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## THE CONTEXT PROBLEM

### MISSING

In the minute investigation of old oil canvases, modern art restorers use a technique called *rigatino* to fill in where flecks of paint are damaged or missing. These fine hatch marks, made with thin paint, signal to later scholars and restorers what constitutes the restorer's work while fully maintaining the distinctiveness and integrity of the original artist's brush strokes.<sup>1</sup> In other words, restorers have devised a straightforward method to indicate the exact positions of evidentiary lacunae and to mark the impositions of their own hand amidst the work of old masters. Unlike the superscripts of footnotes amidst a printed text, *rigatino* blends with the original picture, though upon close investigation it is always distinct.

In theatre and performance history, the encounter with "gaps" is a major conundrum of the discipline: the ephemerality of performance, especially performance before our lifetimes, means that any surviving evidence, even a playscript, is but a poor imitation of an actor's labor, let alone the combined efforts of actor, scenographer, orchestra, and stagehands. In performance history—encompassing, for example, events that conform to Victor Turner's version of social drama—the amateur counterparts of actors and so on, who made a performance look, sound, and feel a particular way on a specific occasion, may leave even fewer clues. In either case, the added complications of audience reception—who was there and what they thought or experienced—is often left up to guesswork: only rarely can it be deduced.

If an event is a theatre or performance historian's canvas, and if *rigatino* is what we fill in between the gaps of evidence, then in almost all cases the thinly painted hatch marks will be a significant part—often the majority—of what we

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author. In writing theatre and performance history, we utilize theory, logic, surmise, and induction to justify the copious *rigatino*. Whereas the art restorer's *rigatino* is needed only here and there in a well-preserved canvas and not readily apparent to the naked eye, the theatre historian's *rigatino* plays a much greater role. Most of this is provided as "context," and, indeed, the provision of context has become a mantra in our field: we seek it avidly, we include it conscientiously. In a sense, too, we hatch in "context" (demographic information, contemporaneous events, political esprit de corps, ethnographic tidbits, or literary zeitgeist), which can be scraped off by future generations who will approach the problem with new theories, perhaps new evidence, and certainly different concerns.

This is how we deal with what is missing in evidence. "Context" is instrumental in helping to convey the immediacy of performances in the past, compensates for their perishability, and conveys their relevance to the past and present. A problem with "context" is that, though it is provided for the sake of "completeness," one scholar's criterion for gestalt may be another's idea of irrelevance.

#### MISSED

Paul Cézanne closely identified with Frenhofer, the Rembrandtesque artist in Honoré de Balzac's novella *The Unknown Masterpiece* (*Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, 1831–7), a Romantic genius, doubting, anxious, and uncompromising, whose pronouncements were taken by generations of admirers to be presentiments of modernist art. To Cézanne, as to Frenhofer, great art expresses nature but does not copy it.<sup>2</sup> Technique is responsive to nature, organized into a personal aesthetic. It is a way to become understood—for others to perceive what the painter perceives—even if the means are mysterious.

Cézanne, like Antonin Artaud or Edward Gordon Craig for theatre historians, might be said to have thought about art more than he made it: providing guidance via innovation is his principle measure of success. He devoted himself to creating two-dimensional illusions, and successful as he was at this, admitted late in life that "It took me forty years to find out that painting is not sculpture."<sup>3</sup> Typically, an oil painter will gesso a canvas and then build up layers of pigment (impasto). By using color thinly, Cézanne discovered that he could still use it to advantage in suggesting distance and volume. In his later oil works, he abandoned impasto and instead often used a single layer of paint on a barely prepared canvas. The result, using highly diluted pigment, was a vigorous yet seemingly spontaneous effect, as Cézanne called it: "sensations of color, which give light."<sup>4</sup> The canvas was now neither saturated with color nor completely covered by it. As painting, rather than sculpture, these late works comply with the limitations of the medium rather than try to supersede them.

