

# The road to Epidaurus is like the road to creation: tapping the urban archive

cultural geographies

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## Abstract

This article brings together three short ‘provocations’ presented by Katie Beswick, Harriet Hawkins and Joseph Kohlmaier. Between them, these provocations investigate the idea of how the archive of the city has and might be ‘tapped’ through a number of performative acts from a broad range of different perspectives, including the role of ‘archival art’; performance, practice and competition in the context of the city; the body as an archive; the foundation of the city as a performative act; street dance; stream of consciousness and the city in the psychological novel; and the role that documentary practices can play in regaining political territory.

## Keywords

archival art, documentary practices, embodiment, performance, street dance

A beehive is shifted to a location of 2 metres from its original site while most of the bees have flown out. It will then be found that the bees gather in the air, at the spot where the flight hole – their front door – was previously located. Not until 5 minutes later do the bees turn and fly toward the hive.<sup>1</sup>

Jakob von Uexkuell, *A stroll through the worlds of animals and men*

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**Figure 1.** Franz Erhard Walther, *Speerstück* (*Spear piece*), 1961. Courtesy of the artist.

## I

Positioned in the cramped courtyard of the Hayward Gallery, visible only through a window onto the littered patch of land where it stands, is Cyprien Gaillard's *Cenotaph to 12 Riverford Road*. This monument is constructed from the rubble of a demolished Glasgow housing estate, shipped to London and fashioned into a cenotaph. It is positioned here, at the Hayward, hundreds of miles away from Riverford Road and the residents who sustained the life of the estate, where it might be dismissed as yet more rubbish, except for the description etched upon the window glass.

Gaillard's sculpture points to the precarity of the built city for its poorest residents. As social housing is torn down to make way for 'affordable' and luxury homes in gated 'villages', the marks that lower and average earners – increasingly pushed to the margins – leave on a city are ever more impermanent and subject to appropriation. The buildings where we grew and were raised, the spaces where we socialize, the hospitals where we were born, the schools where we were educated are demolished. They are erased and written over at the whims of planners, city officials, and developers looking to make a fast buck before they move on to somewhere else – to New York, to Philadelphia, to Beijing, to Melbourne – to regenerate, and to demolish and refashion that city into something else. If the city is an archive then, like any archive, the knowledge it contains is organized and preserved by those in power, and those with the money, time and resources to influence the powerful.

Where do we look then, in city studies, for the archival documents that might record and transmit a different type of knowledge? How do we reconfigure the city-as-archive so as to access the experiences of 'those others' who create and maintain the life of a city? Is materiality enough?

## 2

The idea of 'performing the urban archive' suggests that what is being performed is the city itself, unless we see the archive as something like choreography. What then is the practice involved in becoming the performer of an urban archive?

Every performance requires a degree of practice. A performance begins, and ends. The beginning of the performance opens up a space of attention. In this space, through the mutual agreement between the performer and her (sometimes imaginary) audience, a recording is made. The recording takes a snapshot of what was practised, and produces a precedent. We later refer to this precedent in further practice, and so on, until the circular, or spiral-like transition from practice to performance falls into a point so dense and accomplished that we may say, 'now it is finished'. The act of practice is an often overlooked, but essential part of performance. As Peter Sloterdijk has argued in a number of recent publications, among them *You must change your life*,<sup>2</sup> the 'anthropotechnics' of practice and competition constitute one of the foundations of Western culture.

When Henry Miller visited Mycene, it unleashed the torrent of consciousness that later became *The colossus of Maroussi*.<sup>3</sup> Miller squeezes histories from ruins like blood from a stone. He feels his heart and the earth underneath his feet tremble with the pounding footsteps of soldiers perished long time ago. He despises the parrots that stand at Mycene's gates, mindlessly regurgitating facts for tourists. But Miller studied the classics, presumably. He mastered the art of poetry, his desire to write, the possibilities of history and the psychological novel in days and sleepless nights of practice, in which he touched imaginary stones again and again, recording notes, making precedents, recording more notes. Then Miller travels to Mycene and lets loose his performance, from the storehouses in his notebook – but back inside a furnished room overlooking a synagogue, with a typewriter: 'The road to Epidaurus is like the road to creation. One stops searching. One grows silent, stilled by the hush of mysterious beginnings'.<sup>4</sup>

