

Setting and Unsettling the Stage

Up until the moment that lights went out in Beyreuth, and the audience, for the first time perhaps since Plato's cave, was to sit docilely facing forward in the dark, one's attendance, or rather "assistance", in performance was a multi-sensory and multi-focal experience.

BETH WEINSTEIN
University of Arizona

Many of the realized and unrealized avant-garde performance spaces and set designs of the 20th century aimed at restoring an immersive, multisensory experience, or, conversely, poking and provoking the audience out of their daydream to intellectually engage with action on stage, action that made no attempt at illusion. These two models of spectator engagement correlate to the principles underlying the thinking of two important directors: Antonin Artaud (physical, haptic immersion) and Bertold Brecht (intellectual engagement through techniques of alienation).

Within the last decade in visual, performance and performing art circles, French philosopher Jacques Rancière's lecture on the *Emancipated Spectator* has furthered the debate about this dilemma of spectacle and spectating versus engagement and participation. Rancière reveals this "paradox of the spectator" as being based upon the following relationships:

'...there is no theatre without a spectator...But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing....Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.¹

At the heart, the dilemma assumes many things. One assumption is that being a spectator is 'bad' and that there is a moral imperative to transform this passive spectator into active participant. Rancière reframes the question asking if, in fact, the spectator is truly passive and thereby must be "activated," or if there is already action, and therefore engagement, agency, participation, already in spectatorship.

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure

the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts... observes, selects, compares, interprets.... (and) participates in the performance by refashioning it in (his) her own way.... They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.²

How does this dilemma of spectacle and spectating versus engagement and participation impact current architectural thinking? Architect-authors of the recent publication *Performatism* present the perspective that

...performance provides a wider frame for the conception of the architectural form because it incorporates and lingers in-between the functionalist and image-based approaches of form making and conception. It also suggests breaking dichotomies between the performance of form as an object and the performance of the human subject. Form in this case is animated, acting and interacting with the surrounding objects/forms and the human subject, creating possibilities for the emergence of new realities.³

Chris Salter, in *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*, also recognizes the contribution, beyond form, of architectural works and thinking to the discourse around performance and Performance Studies.⁴ Within recent histories of experimental architecture we find many encounters between architectural propositions and performative actions. Haus Rucker Co, Coop Himmel b(l)au, Cedric Price, and Bernard Tschumi are amongst many to acknowledge for their speculations—written, drawn, constructed and lit afire— on performing architectures.

Returning to the architecture of Beyreuth, as well as Gropius' Total Theater for Piscator, El Lissitzky's set for Meyerhold, and so many others, these projects raise questions about how architecture participates in not only staging scenarios but also as performer in scenarios. To perform must architecture literally become a dynamic, mobile actor in an event? Or can it do so by empowering humans to participate as dynamic actors or physically active interpreters? Or can it construct more engaging relationships for *distant spectators* to also be *active interpreter*? Can these three modes of performance be a way to question the performance of architecture in performance events?

Within a context of architectures for contemporary dance performances this essay will address architecture's staging and participating in the scenario, and its engaging and empowering the performer, the public or participant. It will unfold a lineage of architectural scenography's activation, from a static construct to a performing participant in the event. Secondly, it will address conditions through which the architecture, although static, engages the *distant spectators* and *active interpreters*. The works discussed in this essay, that are but a fragment of a larger theory of performative architecture, are performance environments resulting from collaborations between architects and choreographers. The architect-collaborators discussed here include Frank Gehry, TWBTA, John Pawson, Jaafar Chalabi, Thom Mayne, Nikolaus Hirsch with Michel Müller, and Francois Roche.⁵

The time line of evolving ideas about performative architecture begins with a collaboration, arranged by LA MoCA curator Julie Lazar, between Frank Gehry and choreographer Lucinda Childs (1983) on a work titled *Available Light*. Childs' dances are studies in repetition and variation of ordinary movements, taken to

an extreme such that they produce a transporting state – an ex-stasis, if you will. Rhythmic structure overlays the variations to geometric patterning; this patterning can be seen in her choreographic scores which are similar to the patterns and variations found in Sol Lewitt's drawings. Childs and Lewitt, with Phillip Glass, had collaborated on *Dance* just a few years earlier (1979). In *Available Light*, two geometries – parallel and oblique – informed the patterning. For this work Frank Gehry designed both the two stages on which the dance occurred and audience seating structures; although physically static, the relation between the seating and dancing platforms constructed dynamic conditions.