Critical to this technique is *passage*: white spaces of canvas amid pigment. Used by a modernist master such as Cézanne, *passage* creates harmony in composition through judicious choices of brush stroke and color, as well as absence. As Dore Ashton explains in an analysis of Balzac and Cézanne:

When he first speaks of the ‘passage’ he seems to mean the gradation of light tone as the eye follows the curving contours of an object and reaches its limit in a vibration of air. Later the ‘passage’ takes on the connotations of an abstract system. In the last watercolours, the shaped white absences are necessary abstractions. They are the vision, the ideal, held in the imagination as the hand and eye seek equivalences. The tension between idea and act . . . finds resolution in these absences lighted by both the mind and the hand.<sup>5</sup>

Theatre and performance historians hell-bent on explication through provision of “context” might benefit from this example. By setting an event “in context,” layering in detail and explicating contiguity with other aspects of time and culture, do we seek to make it sculptural? Do we build up the narrative, ply upon ply, glorifying our research virtuosity in the name of fuller explication? Does this enhance the impression of depth and accuracy? Do we obliterate all blank spots, come what may, and deny the facility of *passage*?

### UNSEEN

Painters are concerned with illusionary space and light; historians with elusive time and events. Both involve distance—spatial and emotional—in their hermeneutics. Professional historians rarely attempt the “you are there” pretense, yet seek to provide enough points of connection between event and reader to stimulate the readers’ imaginations so they can understand what it might have been like “to be there.” This, like the painting effect *rondeur*, is an illusion of convexity. The far side of an object (or in the case of history, an event), though unseen, is imaginable. *Rondeur* produces an effect of multidimensional mass through color, shading, and foreshortening. Historical “context” is like this optical trick.

*Rondeur*, as the term implies, involves rotundity. The planes of a square object cannot achieve multidimensionality unless the edges of the object are rounded. The place where objects end and space begins cannot be drawn with lines. The technical trick involves blurring edges, as if an object gradually accedes to the space around it. Historical “context” works much the same way. In order to “flesh out” an event, bring it “to life,” or show its vitality, other evidentiary morsels are brought in narrative proximity and they “bleed” together in order to create an impression of completeness, *rondeur*, of the one in relation to the other.

This is a technique Cézanne embraced throughout his career, though with different effect in the later years. In watercolor, a medium requiring quickness and single layers of color, he imported impasto, patiently waiting for one layer of color to dry before applying another, imitating the technique developed for oil in a way that showed simultaneously layer upon layer of transparency (Rewald, 205). Amid this, *passage* operated not next to an object—pushing the object away from the canvas—but in its midst, helping to pull it into the foreground.

Cézanne’s aims and that of theatre and performance historians are not

dissimilar, but for the painter, less was more. More like nature. More congruence between his experience of something and the viewing of his work. Can less be more in history?

Feminist historiography would seem to argue against this proposal, providing an object lesson in the problems arising from “contextualization.” Feminist histories since the 1980s have helped us understand what is implicitly understood about class, gender, race, socially constructed femininities and masculinities, how women’s presence (or absence) has served particular interests, and how history has ignored particular empirical realities that may have been well-known to women. It has a great investment in explicating what was not, previously, sought. That which was missing, missed, or unseen found its way into narrative. This has led to a more nuanced idea of how we deploy experience (ours and our historical subjects’) as subjects of knowledge, ingenious examples of evidentiary reconceptualization, and a different cast of characters in history. Feminism requires acknowledgment of agency within public and private dichotomies, and the tendencies to exclude people from the record or assimilate them to norms, as well as locating the unprecedented into existing categories. Feminist theory helps us understand how performance research—including audience research—is built upon particular foundations and how these, along with feminism itself, are cultural—institutional complexes and therefore implicitly perspectival. By narrating these complexes differently, perspective changes and so too does the version of depth that is portrayed. This involves “context,” of course, and “context” is doomed to incompleteness. Feminism seeks a more complete gestalt in the understanding of performance and performance reception, but substitutes one version of partialness for another.

Feminist and gender studies, like racial and ethnic studies, at their best never look at only one form of explanation. Increasingly, “context” has come to mean incorporating the triad of “race, gender, class” and this has changed the contours of history, again. Its *rondeur* takes into account aspects of culture and experience that were previously unacknowledged by histories. Reflecting another denotation of *rondeur*—outspokenness—different lives, cultural microhistories, and national and transnational interhistories became “seeable” in history.<sup>6</sup> What had been unseen to history may now be spoken and written about.

