

BY WAY OF THEATRE: DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE EXPLORATION OF HUMAN POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Such dualisms as between mind and body and between nature and culture persist in anthropology, despite recurrent attempts to dismantle them. The persistence of dualistic thinking can be attributed to a division between practice and theory that underpins the discourses of anthropology, as of every academic discipline, and that rests on the same ontological foundations. This project seeks to move beyond the practice/theory division and to develop scholarship that shifts away from retrospective description to responsiveness in the midst of engagement. I am approaching this task by studying with a particular community of knowledge-craft: research theatre makers. In their work they explore what it means to be human, taking the whole organism-person as their point of departure. For them, theatre work offers a path towards theoretical understanding that is as much practically enacted as discursively articulated. I aim to open up this approach from the relatively narrow domain of theatre research to address the broader concerns of contemporary Design Anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

At a conference called Sound and Anthropology in 2006, the anthropologist Steven Feld, who had presented his soundscapes of bells from around the world, was asked whether his recordings were intended to convey his theoretical arguments to the same extent as his writings – or were the recordings illustrations? Feld, expressed his long felt frustration that although *in theory* his point was that the recordings did indeed carry the arguments he expressed in writing, only the latter so far seemed to be able to communicate

them explicitly. This anecdote flags how non-linguistic forms of expression are considered not to be explicit enough to carry academic arguments. The association of theory with language and other modes of expression with practices other than theory are part of a wider ontology prevalent in academia. Dualisms such as mind and body and nature and culture persist in anthropology, and in contemporary society more broadly, despite recurrent attempts to dismantle them. In anthropology, the much-vaunted ‘paradigm of embodiment’ (Jackson 1983,

Stoller 1989, Csordas 1992), for example, reproduces these dualisms (while claiming to obviate them) by excluding from its conception of the body, on the one hand, semiosis, discursive thought and self-conscious practice, and, on the other, the organism (Starrett 1995, Farnell 1999, Ingold 2000). The persistence of dualistic thinking can be attributed to a division between practice and theory that underpins the discourses of anthropology, as of every other academic discipline. Academic disciplines in fact rest precisely on the ontological separation between theory and practice. The project that I am developing, called *By way of theatre: Design Anthropology and the exploration of human possibilities*, seeks to move beyond the practice/theory division, and by the same token, to develop an anthropology that is processual in its approach to scholarship not only in its texts.

I am approaching this task by studying with a particular community of knowledge-craft: research theatre makers. I trained in research theatre groups between 2001 and 2006. I worked with Icarus performance project from 2001 – 2004 (icarusproject.info) and with CIRT between 2005 to 2007 (teacirt.it). Since then I have participated in and given various theatre anthropology workshops (workshops with Nhandan Chirco, Italy, Rachel Karafistan, London, Krystian Godlewski, London, Song of the Goat Theatre, Poland).

In order for the actors in this type of training to achieve the awake-ness and aliveness that they search for in their improvisations the whole organism-person needs to be trained. The training is specifically aimed at sharpening the actor's responsiveness: A responsiveness that does not separate physical expressiveness from memory or meaning. In their work, research theatre practitioners explore what it means to be human, taking the whole organism-person as their point of departure. For them, theatre work offers a path towards theoretical understanding that is as much practically enacted as discursively articulated. My aim is to open up this approach from the relatively narrow domain of theatre research to address the broader concerns of contemporary design anthropology.

In this paper I present in what way Design Anthropology (DA) is taking a different path to conventional research practices, and how my embryonic project, *By way of theatre*, furthers this emerging approach. I then describe the project questions and in the subsequent section I explore aspects of the theatre training that I am already practiced in, so as to give an indication of how the project questions can begin to be addressed. In my experience I have gathered the training from theatre and from anthropology separately, in this paper I am beginning to explore them as part of a joint project.

