different context from that of their arising.” (Wolford 1997:) This is suddenly very exciting because of the questions that it inspires me to ask. In an intellectual climate that considers transformation, movement and emergence as the basic quality of the world, can we still talk about precision? What could precision be if not defined in terms of unchanging natural laws? How can it be recognised? Equally what is efficacy when everything is emergent? And again how can such efficacy be recognised? Nonetheless, I found I could only even start to be curious about this process because the training had allowed me to hold in abeyance my dislike for his ideas.

The art of enquiry

I felt that the only way to explore these questions is through the way of knowing of theatre, the art of enquiry as Grotowski referred to it (Grotowski 1997:). This has

meant working with Gey Pin on developing my theatre work, incorporating studio work into my daily practice. In fact in the very early stages of our collaboration, in 2013, Gey Pin suggested that to achieve the sort of encounter I was interested in, she could be the anthropologist, and observe my theatre work. Depending on the way I engaged in this theatre work, Gey Pin would be able to tell whether I had, as an anthropologist, understood something about her and the ‘tradition’ she carried with her. She would evaluate whether my anthropological interpretations had grasped something that resonated with her, not only through the conventional texts I produced, but also through my theatre work. After all that is where her expertise lies. Together we have also presented at conferences together, written academic papers together, had long exchanges about the concepts we use, what things mean for us or how they are interesting to us.

In the photos below are some examples of the more open imaginative exchanges that Gey Pin hosted in her Sourcing Within Sessions, specifically in the photos below are from the celebration of Sourcing Within’s tenth anniversary, organised by Ang and held in Casa Cares, Reggello, Italy. In the task below I invited the professional actors who participated in the exchange event to read an extract from an anthropology text about theatre (Schieffelin 1998) in small groups. After having read and discussed the extract I invited the participants to respond to their experience of the reading and process of collective understanding and interpretation. I specifically asked them to respond to this experience in the mode of work they are most experienced and skilled in. With most of the participants this meant working with the experience as they would when developing an improvisation for a theatre etude. I invited them to take notes and explore the experience of the group reading

through their expertise of performance, after all reading and discussion are experiences on par with any other and personal experience is the material most actors work with when developing material for their work. Two participants were musicians. One responded to the experience through improvisation that included composing fragments on the piano that was there in the space we worked in. The other musician, Nickolai D. Nicholov who is also Gey Pin Ang's long-term collaborator and fellow performer and deviser in *Wandering Sounds*, created a sound walk during the whole workshop. Finally after a period of developing and crystallizing their response to the reading experience as a theatre practitioner does, I invited the participants to show a repeatable part of their explorations, or what we could call their notes through performance. They showed their work to each other and for those who had time I asked them to respond once again in the way they would respond when working on a piece of devised theatre, as they do in their daily work – and not as might be expected in an academic setting, even if they were being invited to work with an overtly academic texts and as part of an academic project. We ended the experiment with a half hour discussion. Two comments in this discussion that I have found very useful in thinking further about this work were the following. Lembo, both an anthropologist and a performer, commented on how this work reminds her how the experience of reading, striving to understand and pursuing academic interest in not only deeply visceral but also so often glossed over as such. The second comment, which was reiterated by many was about how the group reading and challenge of the particular reading brought to the fore how intellectually active the work of improvisation is.







The experiences of this experiment will be folded into the next experiment I hope to carry out within Ang's Sourcing Within platform, as all previous experiments were folded into this particular iteration of the work with Ang. What is emerging is that the process of reading itself can be changed by this in a way does not flatten either the rigorous and complex nature of the written arguments, nor the approach and way of knowing of the performers who engaged with it.

Considering that the way of working in such a performative stance requires time and attention to exploring the minutiae of experience, another factor that is very important is time. In order not to create a hierarchy between a performative way of knowing and an analytical way of knowing, time for a back and forth movement may be necessary.

Conclusion: What is knowable

I want to conclude with a thought that being able to encounter difference may require bodily change, achieved through practice. Greg Downey is anthropologist and

neuroscientist who works with Capoeiristas. He found that capoeira training develops peripheral vision. Where reading for example relies on and develops foveal vision, vision in focus, Capoeira training develops peripheral vision because the Capoeirista, like an actor, needs to be aware of the entire performative situation. What changes in this training process is the capoeiristas actual visual apparatus. The key to Downey's argument is that "[h]uman physiology and behaviour can be modified, affecting both what is 'known' and what is 'knowable'" (Downey: 236). This is what I mean in the abstract that work on the self is ontologically generative: every way of knowing develops the living person in specific ways, so what changes is not only our concept of reality but actually what it is possible to perceive, and that this change happens very mundanely through our practices.

As I final note I wanted to give this talk in the regular academic format because while I want to valorise the epistemology of theatre, I don't want to do so by jettisoning academic craft of anthropology, which is also a living body practice, rather I am interested in experimenting with what happens when one way of knowing is not subjugated by the other.

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