#### UNSEEABLE

In a recent rumination on the genesis and current directions of performance studies, and its challenges in the midst of George W. Bush’s neomilitarism, Richard Schechner writes:

Performance studies assumes that we are living in a postcolonial, performatized world where cultures are colliding, influencing and interfering with each other, and hybridizing at a very fast rate. These collisions are not always ‘politically correct’ or pleasant. . . . In order to explore postmodern performative circumstances, performance studies works from the premise that anything and everything can be studied ‘as’ performance.<sup>7</sup>

Schechner's position is that something is a performance if the culture giving rise to it says it is a performance. Contemporary scholarship "emphasize[s] how performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and provide people with the means to play with the worlds they not only inhabit but to a large degree construct" (Schechner, 162). Performance, therefore, is simultaneously a form of cultural literacy and cultural inquiry. It is integral to cultural promotions of group identities—such as the nation-state or race—and their function as truth telling as well as truth making. But does performance have boundaries?

If performance can be anywhere and constitute virtually any behavior, human or otherwise, and if all can be studied as performance, *why* is there no limit? I am not the first to ask this question, though I do have an unusual reason for asking it. I am not chagrined by practicing a discipline that is now at the center of humanistic inquiry, seemingly expansive into all its branches as well as those of applied social science. I am determined to enjoy the moment while it lasts. But what, in this expansive conception—which shows phenomenological contiguity between theatre and performance, and casually exchanges analytical vocabulary between the two without differentiation—is unseeable, unknowable, unrememberable, or unrecoverable? If Schechner's preoccupation is the domain of naming—denoting this or that as performance—are historians prepared to aspire to omniscience about what gets named?

Semiotics held out an elusive promise that everything about performance could be described. Even if it could not be perceived all at once, it could be dissected and accounted for as a gestalt. This proved elusive, and the claims of semiotics as a holistic method have been tempered. Even "context" within a signifying event cannot be complete. Is performance studies denying, implicitly, that there can be nothing that is unseeable in academic scrutiny? If so, what kind of a post-Enlightenment discipline is that?<sup>8</sup> My critique unites the field-ground problem of *rondeur* with the consequences of "framing," for, like depth, the breadth of inclusivity is illusory especially as a function of historical narrative.

#### UNSEEKABLE

Contextualization is a process. It involves reasoned choices about what is sought and provided as explanatory mechanisms. I certainly do not mean to imply that it can be dispensed with, but rather that practitioners and purveyors of theatre and performance history should be thinking critically, and in public, about what "context" accomplishes and what it does not, arguing as vigorously about "context" as we do about what "context" is constructed around. Where has the context problem led us? What, if anything, do we agree about contextualization? Contextualize what? How deeply? To what end? What is the relationship between contextualization and pastiche? Which analytical components should be included? Which components *can* be made separate from others? What theoretical positions substantiate decisions about any of these questions?

In a recent issue of *SubStance* in which long-term contributors were

requested to respond to the challenge, “What are the questions that fascinate you? What do you want to know?” Marcel Hénaff replied:

While I was in the middle of this vast plateau of perplexity, and thinking about what my work has been these last years, slowly but clearly an answer came to me: *what has fascinated me has been to discover what I was not seeking.*<sup>9</sup>

Discovering what we are not seeking may reveal blind spots that can, and should, be addressed. But is it possible, in some cases, that we should attend to what we are not seeking by acknowledging that it is unseekable, even by the most ingenious and creative of historians? What might the unseekable be?