### 3

I am concerned with a book by Henri Lefebvre published by Semiotext(e). I originally picked it up because I thought it was by the Marxist spatial philosopher, but I soon learnt it was by another Henri Lefebvre, the French poet and publisher. *The missing pieces* is a prose poem in list form – an archive of sorts – constructed from found ideas and text. Ironically, in each case the found thing is a textual record of something – a book, painting, composition – that was missing, lost, overlooked, destroyed or unfinished. The stanzas read, 'She loses when she loves: scarves, dolls, rings'; 'We no longer know why Henri Lefebvre fell out with Guy Debord'; or 'Since Ovid's error was never put in writing, the reason for his banishment by Augustus has remained unknown for the last thousand years'.<sup>5</sup>

Running to 76 pages, the text collects and collates immaterial materials, staying the oblivion of things that might otherwise have become famous and well known, as well as mundane things that would have become lost to time. Its material inexistences serve to encourage imagination, to facilitate fabrications as we muse on what might have been, and spin the stories behind their missingness. It asks us to attend to these fragments of things now unknowable in order to imagine how our lives may have been altered by what we can no longer know.

### 4

Dance academic Laura Griffiths has argued that Diana Taylor's concept of the archive and the repertoire<sup>6</sup> – where embodied practices constitute non-archival materials because of their unfixed, transient qualities – is limiting. The knowledge contained in the vessel of the body does not disappear in the act of performance; it remains and is accessible. Griffiths proposes that the dancing body can function as an archival document revealing new knowledge and supplementing the material archive.<sup>7</sup> As she notes, the sensory qualities of dance practice constitute 'haptic knowledges' and '[I]nking haptic domains to memory and absence is a key point in relation to the argument that knowledge resides in ephemeral experience'.<sup>8</sup>

I want to visit Griffiths' proposal that the human body serves as an archival source, a vessel of untapped knowledge of the city space. What might be better understood or known through a close engagement with bodily practices? How might attention to the ways in which expertise is embodied and expressed through the body help us to open up new knowledge about the city and its residents?

## 5

In a series of dance works, most noticeably in *Accumulation* (1971), Trisha Brown explores the possibilities of bringing together, or accumulating, gestures, movement and sometimes speech. Documentation of Brown's work from that time shows practice and performance situations indistinguishable from each other. In fact, the entire character and nature of these performances includes an element of practice, heralding the era of 'unfinishedness' in art that emerges from modernity and which we still inhabit today.

What is remarkable in Brown's dance work is the language- and sign-like nature of her movements. There is a constant framing and touching of objects that are not present, and defining of places and spaces that come into existence through movement. By making a gesture that creates a space, and moving this gesture into a new position, a new object appears in a new place. The mind is a muscle, and it points at things, as if to say 'look!'

But who is to look? The performance presupposes an audience, or unknown friends, who have been schooled to see, in the emptiness between Trisha Brown's hands, a conjured object. A hand that points at an object in the city points at nothing until a 'this is' spins a yarn. Stones do not store memories. Performances do, and rituals, like the beautiful and strange British folklore customs photographer, Homer Sykes documented across England in *Once a Year*,<sup>9</sup> such as smoking the fool in Haxey, or turning the devil's stone in Shibbear. The most forceful framework to contemplate the city as archive is through the very absence of the city itself, and its objects. Dancers move and conjure ideas in empty space, animated by an invisible force; a practice of superimposition of ideas on actual objects, spaces, situations, 'to connect what cannot be connected'.<sup>10</sup> But these objects are not storehouses. The whole idea of the city and memory is a construct, and an affectation. It is, as Adrian Forty has stated, probably 'a short-lived category . . . inherently alien to architecture'<sup>11</sup> – an episode in the history of discourse, and not a fact. The actors, dancers and the spectators agree that the story is unique, and needs telling; but the object is exchangeable.

## 6

'To connect what cannot be connected' is part of the will, the impulse to archive, that art historian Hal Foster finds present in contemporary art. As Foster explains in a paper published in the journal *October* in 2004,<sup>12</sup> archival art was at the turn of the millennium, in the ascendance; its aim to make historical information lost or displaced, physically present. Artists might use familiar sources drawn from archives of mass culture to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed, or they might retrieve alternative knowledge, or forms of counter-memory.