Gehry split the stage into two unequal platforms, elevating and rotating one. The audience space also was split; one group to the front and one to the side, with the larger side group split again with one seating section twisted so as to be parallel to the rotated rear stage platform. The split and rotated platforms in front of the audience's view, plus the presence of the other seating section in peripheral vision, primed an aggregate of canvases across which Childs' dancers drew their split and rotated geometric patterns with their movements. The physically static stage and audience space complimented the dynamic split and rotated choreography.⁶

Gehry's design set up visual interest in frontal and peripheral vision, on a foregrounded stage and in deep space beyond the chain link fencing installed to define a spatial vessel within the larger building (today's Geffen Contemporary). The layers and spacing of action engaged the viewers in the act of viewing multiple places and spaces of action. The audience members could, in addition to dance and space, perceive each other in the waning light available through the spaces' skylights.

Several years later, when invited by Elisa Monte to collaborate on *The World Upside Down* (1990), Tod Williams and Billie Tsien reflected upon and reacted to their experience seeing Gehry's stage platforms for *Available Light*. Their experience of *Available Light*, however, was of its re-performance on the proscenium stage of the Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House. They could not have experienced the original production's split audience relationship to the stage, nor its setting within a larger volume. Thus the more complex engagement of viewing was absent. Not surprisingly they perceived Gehry's design as static,⁷ and determined to make a set for Monte that would actively participate in the performance. Their ultimate solution was an enormous folding wall that, through the dancers' efforts, was continuously moved around the stage over the duration of the performance. The logic behind the wall's design produced a system of binary oppositions: object to be illuminated front or back; scrim or screen; open or closed; facing upstage or down; structure hidden or revealed.⁸

Although seemingly static, Gehry's intervention invited the audience into a multifaceted viewing condition. The folding wall of *The World Upside Down*, although literally dynamic, made other demands on the viewer; the play of lighting with scrim, screen, and even light-sensitive surfaces demanded that viewers make sense of shadow, silhouette, imprint and actual bodily presence. The work not only foreshadowed the growing use of projection – the contemporary version of Plato's cave – to create performance environments, but foreshadowed also the wave of collaborations between architects and the full spectrum of performing and performance arts that continues today.

In *The World Upside Down* the hinged wall moved about the stage space, gravity bound, not unlike the dancers who mobilized the wall through their interaction

with it. This work by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien literally opened up the question as to how architecture can participate in the scenario as performer, not just the setting of the stage. In the projects that follow the architecture also transformed spatially over the course of the performance, but without the dancers physically enacting that transformation. The transformations were remotely controlled, and, similar to *World*, the performed transformation of the architecture was entirely pre-scripted; its choreography predetermined.

In the case of *Multiplicity: Forms of Silence and Emptiness* (1999), with a set by Jaafar Chalabi for choreographer Nacho Duato, both the architectural set's underlying structural logic and its transformations drew from the collaborators' interest and research on Baroque music, with its variations and fugue, and the convoluted surface geometries of Baroque space. The three tiered scaffold structure alternated between being hidden behind an impenetrable surface of metal sheets, to its being revealed as a result of the incremental concave and convex folding of the surfaces to create an opening below, then fragmented surfaces and voids above, to the ultimate revealing of the ramp within the supporting scaffold structure upon which the dancers ascended at the conclusion of the performance. All of these transformations occurred with equal precision and grace as the dancers movements, either slowly shape-shifting in plain sight, or revealed in a new position after a blackout.

Architect John Pawson, consistent with his reputation for minimalist design, created two seemingly simple pivoting walls for choreographer Wayne MacGregor's *Anatomie de la Sensation* (2012). These two walls, that filled the full height of the massive proscenium arch of the Opera de la Bastille, and extended nearly the entire depth of the stage, divided the image into a triptych configuration, evoking the paintings of Francis Bacon—the inspiration for this collaborative work. Subtle pivoting of the walls opened or pinched the space and perspective view of the stage. These enormous structures, dwarfing the dancers on stage, could only be controlled with intention, by vast machines. This pre-scripting, this remote controlling, in both cases is important as it raises questions about the architecture's participation in staging or in scenarios, and empowerment of both spatial and human performer. Both works present two pre-scripted, separate, but parallel, solos—an architectural solo and a human solo. There was nothing “unscripted” in this performance.

