

Dialogic Evidence: Documentation of Ephemeral Events

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Abstract

Performance and documentation have long been characterised as oppositional practices, separated by competing voices which argue the virtues of disappearance and reproducibility. In response to this state of affairs, the recently completed *Dialogic Evidence* project was designed to explore the possibility (and the limits) of a productive co-existence between performance and documentation practices. In this paper I reflect on this project's processes and outcomes, particular highlighting the potential of social web technologies as a collaborative means to archive, discuss and remember live performance.

Introduction

This paper will explore a range of perspectives on the relationship between performance and documentation practices, specifically reflecting on the primary outcomes of my recent 10-month research project *Dialogic Evidence: Documentation of Ephemeral Events*. The project was active from mid September 2006 to mid July 2007, and was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Small Grants in the Creative and Performing Arts Scheme.

Historically, performance documentation has commonly been characterised as an unfaithful representation of the ephemeral art experience.¹ However, in recent years the relationship between documentation and live performance practices has moved towards reconciliation. The reasons for such a shift are many, possibly including the validation of new methods in performance research, the use of new digital technologies within performance, anxieties over disappearing legacies, and the widespread acceptance of the personal and cultural value of mediated memories. Yet not all are encouraged by the promises of digital technologies, or the increasing demands for reproducible evidence by funding bodies and archive-oriented institutions. The role that documentation plays in the recording of performance continues in certain arenas to be described as negative or destructive towards the knowledges embodied in live events. It may be that this oppositional view is a reaction to the misuse of positivistic imperatives in the context of performative research (i.e. knowledge must be quantifiably measurable, repeatable, transcultural, and objective, leading towards generalized theories), or to economic values that emphasise the need for reproducible products. Such values are discernable in forms of academic assessment and validation that privilege

¹ See discussion of monologic and dialogic approaches to documentation in 'Why Document Performance' and the notion of preservation vs. performative documentation in 'Liveness' below.

documents of performance over performance per se. In reaction to this state of affairs, several researchers have made the case for replacing performance documentation with older forms of oral dissemination, which as Caroline Rye has suggested, 'share with performance an emphasis on the live as a knowledge-producing encounter' (2003:2-3).

In response to this current climate, the *Dialogic Evidence* project aimed to explore the possibility (and the limits) of a productive co-existence between performance and documentation practices. Furthermore, the project set out to discover ways in which documentation practices can remain sensitive to the (often undervalued) provisional nature of performance. Such an endeavour remains a significant challenge in the move towards the wider acceptance by the academy of provisional forms of knowledge resulting from practice-led research activities.

Documentation and Interpretation

The notion that documentation is both a process and an object, is widely accepted. The OED defines documentation as, 'The accumulation, classification, and dissemination of information... [and] the material so collected' (3b). What is missing from this definition is the role of interpretation, a crucial step which distances documentation from the documented. Many disciplines have well established methods for capturing, interpreting and disseminating evidence. Researchers in these areas frequently make use of such methods to create experimental situations that generate results which can be documented and reproduced, thus making the act of interpretation as straightforward as possible. The aims of researchers operating in artistic contexts are often quite different. In the book *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco describes a similar variation in intention as follows:

When I write a theoretical text I try to reach, from a disconnected lump of experiences, a coherent conclusion and I propose this conclusion to my readers. If they don't agree with it, or if I have the impression that they have misinterpreted it, I react by challenging the reader's interpretation. When I write a novel, on the contrary, even though starting (probably) from the same lump of experiences, I realize that I am not trying to impose a conclusion: I stage a play of contradictions (1992:140).

A common intention held by most (if not all) researchers across the disciplines is to contribute to the advancement of practice in their area of research. In the broad area of the creative arts, works are often valued for their ability to raise questions or provide provisional and nuanced perspectives. These values are not often shared, for example, by researchers documenting the effectiveness of a new airplane wing design, where the aim is to reduce uncertainty (in regards to safety) to a minimum. In the case of performance research, researchers must often contend with the fact that the experimental situation to be documented has been wilfully created to make singular interpretations difficult, and that such expertly executed ambiguity can be a positive contribution to the area of research. This is not to suggest that facilitating

multivocality reduces such work to interpretive relativism, or, as Eco has put it, '...I accept that [an open] text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense' (1992:141). Of course, performance can also be valued for its clarity of articulation, its ability to veraciously demonstrate where descriptive communication falters; but even in this instance the goal is not to provide clear and reproducible data or rational arguments (other disciplines are better suited for these tasks); rather performance is able to confront one with the full realm of human modes of experience at its disposal, alive in its contingency and messiness even when the performing artist's intention is clear.