There are at least three reasons why this approach is valuable to design processes. First, retaining the focus on language and writing as the final product of academic processes affects what is paid attention to in fieldwork. Although there is increased interest in the senses, so called embodiment and experience more generally, most ethnography still relies on language, on interviews and people's words (Wikan 1993). The effect of the hegemony of language is that various forms of meaning, understandings, and values are subsumed under the semantic framework of language (Jackson 1983), thereby allowing entire swathes of people's experience and lives to go unnoticed in ethnographic research. Second, the focus on language and especially 'theoretical' knowledge that permeates archetypal notions of academia is part and parcel of a hierarchy,

or regime of expertise, in which tacit or 'technical' knowledge is always of secondary importance (Strathern 2000, Latour 2003). Therefore when collaborating with persons from outside academia, for instance in collaborative design situations, where this archetype of theoretical vs practical knowledge is present apriori, this hierarchy is simply reinforced. Third, developing a design anthropology where 'response in the midst of engagement' is equal in academic value to subsequently produced documents (of varying sorts) entails being able to participate in *ongoing* exchanges, creating value as a part of the exchange 'in the field'. The tension here is between value for those involved in the immediate exchange and the wish to share insights with others not present. This tension is the focus of one of my research questions, that I shall now expound upon.

DEVELOPMENTS IN DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY

As Miyazaki (2004) has recently pointed out, the kind of descriptive ethnography that has long been the mainstay of anthropology is inherently retrospective. Implicit in the retrospective glance of ethnography is the notion of a completed world: what for the people are moments of hope, of opening up to a future that is 'not yet', are converted in the process of ethnographic writing into moments of closure and finality, wrapping up what has already come to pass. How, Miyazaki asks, can we overcome the incongruity between the retrospective orientation of ethnographic description and analysis and the prospective orientation of hope? So long as we assume that anthropological analysis is geared to the production of written texts, this incongruity is inevitable. DA, however, offers an alternative. Not an anthropology of design but an anthropology by means of design, where design (like hope) is the way or method of research rather than its object. DA shifts the practice of scholarship away from retrospective description to responsiveness in the midst of engagement, or what Ingold (2008a) has called 'correspondence'. In this correspondence, the analysis and reflection characteristic of academic work move forward in synchrony with the flow of happenings in the surrounding world.

By way of design, the theoretical or speculative work of anthropology, understood as an exploration of the potentials and possibilities of human being and knowing, can proceed in tandem with our engagements with others in what is conventionally called 'the field', rather than being postponed to the subsequent production of retrospective texts (Ingold 2008, Das nd, Marcus pers. com.). Through its synchronized correspondence with social life, Design Anthropology promises a genuinely processual paradigm.

Why have I chosen to develop Design Anthropology by carrying out research with theatre makers? The reason is that their practice is precisely one of cultivating responsiveness in the midst of engagement, in which the temporal orientations of practical action and philosophical reflection are the same rather than opposed. Both are prospective. It therefore offers an exemplary paradigm for a broader Design Anthropology. The theatre makers' work taps into extensive living traditions of holistic attention and calls for the training of the whole organism-person. This training is aimed at sharpening the actor's responsiveness in a way that does not separate physical expressiveness from memory, meaning or intention. In the terms of research theatre, an action has to have an intention to be considered alive. Intention here is often written as in-tension, in order to highlight the inseparability of will, muscles, consciousness, breathing and memory.

A fundamental notion in research theatre is that since everyone is different and since everything is constantly changing, there can be no formulaic recipes for training. Yet in apparent contradiction to this, practitioners talk extensively of 'foundations' and 'origins'. Thus their practice raises in an acute form the tension, which also lies at the heart of anthropology, between the specificities of human experience and its universality. In furthering this project I shall consider what lessons can be drawn for anthropology from the ways in which theatre makers address this tension.

STATING THE QUESTIONS

In the intellectual Cartesian tradition in which mind and body are es-

essentially disparate, certain aspects of our lives and experiences are allotted to mind and others to the body. Particular sensory organs become more associated with the mind and others with bodily sensation (Ingold 2000a). Most evident in this dichotomy is the separation of theory from practice. Theorising together with thinking, reflecting and pondering are allocated to the realm of mind, while things done with the limbs, hands, feet and other visible 'parts' are allocated to the body and practise. It is in this ontology that spoken and written language are considered to be more explicit than other forms of expression, that are allocated to the realm of affect as opposed to the realm of thought.