Although the movement of the architectural setting in Thom Mayne's set for *Silent Collisions* was similarly remote controlled and pre-scripted, it took on the additional role of structuring the complete audience-performance environment—a setting for unscripted performances. This occurred within the Teatro alle Tese on the occasion of Frédéric Flamand's curating the first Venice Biennale of Dance (2003). Flamand's dance occurred within the ample corridor of space created by Mayne's set, with audience seated at two ends. From a clearly rectilinear tube of space at the outset of the performance this overhead and lateral enclosure of the dance platform transformed into a folded, fractured and divided space, moving through eleven distinct configurations corresponding to eleven cities derived from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The alternation between expansive and constricted space, and changing illumination and projection conditions, correlated to changes in choreographic texture from section to section.

Not unlike Gehry's intervention for *Available Light* in the then Temporary Contemporary museum space, the set for *Silent Collisions*, was originally designed for a non-theater space. These conditions allowed, if not demanded, a rethinking

of the physical relationship between performer and spectator, and between spectators. Audience members saw before them a dance within three receding layers of folding frames, behind which, in the darkness, were their fellow audience members. While the architecture performed its actively transforming part of the dance, the spectators, though stationary in their seats, were not entirely, conceptually, in the dark. Their presence as viewers, presented back to them in seeing other audience members, moves one step towards another form of presence / activation / participation—Rancière's *distant spectators* and *active interpreters*.

Taken one step further, *the Future of Work*, designed by Jean Nouvel for the Hanover 2000 Expo and performed by Frédéric Flamand's company, framed the performed dance within a three-story, elliptical ring around and then through which Expo-goers circulated.⁸ The public ramped down the exterior, from top to ground level, and then entered into the center of the arena. Milling about, amongst other Expo-goers, the mobilized public could visually explore the dance action surrounding them as well as fully participate in exploring the space of their peer-spectators. In a more distributed manner choreographer Sasha Waltz's *insideout* (2003) demanded that the spectators physically move about a large structure within which multiple space-dance actions could be discovered.¹⁰ These projects raise questions about how literally must the architecture demand the audience to physically engage in order for one to cease being a spectator and "participate" in the performance experience.

William Forsythe's *Hausführung* (2005) perhaps took to the extreme this last issue of mobilizing the spectator and transforming their role to participant/performer. Yet, not unlike Rancière's third way, *Hausführung* set up alternating roles of spectating and performing, speaking and listening, acting according to script and improvising unscripted performances. In this work, which was, as its title suggests a "house tour" – of the fitting out of the Bockenheimer Depot by architects Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller—Forsythe explained all of the decisions that led to the design that the house-tour "audience" was experiencing. Upon completing the tour, audience members were offered a tour guide's badge, empowering them to give their own tour whenever they liked. The architectural fit-out similarly empowered the public. The redesign of the Depot was comprised of a set of mobile elements. These included steel and panel benches and tables, felt covered balls and cubes, and sheets of industrial felt. Larger ones were hung as movable space dividers and smaller ones were of a scale to be easily moved about by the public and piled up on the floor. These elements were both those that defined and enclosed spaces for performances, and the sets for performances and the furnishings for the public space of the Depot – a space the public was empowered to configure as they saw fit on a day to day basis.¹¹ The elements distributed in the foyer of the Depot offered an open and endless set of possibilities to create an ever-evolving environment which individual members of the public could tune to their needs—meeting room, indoor playground, picnic area, public living room.¹²

Between the extremes—of architectures that perform their solo in parallel to the dance and the spectators who are, through the architectural scenography, prodded out of their seat to become a performer—what other territories have been, are to be, explored?