Why Document Performance?

At this point, it may be useful to briefly attend to the question of why, in the broad sense, is performance documentation produced, leaving aside for the moment the obvious motivation of promotion and marketing. Although research in the performing arts is not often concerned with empirical verification, logical proofs, or the unambiguous resolution of social or technical issues, academics in this area frequently claim that they are documenting performance as an epistemic practice. With the academy's increasing acceptance of performance as both a means of researching, and as a form of research output in itself, comes the implicit (or at times clearly argued) belief that performance can be an activity which generates new and useful knowledge. Yet without a stable form of dissemination, it remains difficult for performance to integrate effectively within the academy's knowledge economy. Notwithstanding the significant role which performance plays in the UK's so called 'cultural industry', it is only through documentation that performance can contribute to the foundation of cultural authority, that is *the archive*. Jacques Derrida, in his book *Archive Fever*, reminds us that the etymology of the word 'archive' reveals its longstanding role as a primary vehicle for socio-political dominance, forming the basis of law and order. As many of us are likely aware, documents and their archives also form the basis for academic authority. In this context, the role of an academic is similar to the Greek *archons* described by Derrida:

The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law (1996:2).

This understanding of the drive to archive performance shifts the discussion away from the all too familiar dichotomy of preservation and disappearance, towards an understanding of documentation's active (and at times hegemonic) role, one that is often performative in nature. My proposal here, as was the case throughout the *Dialogic Evidence* project, is the continual exploration of the performative possibilities of documentation, an effort in which I suspect many performance makers, curators, writers and archivists

are actively (yet frequently in a non-reflective pre-conscious manner) taking part in. The key agenda in this exploration, from which the term 'dialogic' is an obvious clue, is to attempt to move the role of documentation away from repressive and monologic forms of authority which often obscure the knowledge embodied in performance events, towards an approach that embraces multiple (and even at times apparently contradictory) perspectives. I am strongly in agreement with the following statement by Caroline Rye in her paper *VIDEO WRITING: The documentation trap, or the role of documentation in the practice as research debate*:

I would like to see more attention given to the live exchange, the spontaneous, reactive, evolutionary, provisional exchanges of ideas and opinions which formed, and still form, the basis for much information gathering, judgments and policy-making today (2003:3).

However, unlike Rye (at least in this paper), I feel that documentation should have an important role in the exchange of provisional forms of knowledge resulting from performance. Yet, I am equally aware, as I have previously stated, that documentation is too frequently used in exchange for performance, thus continuing to giving some merit to documentation resistance strategies. These were the motivating factors behind my use of the term *Convivencia* as a title for a symposium that I ran as part of the *Dialogic Evidence* project in February 2007. *Convivencia* signifies a somewhat utopian type of tense but productive dialogue between performance and documentation practices taking place in a common community, a place where the longstanding dominant role of documents and their archives (and archons) may be reconfigured, and where exclusive ontological differences can be questioned (even if they are later found to be intrinsic).

Liveness

One such popular ontological claim, which I would like to briefly address here, is that liveness is necessarily tied to the presence of live bodies. This is a claim that I have questioned elsewhere as follows, 'can a document, even in the absence of its source, emphasise "the authority of what is live and provisional" (Rye 2003:6)' (Stapleton 2006:81)? Must a live experience consist of the physical co-presence of human beings, thus excluding temporally immediate encounters with mediatized forms of human presence and interaction? As Philip Auslander pointed out in a recent interview, cultural understandings of liveness shift over time:

[T]he idea of a live broadcast constituted a redefinition of liveness such that performers and spectators no longer had to be physically co-present for an event to count as live. What had been a physico-temporal relationship thus became a purely temporal one. The use of the phrase 'go live' (originally a broadcasting term) to describe the initiation of websites suggests that we are now prepared to extend the concept of liveness to non-human entities (websites) with which we nevertheless interact in real time. The idea that liveness is a fundamental mode of performance remains unchanged over

this history even as the definition of what counts as a live event changes in response to technological innovation (2005:97-98).