The material in these archives often remains indeterminate, presented, as Foster notes, 'like promissory notes for further elaboration or enigmatic prompts for future scenarios'.<sup>13</sup> These are archives that proceed through mutations of connection and disconnection, creating spaces for, in the words of Thomas Hirschorn, 'the movement and endlessness of thinking'.<sup>14</sup>

Recovering radical figures and recalling lost souls, the archive emerges through these aesthetic impulses as a site of creation, recouping often failed visions in everyday life into possible scenarios

of alternative kinds of social relations, to ‘turn excavation sites into construction sites . . . turning belatedness into becomingness’.<sup>15</sup>

A question that has been preoccupying me concerns the potential for creative practices to rewrite our city scripts, and to remake our worlds. In asking this question I am paraphrasing Marxist geographer, David Harvey, who in turn is building on the place of aesthetics within the creative transformation of the everyday for which Henri Lefebvre – this time the Marxist spatial philosopher – argues. I am interested in how it is that creative engagements with archives, and the creation of archives, especially as forms of becomingness – not belatedness – might offer the means to open up urban imaginaries of what the city was and is, but also, importantly what it might be . . .

When I am thinking here of creative engagements, I am thinking both of artistic practices, but also the entwining of creative practices and social science research methods. For these forms of creative research practice, the urban has provided a very rich experimental terrain, and I wonder what models of practice artists’ archival impulses might offer those of us engaged in this field, but also what lessons we learn from the ways in which they both present, and bring about re-scriptings of the city.

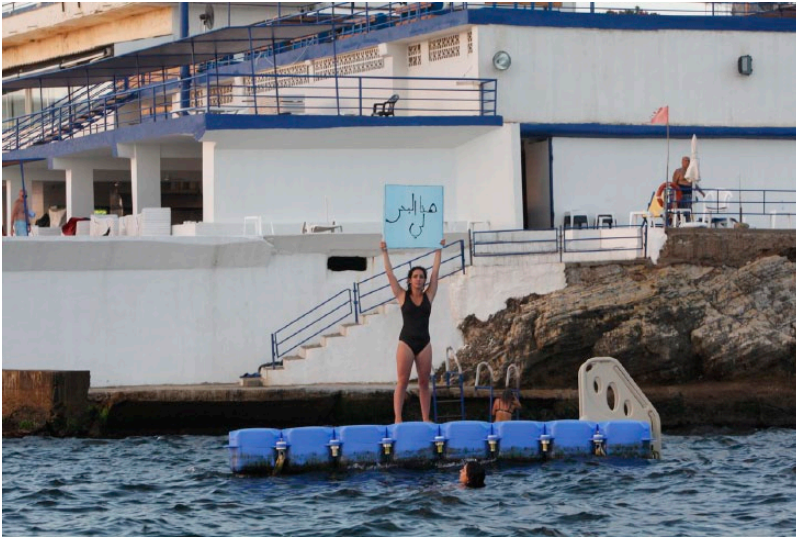
## 7

What might we understand about specific cities by paying proper attention to those ‘others’ who practise them? WAFFLE is a group of young Hispanic and African-American men engaged in a dance culture called ‘Litefeet’ that practitioners call ‘the rebirth of hip hop through dance’. It emerged on the streets of Harlem in around 2006. Dancers reveal their intimate embodied knowledge of New York City by practising on the streets and the subway – expertly navigating the space through gymnastic feats on the floors and poles of moving subway cars. Litefeet facilitates an active engagement with the material conditions of the city streets and underground spaces.

As New York City clamps down on the practice of Subway Dancing, charging those caught panhandling with ‘reckless endangerment’, a ‘Misdemeanor A’ offence with a maximum penalty of up to a year in prison, WAFFLE are in huge demand. Documentary makers, news crews, journalists and academics such as myself record and fetishize their practices in the hope these vital and energetic expressions might reveal something unknown about the city, and the marginalized cultures and people that sustain it. This is particularly the case at a time when city space is conceived as under threat by the hyper-commercialization of the real estate market, and where once vibrant areas are transformed into unrecognizable centres of commerce by the gentrification process. Officials from the city of New York are keen to recruit subway dancers to their ‘show time’ programme, so that the city’s sanctioned performers might learn from illegal dancers how to draw a crowd, and serve up the kind of dances that attract tourists. Some of the WAFFLE dancers are the children of important hip-hop founders – such as Kippy Dee of the Rock Steady crew – and are tied physically to the historical hip-hop culture of The Bronx and Harlem. All have an intimate embodied knowledge of the subway system, of the rhythms and practices of the city space, and of the historical performance innovations that have manifested in Litefeet dance and music culture and which are related to the historical local and global practice of hip hop.

The knowledge that the WAFFLE crew have gained from what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls ‘being-in-the-world’<sup>16</sup> can provide us with untapped insights into the city space. Engagement with such knowledge might prove especially important in articulating the experiences, perspectives and contribution of marginalized communities to the cities, and particularly to the cultural life of the cities where they live. Especially at a time when those communities’ right to the city is threatened by the unstoppable march of gentrification.





