

This review can be found online on the Journal of Contemporary Archaeology website:

<https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/jca-book-reviews-marking-time-performance-archaeology-and-the-city-by-mike-pearson/>

## JCA Book Reviews: *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City.* By Mike Pearson

By [Eve Hooper](#) On January 25, 2016 · [1 Comment](#)

*Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City.* By Mike Pearson. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2013. Hardback, 288 pp., 52 halftones, 5 maps. ISBN 978-08-5989-8751

The word 'performative' featured fairly heavily in the early days of CHAT (Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory), enthusiastically deployed by its adherents as a useful word for locating what it was that happened between people, things and media of all kinds, and how. Often the primary retort of their detractors was that the word wasn't in the dictionary (it is, first recorded in 1922 to describe the act of memorizing as something more than simply informational). It seems to have faded from prominence over the last few years; still used relatively frequently, but not quite the object of research and interpretation it once was. There are plenty of reasons for this, none of them the whole story. One of the more positive we can see as a success of the same multi- and inter-disciplinary research that was and is so taken with the concept of performativity. That is that archaeology—contemporary archaeology for sure, but also buildings and landscape archaeologies, among others—has developed in the last decade a more nuanced understanding of performance and how it might play a part in archaeological interpretation. Thus, in addition to continued discussion of performativity, with its range of uses from the exact to the distinctly mystical, we see incorporated into research deeper understanding of the mechanics of performance, its aims and economies, and its range of manifestations, from the theatrical to the personal to the architectural.

Playing key roles in this development are a "material turn" (of sorts) within the wider field of Performance Studies and the ongoing efforts of some excellent performance archives, notably the online archive What's Welsh for Performance? Beth yw "performance" yn Gymraeg? and the Live Art Archives of the Theatre Collection held at the University of Bristol. The former will be well known to contemporary archaeologists, who will be familiar with Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks' book *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001), Angela Piccini's "micro road movie" *Guttersnipe* (2010) or any of a host of other media archaeology presentations at CHAT conferences and elsewhere. The work of the archives has been equally important, not simply for being able to juxtapose and investigate the performance histories of particular locations or companies, but in inspiring and sustaining much 'performance re-enactment', the investigation of past performance through its re-presentation. These themes speak directly to archaeological concerns with

materiality and material culture and have contributed much to the overlapping concerns of Archaeology and Performance Studies as practised today.

Although part of the University of Exeter Press's Performance Studies Series, Mike Pearson's *Marking Time: Performance, Archaeology and the City* places itself firmly between the two disciplines. It is essentially a performance-history of Cardiff, told through the career and interests of the author, covering performance in the city over nearly the last 50 years. The book divides into five main parts, covering the north, south, east, west and centre of the city, each part describing and discussing ten performances. It starts by outlining its four main aims:

To locate and describe instances and procedures of production and presentation [...] at a variety of scales within one urban geography, [...] to [consider] such performances [...] with other artistic and quotidian activities as aspects of a wider cultural ecology [...], to attend not only to aesthetic endeavours, but also to the performance of everyday life [and] to occasion reflection on the city itself and its performative nature. (p. 11)

We start in the north, in the coffee bar of the University Arts Building, with a description—part recollection, part interpretation of a series of photographs—of a 29-minute long student production of *The Odyssey*: “making no claims to originality, we aspired to emulate the productions we had seen in Manchester” (p. 26). It's an ideal place to start. On one hand, we are given the comfort of starting our exploration of Cardiff with a fairly warm personal recollection of one of Pearson's early forays into theatre and performance. On the other, we are thrown in at the deep end by being asked to consider a performance that is ephemeral in the extreme: performed in a non-theatre space assembled and disassembled in minutes and, being intentionally derivative, with little obvious identity of its own. And yet in the surviving photos (with a clock in the background that allows knowledge of the performance's duration) and the description of the final photo of the series (“cigarette in hand, I sit under audience interrogation” [p. 26]) we see a clear moment in time, an intentional performance that in its regular configuration is as much a part of this social space as people drinking tea. The presence of the audience in this final image is key: not passive at this point, but engaging with the cast. Performances happen with and without audiences, but their presence or absence carries both meaning and agency. Already in what is presented as a simple performance in a simple space, we can discern a number of different interpretive strands; the conscious emulation of the performances of others, the reference (at the time) to Peter Brook's book *The Empty Space* (1968), the direct—but clearly post-performance—engagement with the audience, the role of the photographs in the production of memory. In a way, this first chapter stands as a textual effigy for the remainder of the book, which continues these themes and more as it moves around the city and across the years.

*Marking Time* takes in many different spaces of performance, whether Cathays Park with its array of historically- and mythically-referential statuary, the production of national identity in the

National Museum of Wales, community street theatre in east Cardiff's Topaz Street, the past and present of Butetown in the south of the city, or the architecture of the Wales Millennium Centre. Not only does it create an incredibly wide-ranging discussion of performance, but the geographical locating of each episode leaves the reader with a feeling of having learned something new about Cardiff, a different narrative at least. The book does well in extending its discussion of performance to the city itself, whether acting alone or through the stories of the actions of the people who made it. Cardiff as presented here also retains an air of autonomy; the long-unsolved murder of Lynette White in 1987 (mentioned in four chapters and a coda) a counterpoint to the control Pearson exerts over his own history.

It is, though, in descriptions of performing bodies that Pearson really excels. The account of Keele Performance Group's *Hunchback* (1972), partly told through a contemporary written account, partly through memory, is one of the best textual descriptions of performance around and the book's sections on *Blindfold*, *Flesh* and *Asylum* are almost equally exhilarating.

The book ends with a section titled "Reflections after Walking", in which Pearson discusses both the City and Archaeology in more depth, using a series of bullet-pointed prompts for emphasis. This essay will prove very useful for its connection of *Marking Time* with Theatre/Archaeology and with this book's rural equivalent *In Comes I* (Pearson 2007—although this earlier work is not directly referenced) and for locating this kind of performance-archaeology within wider contemporary archaeological themes. It would be interesting to know whether university tutors are recommending reading this section first or last. There may be some merit in the former for readers in a hurry, but it works just fine where it is. Likewise, having read the book cover to cover, it is hard to imagine it being "dipped into" by readers like a reference book, although the format makes that entirely possible.

Part performance research, part archaeological theory, part autobiography, part lots of other things too, *Marking Time* is a fascinating book that tries, successfully, to work between disciplines, making theoretical contributions to both while remaining more than the sum of those academic parts and providing an enriching reading experience at the same time.

## References

- Brook, P. 1968. *The Empty Space*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Pearson, M. 2007. *In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. and M. Shanks. 2001. *Theatre/Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Pétursdóttir, Þ and B. Olsen. 2014. "Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography." *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1(1): 7–23.
- James Dixon  
Museum of London Archaeology  
[jdixon@mola.org.uk](mailto:jdixon@mola.org.uk)