Several others have argued in favour of the notion that we (as makers, writers, archivists and curators of performance) need to be open to what liveness can be. Extracts from an online report by Tagny Duff on the Convivencia Symposium highlight this concern:

[Simon] Ellis stated the importance of thinking through the philosophical and artistic implications of liveness in relation to digital and web based media... The dad.project, among other projects on his site, intend to subtly undermine the deeply embedded hierarchy in which the live body is considered to be the acme of performance practice.

Duff called for a re-assessment of creative lying, error and authorial hoax as a form of ontogenesis; a necessary movement that generates anomaly and mutation, often wittingly and unwittingly employed in documentation and conservation practices.

[Fiona] Wright explored how indexing, as a form of taxonomy, betrays its own lie- as the stable and complete mapping of meaning is in constant flux... Wright called for embodying both betrayal and fidelity as a form of liveness - a sentiment that was echoed in the previous two presentations.

Michael Mayhew ended the event with a presentation of an archive of objects from his coat pockets. He recalled stories associated with each object emphasizing the lapses and unexpected recall of memories... Mayhew reminded us that oral tradition, as a mode of documentation, is a large part of performance/live art practices that must also be acknowledged in archiving practices
(<http://www.docam.ca/techwatch/fiche2.php?id=91> Accessed 11.07.07).

From Duff's account it would seem that liveness is understood to not only be established by the presence of physical bodies, but also by performativity and acts of memory or *rememberings* (Ellis' suggested alternative to the term documentation). Furthermore, an awareness of one's performative actions is not only essential for individuals in the conventionally understood role of performer, but also for those engaged in documentary practices. This notion challenges the idea that performance documentation should be an activity concerned with accurate representation and preservation of past events.

Non-Web Case Studies

It may be worth briefly mentioning a few notable case-studies which have informed the *Dialogic Evidence* project. Although intentionally removed from the domain of digital resources, *Shattered Anatomies: Traces of the Body in Performance* (edited by Adrian Heathfield with Fiona Templeton and Andrew Quick, and published by Arnolfini Live), demonstrates what Laurie Anderson once wrote about another noteworthy collection of documents: 'In this book, the images and text are presented in the spirit of the work itself: ever evolving and reinventing' (Goldberg, 2004:7). Such is my experience of this collection

of fragments described on the cover as 'A limited edition box containing artefacts, documents and critical theory from an international field of performance artists, theatre makers and writers.' The process of (literally) uncovering meaning while engaging with *Shattered Anatomies* clearly implicates me in my role as performative reader. And my readings continually change, not only resulting from the deterioration of the material caused by each encounter due to the fragility of the contents found in this box.

Another performance archive which attempts to do more than merely describe previous work, while simultaneously adopting similar strategies to the work itself, is Forced Entertainment's *Imaginary Evidence* CD-ROM. Mathew Reason, in his book *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, identifies two categories of performance documentation: pragmatic and artists. Forced Entertainment's website is described as an example of pragmatic documentation. Reason states:

The website meets many demands: from audiences wanting to know about tour schedules, promoters wanting information and contact details for the company, journalists wanting background information, and (not least) students wanting to research previous productions (2006:58).

Contrastively, *Imaginary Evidence* is seen by Reason as being an example of artistic documentation, which he describes as follows:

These representations, therefore, seek a way of speaking about the work that is more akin to the aesthetics of the original piece. Often this involves mixing genres, using anecdote and conflating or expanding ideas and times and events to subvert conventional chronologies (2006:60).

In the case of this CD-ROM, the overriding theme is one of fragmentation. This, as Reason also points out, is made evident by the non-linear and considerably messy navigation menu on the main page of the document, as well as by the detached nature of each individual page, which nevertheless are stylistically coherent, seemingly acting as a trigger to playful and fictitious memories. The digital format of the CD-ROM is well suited for such non-linear and fragmentary narratives, although the static nature of the disc requires one's participation to be largely reactive, a defining difference between static and active digital documents. Even so, many other notable contributions to performance documentation have been constructed for static disc formats including: Desperate Optimists' *Stalking Memory* CD-ROM; Bodies in Flight's *Flesh and Text* CD-ROM; and PARIP's *Mnemosyne Dreams* multi-viewpoint DVD.