Counter to Cartesian dualism, neuro-science and neuro-anthropology (Lave 1988, Clark 2001, Downey nd) are making increasingly evident what philosophers of phenomenology have long argued (cf Ingold 2000a chap 9, for a review): that practices of thinking and reflection depend on the whole person acting within a particular task in particular places. In a processual ontology (Ingold 2008a, 2008b, 2000a, 2000b, 1993 and Latour 2003) the multifarious aspects of an environment (human and non-human) participate in the continuous constitution of that environment. Through this understanding of the world even to view, in reference to the etymology of the word 'theory', is *active* in the constitution of the very real world around us (Okely 2001, Ingold 2000). This also counts for thinking (Shurman and Munro 2006) and imagining (Ingold 2000a). Thinking, reflecting, remembering as well as imagining, hoping, abstracting and theorising have observable effects in the world around us.

Like speech-acts (Austin 1962), theorizing can be considered a type of what I would like to call thought-acts. Thought-acts, including theorizing, are not independent of other activities/practices a person may be engaged in (cf Lave 1988, Clark 2001, Downey nd). Therefore theorizing will be of a different character when, for instance, it is part of a theatre project, then when the theorizing is carried out sitting at a desk (Ingold 2008a). Keeping in mind this processual ontology, the question of the explicitness of language that Ste-

ven Feld pointed to in comparison to other forms of expression can be seen in a different light.

The ambiguity of non-linguistic forms of expression (music, dance, and so-called physical theatre) are often quoted as the reason why academics prefer linguistic means of communication. However, language has been shown to be equally ambiguous. I argue that the ambiguity of language is not considered as problematic as that of dance or theatre, because due to the ideological allocation of language to 'mind', generations of scholars have dedicated themselves to refining the skills for reading, interpreting, understanding, writing, argumentation and discursive articulation. Therefore, the difficulty of conveying the theorizing embedded in a form of communication such as dance or physical theatre seems to emerge from the hegemony of language rather than from any inherent limits in other forms of communication. More specifically it is the hegemonic status of academic text and speech. Poetry, creative writing, or language used in theatre, although often included in academic work, are nevertheless considered peripheral to the essence of such work.

In order for other forms of expression to reach the point at which their ambiguity is not considered a barrier, but the site of negotiation as a matter of course (as much as negotiation is part of interpreting and discussing text/language, cf Rapport 2003, Ricoeur 1991) what is needed is their legitimacy within academia. Such legitimacy will at least make space for scholarship that does not reinforce the theory/practice divide. Through my work with theatre makers, I am therefore exploring the following three questions, also with the aim of enabling others to engage in their own processes of discovery.

First, how can anthropology balance a commitment to the creation of knowledge through engagement in real-world contexts of action with its commitment to disseminating the knowledge thereby created to audiences beyond these contexts? How should normal procedures of participant observation be revised in order for both commitments to be satisfied simultaneously?

Secondly, how can research theatre

training be translated into methods for anthropologists to be responsive to organism-persons in their continually changing environments? What alternative forms of notation (other than writing) could be developed to record the results of such methods?

Thirdly, does a focus on growth and maturation allow for a new understanding of humans in which both change and continuity can be accounted for? Can such an understanding allow for future-orientated behaviour that emphasizes human possibilities rather than human actualities?

These are the questions that have arisen in my work as the result of anthropological studies and fieldwork as well as the insights I gained from practicing with research theatre groups. Therefore in the next section I describe aspects of the theatre training and how I believe they can be used to draw attention to the theorizing embedded within activities as yet not associated with the products of scholarship. The key in the practice is how the training brings memory, reflexivity and thought to act in tandem with other human ways of responding. Following Lave's (1988) work I typify this enskillment as distributed cognition, with a focus however, on how one can be trained to become aware of how different practices (types of thinking, types of movement, types of attention) mutually shape each other and the way people relate to each other and their environment. This sort of research theatre can train people to pay attention to simultaneous processes going on in themselves and their environments.