**Figure 2.** Dictaphone Group, *The Sea is Mine* (2012).  
Photo: Houssam Mchaimch.

## 8

*The Sea is Mine* is a site-specific performance piece developed by the Dictaphone group, a research and performance collective focused on the exploration of rights to urban space (Figure 2). Based on a bridging of social science research practices and art, the group developed *The Sea is Mine* over several years before performing it first in 2012.

*The Sea is Mine* explores the gradual disappearance of coastal land accessible to the public in the Lebanese city of Beirut. Accelerating after the end of the Lebanese civil war, the privatization of the coastal landscapes by condos, hotels and leisure facilities aimed at tourists and the rich, prevents access to beaches and to the sea, which was early in the 20th century demarked as a public space.

Three instances of urban archives intersect in this project. First, archives were a key source for the group as they researched the changing access to the coast; second, in researching the piece the group created an archive of sorts in both written and sonic form. They summarized their research and collected together legal documents that protest the designation of the land and its privatization processes. During the course of their work they also collected a number of oral histories of residents and fishermen who used to live and work on this coastline. Materials from the project are available on their website.<sup>17</sup>

The third element of the archive at work here is in their performance. Taking to the sea, Dictaphone group invited audiences to travel by boat and even swim up the coast and to be part of a performance of this testimonial archive and the associated information. Tracking the changing legislation and the encroachment of privatization up the coast, the performance encourages audiences to realize the richness of these coastal histories but also to become aware of the illegality and contested nature of these privatization processes. The visualization, sonification and embodied performance of this archive offer a means to assert the right to the sea that these urban residents have.

## 9

While often seen as a site rendering legible power and authority, the archive in artistic hands, can and has been rendered a site of everyday and informal politics. Equally, we also see how it can be mobilized as a site whose rhetoric of power and authority is a means to assert other ways of knowing and being. I am interested in how in the rich ways artists have deployed archives as forms of becomings; we might find models for how we might as scholars and activists, begin to create archives that in their becomings offer ways to individually and collectively reimagine and rewrite our urban scripts.

The material culture of the city and the articulation and documentation of this material culture by academics and others must not be given primacy over the archive of the city contained within the bodies of its residents. We must find ways to engage with and facilitate the dissemination of the embodied knowledge held by a city's residents – and this means active engagement with and respect towards the people of the city.

## 10

The act of founding a city is an act of performance in itself. We have been inventive in constructing practices to create order from chaos. Every city, or at least every idea of the city begins with the idea of a centre. There is no city, until a sacred pole has been placed in the ground, from which culture and dwellings radiate. There is no city until a fire has been lit; or the 'mundus' was dug, the pit in which everything important to life was laid, and covered by a heavy stone. No city until the cattle has been sent to roam on a pasture, and found resting where the altar is to be built. No streets, no pockets and alleyways until a priest has cast two perpendicular lines in the sand, the *cardo* and *decumanus*, from which an urban plan can be drawn, and the palimpsest of the city can begin.

The making of the city reflects the making of the world. To walk the streets of London is to retrace the rituals that formed it, day by day, and to remember what the human cosmos is like; or rather, how such an elastic (historic) idea like the cosmos expands precariously inside the spaces and hard lines drawn by walls and roads. The idea of performing the city as an archive is a making concrete, again and again, something dance-like and poetic – such as standing at the South Bank of the Thames, before time began, and imagining a bridge to the other side; or looking at the bridge as it is now, imagining what it was like when it was not there.

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## Notes

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### Author biographies

Katie Beswick is a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter. Her research is concerned with marginalized spaces, places and peoples. She is especially interested in issues related to class, race and inequality and has published widely on performances set and taking place on council estates. She is co-editor of the recent Special Issue of the journal *Interventions*, 'Reevaluating the Postcolonial City: Production, (Re)Construction, Representation'. She is currently writing a book on council estate performance, and has recently begun a new project exploring 'street' performance cultures across a range of geographical and historical contexts.

Harriet Hawkins works at the intersection of geography and creative practices. This includes collaborating with artists, writers, designers and curators to explore how these practices participate in the creation of geographic knowledge. She is a Reader in Geography at Royal Holloway University of London.

Joseph Kohlmaier is an artist, curator and writer, and a senior lecturer in history and theory at the Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design, London Metropolitan University. He is one of the founding director of graphic design practice Polimekanos, and the artistic and founding director of Musarc, a teaching and research project which has at its heart one of London's most progressive amateur choral ensembles.