Web-Based Case Studies

The rising popular use of social web technologies (e.g. profile networks, blogs & wikis, social bookmarking, and media sharing sites), along with GNU GPL and Creative Commons licensing schemes, has opened several exciting possibilities for the area of performance documentation. Although the use of such technologies is extremely varied, the overriding impact of their

implementation has resulted in a shift from authoritarian control over methods of producing and organising web content towards collaborative, user-led approaches. In response to this current climate, and in particular to such projects as PARIP explorer, ccMixer and Rhizome.org, in the planning stages of the Dialogic Evidence project I set out to develop a pilot performance documentation website, which was latter named LiveArchives.org. The site was initially conceptualised and constructed in collaboration with designer Mike Fallows. The primary aims of the pilot were as follows:

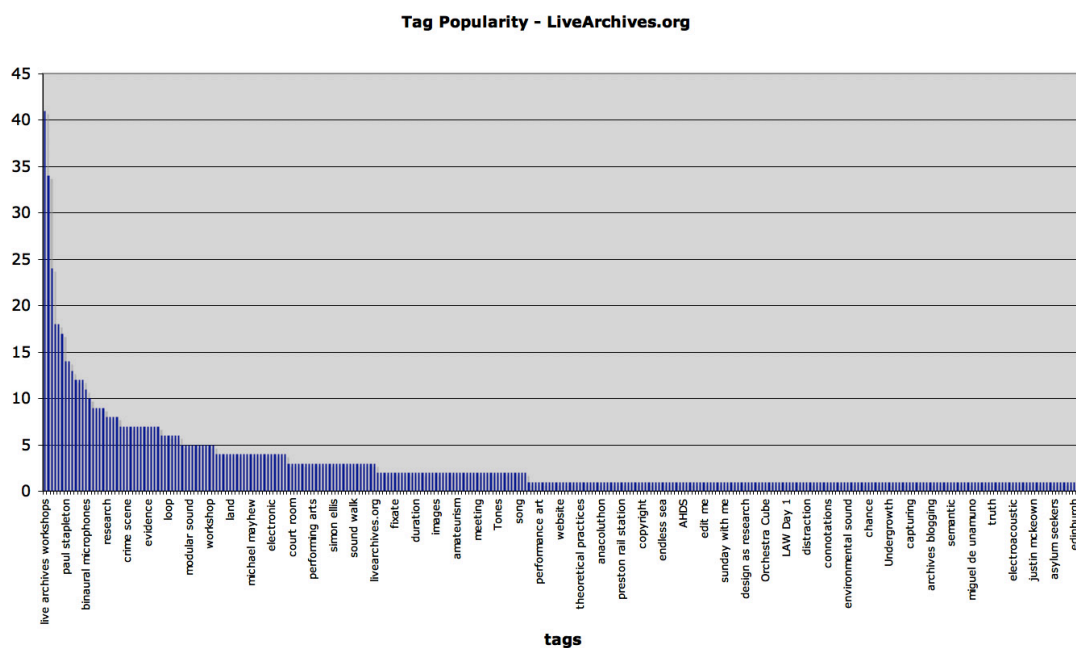
- Create a low cost dynamic website, which is hosted independently from any HE institution, that acts as a discussion platform and an archive for performance documentation;
- Allow for the open registration of users to add to and modify the existing contents of the site;
- Allow for multiple methods of contribution, including the use of embedded multi-media content;
- Explore multiple forms of content organisation;
- Run a performance workshop which makes use of (and adds content to) the site (this latter resulted in the Live Archives Workshops series which features prominently on the site);
- Invite other individuals to participate in the administration of the site.