EXAMPLES OF TRAINING PERCEPTION FROM RESEARCH THEATRE

During the activities of the Summer University of Performing Arts 2005 (SUPA 2005), one of the bodies of work proposed by Frank Camilleri, creative director of Icarus Performance Project (Icarus), was "work with the stick". The work consisted of various tasks that included handling, throwing and catching the stick alone, with a partner or in a group. The throwing and catching techniques are based on bandolier stick work, juggling stick work and Frank Camilleri's own defamiliarisation research. This body of

work acts to bring the actor's attention to the 'intention' that characterises an action. The stick is a tangible extension of the intention. If the intention is not precise, the stick falls.

Another body of work that, in the past, Frank Camilleri had proposed to his apprentices in *Icarus*, also employs objects in order to perceptibly extend intention. The body of work with objects demonstrates how this process of extension is one of the initial stages where the actor becomes aware of intention and can then proceed to revise his or her own actions and check for the precision of intention. The work with objects involved a number of tasks in consecutive stages. The first task was to identify a number of portable objects. The next task consisted in a thorough defamiliarization of the objects, paying attention to remember the actions that arose from this search. The following task was to remove the objects and explore the action and the intention of the action, returning to the object in order to check the precision of the intention (See *Icarus 4 2003* for detailed description of these bodies of work). Here it is important to point out that intention does not refer to an emotional state, but to the precise person-organism state brought about by interaction with the object. An action may include an image, a memory or an emotion, but the work on intentions does not give these undue emphasis. Rather it is a process which allows these to arise. In these two bodies of work using objects, what is apparent are the processes whereby the apprentice actor becomes aware of their intentions in order to be able to revise them.

Richard Schechner (1985) talks about 'revision' as a fundamental aspect of the actor's skill. He refers to revision in terms of what happens after the performance; an actor revising a presentation that has been completed. However, writers like Renato Rosaldo (1983) and Rane Willerslev (2004) describe how in many skilled practices such as hunting, action, decision and revision are simultaneous and inextricable aspects of a single task. A description of a body of work proposed by Mario Ruggeri, artistic director of C.I.R.T., can illustrate how the actor, in very much the same way as an orchestral musician

constantly revises and adjusts their actions according to the relations with the whole context of the performative event. One of the forms of training that is integral to C.I.R.T.'s work, as of many research theatre groups, is referred to as "balancing of the space". As with the bodies of work with objects, described above, this form of training also aims to raise the actor's awareness of their actions. However, the focus here is on the intentions of the person in relation to the whole performative event, including the other actors, the space, the rhythm and the texture of the unfolding happening.

The actors, usually not more than six at one time, work in a demarcated space. One of them is designated the leader. The leader begins to move in the space and the others are to move in the space according to specific tasks. Those working are to follow the exact rhythm, and the changes of rhythm, as well as the texture of the leader's movement. Mario says: 'become the same type of animal as the leader'. Attention must be paid to ensuring that the space is at all times fully occupied while they are moving in the space, there should be no crowding or gaps, this would unbalance the space. In this training the actors are called to be aware of their own rhythms, actions, paths of movement not only in relation to the leader but also in relation to the others in the space and the space itself, in order to balance the space. The relationship between the actors is diffused within the whole person. The rhythm and texture are performed with the whole body, for instance the arms are not to move with a different rhythm to the feet. Furthermore the whole body is called to relate, to acknowledge the presence of another when moving in the space. This can be seen when two actors pass one another. An observer can recognise the changes in the bodies of both actors that shape the space between them, while all the time retaining the relationship with the leader.