The last work, by dancer-choreographer Richard Siegal and architect François Roche, challenged conventions and expectations of authorship and authority. It

questions not only the nature of architecture, but also how architecture for dance performs, and questions who performs and who spectates. We are familiar with François Roche's experiments that blur buildings with environment, weather and vegetation. Siegal, an equally virtuosic dancer and maker in his own right, has shifted away from conventions to engage social organizations, street and folk dance groups, generative collective form, and questioning who performs and who choreographs. For their collaboration on *Civic Mimic*, Roche developed an immense forking surface that sloped from table level to above head-height, with arms stretching out and inviting the public in, and violating one of architecture's three Vitruvian demands—stability. Its foam surface and innumerable spindly legs rocked, swayed and gave way under the dancers, necessitating a constant negotiation between body and spatial construct. At the base of the spindly legs were more anthropomorphic booties than architectural "footings."¹³ This centipede did not perform an architectural solo. Its performance was inseparable from the dancers' movement on top of it. All the while, its performance undermined that of the dancers with its instability.

The dance was equally caught in a feedback loop, conceptually layered with references and commentaries on the behavior and performed relations of performer and spectator. Imitation and mimicry provided the choreographic material, live, while rigid architectural container and flexing platform altered the course of the dancer's intentions. While six skilled dancers negotiated the uncertain table top, two hundred fifty volunteers performed crowd choreographies in response to the audience and to the space's architecture. Siegal explains that

Civic Mimic situates the body on the intersection between the individual and the collective. It enacts bodies in their social relation, frustrating the division between spectator and performer in a conditional, transactional space. Within the interdependent systems of crowd, material and gesture the performers negotiate the resulting unpredictable reciprocity.¹⁴

Subtly, or not so subtly, the work shed light on crowd behavior, on the precarity and contingency of individual action. Quite literally the performance destabilized imbalance postures and sought to render every bit and every body just slightly uneasy in their boots.

So how does architecture participate in not only *staging* scenarios but also *in* scenarios? The works discussed here cover the scope of architectures that constructed a static context for events to occur, to transforming spaces in parallel but not literally responsive to the dance with which they synchronized. Others still offered potential architectures, inviting the participation of the public to actualize space, and yet others offered structures, though "fixed," that were un-scripted, unstable, demanding partnership between human and non-human actors.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rancière, Jacques, "The Emancipated Spectator," in *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 2. "The Emancipated Spectator" is based upon Rancière's lecture opening the 2004 Frankfurt Summer Academy at the invitation of 'choreographer' Marten Spangberg, and originally published in 2008, in French.
- 2 Ibid., 13.
- 3 Grobman, Yasha J., and Eran Neuman, *Performatism: Form and Performance in Digital Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012) 4.
- 4 Salter, Chris. *Entangled: technology and the transformation of performance* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010).
- 5 Footage of John Pawson's set for *Anatomie* can be seen at <https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/videoopera/l-anatomie-de-la-sensation-pour-francis-bacon-0>. For video footage of *Civic Mimic* at Chaillot see <http://vimeo.com/87270933>, and at Hellerau see <http://theatre-chaillot.fr/danse/richard-siegal-rsien/civic-mimic>. Images of all other performance environments discussed here can be found in essays I have previously published, including: Beth Weinstein, "Performing Architectures: Closed and open logics of mutable scenes," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 18:3 (2013): 161-168; and Beth Weinstein, "Flamand and his Architectural Entourage," *Journal of Architectural Education* 61:4 (2008): 25-33.
- 6 Discussion of this work is elaborated in: Beth Weinstein, "Performing Architectures: Closed and open logics of mutable scenes."
- 7 Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, in discussion with the author in NYC, October 17, 2010.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Beth Weinstein, "Flamand and his Architectural Entourage," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 61:4 (2008): 28.
- 10 *Inside Out*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAZ2yHKVmbc>, last accessed September 16, 2014.
- 11 William Forsythe, in discussion with the author, Hellerau, May 26, 2012, and Nikolaus Hirsch, in discussion with the author, Frankfurt, July 9, 2011.
- 12 Weinstein, "Performing Architectures," 167.
- 13 François Roche, in discussion with the author via Skype, December 11, 2012.
- 14 <http://www.thebakery.org/reperatory-civic-mimic>, accessed 29 June, 2014)