The use of WordPress as the site's underlying architecture (PHP-based with MySQL database) allows for LiveArchives.org to meet several of our aims. The site acts in some ways as a blog (registered contributors can create posts written from first person perspectives on events), a collection of archived media (they can also embed or link to audio files, video clips, image, etc), a social network (they can also add profile pages under the person or organisation category and post announcements), a discussion forum (registered contributors and visitors to the site can add comments which are placed alongside posts rather than at the bottom of the page), and as a wiki (allowing contributors to edit eachothers posts, or collaboratively construct posts on past or current events, or create new events in the form of discussions, reconstructions or remixes). WordPress allows individuals to participate at a basic level in the site (covering all of the above activities) without requiring knowledge of programming languages (html, etc) thanks to the built in rich text editor; although it simultaneously allows for more advanced users to make use of their programming skills.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the pilot study was in the area of content organisation. In line with the dialogic approach to co-authorship of content, the pilot was designed to emphasise a folksonomic approach over an ontological classification system. I agree strongly with the perspectives of Clay Shirky in his web paper *Ontology is Overrated: Categories, Links, and Tags*. Shirky states:

That strategy of designing categories to cover possible cases in advance is what I'm primarily concerned with, because it is both widely used and badly overrated in terms of its value in the digital world (2006:Part1).

From this position we incorporated multiple methods of navigating through the LiveArchives.org site, include conventional search as well as chronological and categorical lists; however, the primary method of engaging with the site's contents is through user assigned metadata known as tags (organised in the form of a tag cloud on the home page of the site), as well as through hyperlinks. The tag cloud displays the 125 most popular tags, with the relative size of the tag increasing based likewise on popular usage. Visitors to the site can click on a tag which will then generate a page displaying a list of posts that have been assigned this tag. Tags displayed in the cloud lack controlled vocabulary, allowing contributors to assign any word or phrase to any post. Such an approach creates a certain amount of so-called 'meta-noise', or tags that have divergent spellings or are seemingly unrelated to the posts to which they are attached. However, such difference can be understood to increase the fidelity of an organisational system, allowing for the terminology of majority and minority groups to productively coexist and overlap. This is evidently the case in such websites as del.icio.us, one of the most successful social bookmarking sites which places no restriction on vocabulary. Even though LiveArchives.org has been a relatively small pilot study, the advantages of this organisational approach are already apparent when one views the diversity and distribution of tags on the site. Tag frequency, as in the case of larger folksonomies, follows what appears to be a power-law distribution resulting in a long tail as shown here:



In many traditional organisational systems minority or idiosyncratic tags are often excluded, or are incapable of being identified in the first place. The advantage of such a distribution generated by an open folksonomy is that the more popular tags typically act to efficiently group posts in ways that are obvious to the majority of users, while simultaneously co-existing idiosyncratic tags (despite their perceived inequality) provide alternative

methods of accessing information and often make visible unexpected points of relation between posts.

Due to the fact that LiveArchive.org is currently in a stage of early development, a few design issues remain unresolved. The site has only been tested to work on Gecko-based web browsers such as FireFox and Netscape. Safari users are able to access the site, but access through Internet Explorer is currently restricted due to several know issues. Also, the current search function on the site is highly limited. The development of an advanced search function has taken second priority to experimenting with tag-based navigation systems. An additional issue relates to users ability to view the editing history of each post. Currently, any changes to the site are documented using a WordPress Versioning Plugin which allows administrators to view, and/or rollback to, previous versions of individual posts (to date, this has only been used to archive the evolution of the site). Ideally, this versioning feature would be integrated into the front end of the site and made accessible to all users (in a similar way to Wikipedia).

The majority of the features of LiveArchives.org are not particularly novel approaches to the application of social web technologies in general, although the use of these approaches in the area of performance documentation is still relatively under-explored.² With this said, a few notable examples of online collaborative artistic archives include the Public Domain of Contemporary Art created by Tagny Duff (<http://www.pdoca.ca/>), the dad.project by Simon Ellis and David Corbet (<http://www.skellis.net/dad.project/>). One of the most popular of such archives which make extended use of social web technologies is Rhizome.org. Although Rhizome.org specialises in media art rather than performance, it provides a remarkable case study of how a large-scale online collaborative archive can function, acting as a heavily utilised digital resource for its subject area. With this said (and despite the name), Rhizome's attempts at a folksonomic approach to organisation is largely conservative. Only approved artworks in the ArtBase section of the site can be tagged, and then only by the artwork's author using either Rhizome's controlled vocabulary or the Artist's chosen. Thus, popular active terms in the ArtBase section are generally Rhizome terms. This arrangement sets up a hierarchy of control over how the information on the site is obtained, with Rhizome's administrators at the top, approved artists second, and all other site users largely excluded, resulting in the overall failure on the part of