Mario describes that when the task succeeds the actors move as an organic whole and it is no longer clear who the leader is. Have you ever seen swallows grouping and regrouping, without hesitations, without colliding? That performance can, maybe, convey a sense of what "balancing the space" is. In

this training the actor needs to be constantly aware, constantly revising their actions in order to follow the changes in rhythm and texture of the leader and in order to relate to the whole moving group. However this awareness, this revision cannot be simply reflective, since the adjustments need to be made immediately and with the whole body. For this reason the awareness and the revision must necessarily be diffused. Perception, decision and action are not interrupted, consciousness is very present but discursive reflection does not overpower the actions of the actors. Both *Icarus Performance Project* and C.I.R.T. engage in different bodies of research to explore both personal intentions and relational intentions. I have chosen to relate the specific bodies of work, described above, because they, in particular, clearly illustrate research into personal reflexivity (work with objects) and relational reflexivity (balancing the space).

Generally, when anthropologists are reflexive, they focus on actions, intentions and relations with the aim of distinguishing, as far as possible, between their own cultural baggage and that of the subjects of fieldwork (Okely 1996, Bourdieu 2005, Kenna 1992, Gatt nd). The methods of research theatre provide a possible approach to fieldwork training that can prepare anthropologists to pay attention to the simultaneous processes I discussed above. During the SUPA 2005 exchanges of work, Frank Camilleri noted the ease with which the actors of C.I.R.T. picked up the tasks he assigned them, namely floor work, stick work and plastics (cf Camilleri et al. 2003). Conversely, when I worked on several occasions for short periods of time with C.I.R.T., I found that the apprenticeship under Frank Camilleri in the *Icarus Performance Project*, between 2001-2004, allowed me to participate in their training.

Mario has often said that the training they carry out is aimed at *learning how to learn*, or in Grotowski's words, learning how to steal from a master (Richards 1995: 3). Drawing on the theatre work such as that of *Icarus Performance Project* and C.I.R.T., reflexive approaches can be used to expand the researchers' attention in fieldwork, as well as sharpen their awareness of the multiple processes in which people are

immersed. A convergence of the two disciplines, anthropology and theatre, demands attention to *how* we learn. By conducting an active search into not only the lives of the people but also the way researchers learn to take part in a life-world, we may be equipped with sharper tools of discernment.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that in order to develop scholarship that can participate and contribute in synchronicity with ongoing life, and thereby enacting the prospective character of design, there needs to be a shift away from a practice/theory dichotomy. This dualism prevents scholarship from responding in the here and now because the act of theorizing is associated with retrospective practices such as the writing of texts. Other forms of communication, expression and perception, that nonetheless have embedded within themselves the speculative and analytic approach of scholarship, what is usually referred to as theory, can be usefully put to work to bring about such prospective scholarship. However, in order to develop such responsive skills I have also argued that we need to train our attention in order to be aware of how such processes already work in our daily lives in order to be able to harness them and develop scholarly skills within this processual approach. Such training and explorative projects are necessary since this far energy has largely been dedicated to honing scholars' skills in the analysis and production of academic text and language, to the detriment of other modes of expression and perception.

As is well documented in studies of power, resistance tends to replicate the hegemonic assumptions, or that such resistance falls on deaf ears if it refuses to adopt the dominant discourse. For this reason I propose that a combination of academic language *and* theatre may be the vehicle to allow other forms of expression to start being understood and developed as theorizing practices. In the US there have been longstanding engagements between anthropologists and performance professionals (Schechner 1985; Turner 1988), but the UK for instance has seen fewer collaborations of this kind. However, developments in British anthropology, at least,

indicate that the time is ripe for approaches that go beyond conventional textual and imagistic media. Lucas's (2010) doctoral research employing Laban notation was a key experiment in practice-based theorizing. In 2010 a practice-based PhD programme in Anthropology and Performance was launched at the University of Manchester, and in the same year MSc courses were launched in Design Anthropology (University of Aberdeen) and Design Ethnography (University of Dundee). These developments are part of the increasing demand on academic disciplines to demonstrate their value to the wider community. Developing a contact between design anthropology and research theatre is a pro-active response to these pressures that could be equally fruitful if other communities of practice are engaged with a similar approach: that while exploring academic questions one identifies the value of anthropological work in engagements with academic and non-academic interlocutors.

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