

seems to be very spontaneous?

TW: Not at all! Some of my writings are quite spontaneous, of course (I use short stories as a kind of sketchbook process sometimes, for example) but almost certainly not the ones that seem spontaneous. No, it's partly because I am often dissatisfied with the format of the lecture-as-a-text-to-be-read-aloud, and with the academic paper as a literary form or a performance genre. I've been to so many conferences where the reading of papers absolutely kills everything that is interesting about the work being described. So I do like... no, I find it's a bit more energising for me as a performer and hopefully, also for the audience, if I am able to improvise to an extent.

PM: It's more edgy though, isn't it, if you think that Tony doesn't know what he's going to say next. He is flying by the seat of his pants and he's repeated the word provocation five times in the last five sentences and he does not know where this sentence is leading. Although it makes me a bit queasy, I think

that liveness is really important because the last thing you want as a member of the audience is a speaker saying first I did this then I did this and later I did this and lastly I did this.

TW: Also, as a speaker you can often surprise yourself and make connections with something you didn't know or recognise before. The act of speaking, just as the act of writing, can be when knowledge happens and sometimes that can take you by surprise.

Sheffield - 20/10/2010



Transmission *Provocation*

Guest: Tony White

Host: Penny McCarthy

Interviewer: Keith Barley

*

KB: I was thinking earlier about what happens when a thing stops: does it stop dead or are there aspects of it still moving in time and space? One can think of the analogy of a pebble thrown into water and the ripples that are made. The stone stops, sinks down, but its impact on another element is carried on in ripples. There is a trace. If we align this simple allegory to here and now after the audience has gone and after the highs of a long talk, how do you both feel about that talk after the event and did it challenge you?

TW: Talks and events and readings are always challenging

and always make an impact on me. You were asking before we started recording if I minded that people were laughing. As part of giving, I don't know, maybe hundreds of readings and talks, readings from particular books, you learn which bits get a laugh, how to keep an audience's interest, which bits of a text might surprise them.

KB: Yes, they were very intent.

TW: I made them work quite hard though. In a way, if you're not accustomed to listening to a writer reading their work it's difficult – or rather, it's very different to someone talking to you and it does demand a different kind of attention, which is deferred to “the book”. So perhaps people have to listen more intently.

KB: You had to do that, didn't you, to present a reading for the audience to connect to you and what you do.

TW: The writing is the work, or is a very large part of the work, and ninety-nine per cent of people here will not have read my writing before. If there had

been some way of distributing a book to everyone in advance so that people would have some idea of who the hell I am and what I do and write, then maybe I wouldn't have needed to read from my work. But also, in terms of my own biography, I do see live readings and performances as part of my route into writing. More than that, for me, live performance has always been bound up with the writing of a book and also with a particular kind of editorial process that reading something aloud forces on you as a writer. Things can look fine, even appear to be quite neutral, as a text on the page but when you have to speak them aloud, well, it's a very quick way of identifying where something has gone horribly wrong. You just know viscerally that you cannot read that, that it doesn't work as a spoken text, so it forces its own kind of critical attention for the writer as well. And actually some of my novels, *Charlieunclenorfolktango* in particular, existed first as live performances, before they were published as novels.

PM: I am really struck often by

that when I am teaching about the performativity of delivering a lecture... and what was really interesting was when Tony was delivering his readings, I think that from the students' perspective he is slipping out of mode so that sometimes it's a lecture and sometimes it's a reading and they don't know quite what the hell this is. And that's to do with the book as a form of distribution as opposed to what we are habitually used to in sitting in a lecture theatre and watching an artist clicking through pictures of work, one image, two images, and so on. But this is a bit odd, as when the speaker is doing a reading, it is closer perhaps to having a conversation and the usual wall between stage and audience has dropped down, hasn't it? That barrier of 'this is a image of my work in a gallery' suddenly disappears and it is 'this is the work, it is happening here in front of me'.

TW: Yes, and being read to is also something that many of us are used to – it's one of our first cultural encounters.

KB: I observed how that worked

that myself, but I also noticed something quite different (and this is my personal focus): I noticed that the presentation was quite different from what a 'conventional' artist's talk is, and that frequently you presented the covers of a book which you had spoken about earlier; you handled your books quite a lot and held them up, and in a really nice way it was as though those images were like a veil in front of you. Moreover, they spoke before you.

TW: That's interesting. As I was just saying, when – rather than if – people are unfamiliar with my work I believe that showing the cover of whichever book helps to situate what I'm talking about. And the 'bookness' of the books is important: these are objects that have been produced and they are readily accessible. One student was critical of that. They thought that in showing the covers of the books I was somehow trying to sell them. As if the fact that books are widely available is something slightly shameful. Maybe that says something about one's relationship with books as a

student, books and power: often books are something to fillet for an essay, they are about the work, they represent authority yet operate at several removes, containing reproductions of images of the work rather than being the work themselves. If I were to be self-critical about the talk it would be to wonder how useful it really is for me to turn up and stand there declaring that 'here is another book' without really much opportunity for people to engage in what that book is about. But I couldn't just stand here and read to – or at – people for an hour because everyone would fall asleep. There has to be a different kind of engagement or presentation. I was trying to describe a series of particular projects as briefly as I could but at least also to describe them in a way that would coincide with possible points of interest on the part of the audience. Of course, I can only guess at what these might be.

KB: I am interested in the way your presentation was very spontaneous, or at least, it seemed that way. Does it mirror your work, in that your writing