² Perhaps the most interesting aspect of LiveArchives.org can be found in the actual contributions of participants on the site. However, this article does not aim to reproduce LiveArchives as an already disseminated research outcome. Additionally, the content on the site is continually evolving, therefore not necessarily best represented by a static text document. I have cited a few examples of contributions in the 'Other Potential Developments' section (comments by Angela Piccini and Mike Fallows, and a project led by Ale Fernandez) where such examples are relevant to the focus of the article. Rather than attempting to represent LiveArchives, this article discusses the possibilities afforded by the kinds of collaborative, user-led content development and organisational approaches employed on the site. These approaches are situated within the larger area of performance documentation, with the intention of furthering existing debates surrounding such notions as liveness, preservation, evidence, authorship, ownership and collaboration.

Rhizome to make use of the potential of the folksonomy model. However, the presence of other conventional modes of navigating the site (such as the search function) enable Rhizome.org to remain a usable content rich resource.

Other Potential Developments

Although the LiveArchives.org pilot has shown some promising results for the field of performance documentation, much work still needs to be done in order to take greater advantage of recent developments in social web technologies. The follow are a few suggested areas of particular interest.

Further practical research should take place into understanding the different potential uses of what Thomas Vander Wal has called broad and narrow folksonomies. Narrow folksonomies, such as LiveArchives.org allow for users to directly tag objects, such as blog posts. Other users can view, add to and modify these tags which are in turn stored with the individual object. In a broad folksonomy tags are not necessarily stored with the object, but rather with multiple users on profile pages or bookmark collections (such as del.icio.us). This allows for tags on individual posts to be rated by popularity, allowing a different perspective on popular tag usage than the one currently employed on the LiveArchives.org site. However, such an approach would require the users to create a profile or bookmark page as a kind of post that is distinct in nature from other contributions on the site.

In the on-site discussion prior to the Live Archives Workshops, Angela Piccini made the suggestion that 'we need to be able to tie tags in with timecodes...' allowing for greater fragmentation of time-based media such as embedded audio or video clips. In addition to this I would suggest that the site would benefit from the ability to add links directly to (and from), and have discussions around, specific moments in extended recordings of performance. Such possibilities would overwhelming increase the fidelity of information available to site users, and would equally contribute to extend the performative potential of the archive.

Mike Fallows has also proposed on the LiveArchives.org site the possibility of making use of semantic tagging, which is 'based on creating a way of attributing specific meanings to tag words in order to distinguish their context' (*meaning:definition*, e.g. location:totnes). With this approach comes the questions of how (if at all) should a faceted classification system be used to standardize the use of the *meaning* component of tags; is it possible to allow meaning categories to emerge organically; and how should such categories be represented on the site?

Another concern of mine is the privileging of textual methods of representation in the current tag cloud method. Alternative or complementary methods of representing and organising documents of performance may be adopted from sources such as the image cloud on chainofthoughts.com (<http://www.chainofthoughts.com/>).

Moving away from the issue of folksonomic organisation systems, another area which requires further practical exploration is that of template customization. Web developer Ale Fernandez, a participant in the Live Archives Workshops, more recently made use of the LiveArchives.org site in a project he facilitated on Section 4 asylum seekers. Ale was granted administrative access to the site to allow him to develop a simplified template for adding perspectives on asylum seeker issues as part of a larger arts project. Easily customizable templates for different uses should be a built in feature for any future performance documentation site. A good example of such a feature can be found at Virb.com, a social networking site which allows for users to customize page styles and layouts, and to chose between a range of standard modules (music player, photo collections, visitors comments, etc), with no knowledge of programming languages required. Virb.com also allows more advanced users to alter HTML layouts and CSS styles, and to create custom modules.

Finally, I would like to point towards the potential of Me.Dium, a browser extension that allows for users to view the online location and movements of other users navigating to the same or similar websites in real time, also allowing users to engage in conversation. In the context of LiveArchives.org, or in the case of any online collection, Me.Dium could be used to conduct real time tours of the site, or to schedule discussions with artists and audiences of past, current or future performances. Emerging social web technologies such as Me.Dium provide exciting performative possibilities for the live and provisional exchanges of knowledge, an increasingly necessary requirement for the survival and growth of performance archives in the 21st Century.

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