A crowd at the theatre cannot agree upon what they witness. Why should it be possible to tame the same event into a historical account, even if the account is multiplicitous, thickly described, or “contextualized?” Let’s imagine that I attend the theatre tonight. If “context” is what appeared in today’s newspapers, the conditions of the roads that I travel to the event, and the ways in which the event’s publicity established my horizon of expectations, and if it is also what the person next to me read in her newspaper, the conditions of her route, and her encounters with publicity, all slightly different from mine, does this help us understand the limits of our claims to knowledge about this performance? Let’s imagine another theatre historian researching this same performance, but not able to attend. She conscientiously researches what audiences were likely to have read that day, bus and road access to the theatre, and the performance’s artifacts in the archives. She “contextualizes” the performance. But what is she *not* seeking, and how can she discover her own oversights and what is *not* seekable? If interdisciplinarity provides novel combinations with which to approach historical writing, does it make it any more nuanced, accurate, or complete?

#### BINOCULAR RIVALRY

Sir Charles Wheatstone, the mid-nineteenth-century Professor of Experimental Philosophy at King’s College London, invented the concertina and an early version of the telegraph, and did work that contributed to measurement of the speed of light. He was also a cryptographer. But Wheatstone would be known to theatre historians, if at all, for his experiments on binocular stereopsis, a perceptual phenomenon that led directly to his invention of the stereoscope, a device popularized for three-dimensional viewing of nearly identical side-by-side photographs and still used for examining x-ray film. Binocular stereopsis—studied by neurologists in the twenty-first century as binocular rivalry—explains the human brain’s adaptation to visual phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Two differently patterned objects on a similar background viewed simultaneously by the left and right eyes will at first be seen as separate patterns, then transposed from one side to the other, then mingled. So, at first they are perceived separately or simultaneously, then transparently, and finally the objects fuse. The time needed for each phase to occur varies with the individual and depends upon the stimulus strength (contour density, spatial frequency, stimulus motion, and pure contrast) relative

to the competing pattern. Try placing your hand on a uniformly tinted background and looking at it with one eye while the other looks down a piece of rolled-up paper at the background alone. Be patient, and you will experience binocular rivalry. It is how we make sense of our visual world.

Just as ocular data is swapped from one side of the brain to the other and finally appears to merge, so too do we make sense of an event in relation to the information (“context”) placed around and next to it. The swap can be gradual, or there can be a startlingly abrupt transition. But it is significant to note—as I push the analogy to its limit—that one stimulus can eradicate another’s presence, location, or distinctness, in conscious awareness. Background will always be there, of course. We may or may not see it *in relation to* our object of inquiry. But when we do, it is a function of the human brain that makes it so. This is not a question of seeing or not seeing what is there, but rather how it is *perceived* and *why*.

Few historians today, least of all myself, would argue in favor of performance standing alone in explanation. Instead, I am raising issues about what is taken for granted in historical methodology and explanation because the historicization of theatre and performance presents such a graphic example of the “context problem.” Given that we cannot escape the problem, can we provide innovative approaches to it?

#### ENDNOTES

1. In her study of Martin Guerre, Natalie Zemon Davis indicates possibilities using either a conditional mood or expressions like “perhaps” and “may have been.” Carlo Ginzburg calls this *rigatino*. In “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 301.

2. Dore Ashton, *A Fable of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 37.

3. Cézanne cited by John Rewald in *Paul Cézanne: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), 170.

4. Cézanne cited in *ibid.*, 205.

5. Ashton, 47. I am indebted to the painter Vera Klement, who explained this concept and exemplifies it in her own work.

6. This is a crib of the frame analysis Joseph Roach eloquently detailed as respondent to the “Out of the Box” conference of the Mid-America Theatre Association, March 2003.

7. Richard Schechner, “Performance Studies in/for the 21st Century,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 26.2 (2001): 158–166, at 160.

8. This point is further elaborated in the coeditors’ “Theatricality: An Introduction,” in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 1–39.

9. Marcel Hénaff, “Discovering What I Was Not Seeking: A Brief Narrative,” *SubStance* 32.1 (2003): 16–21, at 16.

10. I am indebted to my colleague Beverly Wright for her introduction to this phenomenon. An up-to-date bibliography on the phenomenon is maintained by Robert O’Shea of the Department of Psychology at the University of Otago (Dunedin) and posted at [http://psy.otago.ac.nz/r\\_oshea/br\\_bibliography.html](http://psy.otago.ac.nz/r_oshea/br_bibliography.html).