Mind the Gaps

Evidencing Performance and Performing Evidence in Performance Art History

Heike Roms

October 2006. An audience of about a hundred gathered at a venue in Cardiff, Wales, on the occasion of the first in a series of conversations — under the title ‘An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales’ — for which I invited artists to revisit key moments in Wales’s post-war neo-avant-garde past.1 On a small stage in front of a screen I sat with Ivor Davies, one of the country’s foremost painters and in the 1960s a protagonist of event-structured ‘Destruction in Art’, to talk about his Adam on St Agnes’s Eve, staged in Swansea in 1968 as an early Welsh example of a multi-medial Happening-style work, which featured the artist’s trademark explosives.2 During our conversation we made repeated reference to documentation selected from Davies’s archive, which was projected onto the screen behind us as both illustration and memory prompt (see Figure 9.1). Among the documents was a detailed score for the piece and a five-minute-long, silent, black-and-white film of its Swansea realisation:

Ivor Davies [ID] I’ve kept all sorts of things from that event, even the tickets, an obsessive sort of collection of things. [Points to a handwritten score that he holds in his hands.] Here is a score which lists the sound, the cues, the explosions and the timing of the explosions, the lighting, the projections, the performers, the actions and props, other objects that were used, and then times it exactly. […] [Turns to the screen, on which a black-and-white film appears.] I wonder if it would work if I said what was happening in the film while we are watching it, oh yes… This is the beginning. 7.30. Recording of bird-song, which I’d taken from the Ornithological Society, and red and
green spotlights on the floor, which give this feeling of a forest. [A performer appears on screen, naked and covered in paint.] I really don’t remember inviting him … [Laughter from the audience.]

Heike Roms [HR] Who was he, do you know?
ID I don’t know who he was.
HR But is he in it? I mean, he’s naked and painted.
ID Well he’s in it, yes, but I didn’t ask him to do it. That kept happening — when you tried to organise something very precisely, things like that happened. [Laughter from the audience.]³

For the past ten years all my research efforts have been devoted to tracking the emergence and early development in the 1960s and 1970s in Wales of those art practices that we have come to call — with a catch-all term — performance art: Happenings, Fluxus, body art, action art, destruction in art and many other performance-structured forms like them. ‘What’s Welsh for Performance? Locating the Early History of Performance Art’ (the overall title of the project) examines how widely such practices impacted on art making at the time, ‘even’ within comparatively marginal cultural contexts such as that of Wales.⁴ To this end I have searched for relevant materials in over fifty-five archives and

Figure 9.1 Ivor Davies in conversation with Heike Roms, ‘An Oral History of Performance Art in Wales’, 2006. Photograph by Phil Babot