The performer and the New Media Object (dramaturgical
considerations and consequences regarding new media practice)
 - by Jette Lund   7. november 2006

> *"to adress the question what makes their work an example
> of Research & Design and not (only) a work of art or a
> design product"*

The modern stage arts request the dramaturge to deal with "a text"
comprising not only the spoken words - if some - and the movement
of the performer, but even more the pictures and forms created on
the stage, the sound and the light, in their interaction with the
performer. What creates the expression of these objects on stage
is not due to the objects alone, but is due to how the objects are
associated with and handled with, as objects of interest for the
performer. This goes for the physical object as well as for the
virtual.
And it goes for the more traditional "theatre" as for "performance
art" - and certainly it goes for the installation, where the
spectator often is expected to interact with the actual work of
art.

The works I am going to present here are no works of art nor
design products - they are attempts to describe how to work and
how to design in order to make it possible for an artist - here a
performer - to deal with the New Media Objects - the "NMO"s.
It is - for me - a question of true "sensuous knowledge". The
artist on the stage knows through her senses - and her feelings -
what she wants to achieve:
How can she communicate her knowledge to the programmer, the
technician, and perhaps even the stage designer - on a field where
the terms and the notions for her is precisely so strange and
unfamiliar, as her notions and terms are to them ?
Not to forget, that in performing arts - as in an installation -
there is allways an audience - a spectator - as the end target of
the communication.

"Responsive rooms" are an often used term for rooms, which
according to sensors and computer algorithms and depending on the
actions of a performer or a spectator, are presenting an audience
or the spectator with different audio-visual expressions - NMO's

*But for the room to be "responsive" someone will have to ask a
question.*

And very often the producer or the artist will be (or will have to
be) content with the NMO as a wonderful changing decoration - like
a lava-lamp.

If the virtual objects on stage should be something more than a fancy background for the performer profiling him/herself, one will have to give attention to the performers (spectators) sensuous, physical acquisition of the New Media Object. One will have to find ways to communicate with the NMO's - to ask them questions, and make them respond.

Our research intend to explore the possibilities of the NMO for more specific use, not just as any expression, but as an expression with a content - a "story" - a poetic row of intended associations - in the stage arts or on the installation art scene. On one hand the virtual scenic NMOs, creating pictures and spaces for the performance, are not different from any other prop, which the performer will have to relate to. On the other hand they are qualitatively different in their virtuality, immateriality, fragility and inconstancy. This transient, non-physical existence of the scenic NMO is challenging the performer with special demands.

Our wiews are based on the consideration, that our perception and our experience of an "image" - a representation - the virtual image as well - is based on the physical, sensed experiences, which we previously have been able to achieve. This "horizon of experience" (my free translation for Jauss "Erfahrungshorizont") is conditional on our psycho-physical abilities, our age, and our historic/cultural background.
The performer has to evoke her own sensed memories, experiences and associations to be able to intermediate and evoke them in an audience.
When the scenic image is an NMO, she will have to intermediate sensed memories, experiences and associations with a picture of the actual thing, not with the thing itself - as f.I by a prop, an object of the "object theatre" or in a puppet play. Or she will have to relate to abstract figures, colours and shapes, making them relate to her, and so to the audience.
This is not a pipe ....

The performer will have to be aware of the reason for the choice of this, and not any other possible image for the stage, she will have to choose and present her "playing material" for the audience to meet her own artistic demands for expression and content, and to meet the expectations of the audience.

Katrine Nilsens "RespOnce Project" meet these demands by creating a sort of "alphabet" for the stage design, which might be used to form a "vocabulary" for a given performance -

2.3 The System

The system is a classification of *things* in a matrix with basic forms on one axis and the transformation from *material* to *product* on the other axis defining 20 categories. The system describes the individual material quality, dynamics and characteristics of the things as well as their *hierarchic* organisation and possible abilities of transforming from *material* to *product* and back – as well physically and in the perception of the audience.

The axis with the basic forms is divided in the following categories:

1) *"Corpus"* describes all three-dimensional things with a (solid) Mass or a volume. *A mass* can be modelled, formed or constructed into a form, it can surround or fill something and it can complete a form. *A mass* can also be destroyed, deconstructed, decomposed, rebuild or transformed. *(The Flesh or A Body)*

2) *"Plane"* describes all surfaces or membranes. *A surface* can be folded and unfolded, it can cover, wrap or hide a form or it can serve as a background or underlay for something or someone. Things like carpets, backdrops, walls or floors are all plane surfaces. *(The Skin)*

3) *"Lines"* is all kinds of sticks and strings and everything with a clear and visible construction or constructive form. *Sticks* can point, pile, bundle and bend and it can indicate and construct a form. *Strings* can connect and be stretched between points, it can join, assemble and encircle, and it can create lines and outlines of a form. *(The Bones, The Veins, Tendons and Nerves)*

4) *"Spots"* describes all kind of grains and small units en-masse. *Grains* are an inconstant mass, which can be small individual units or parts of a demolished mass or form. It can be spread, sprinkled, strewed or mounded, it can create patterns, imprints and outlines and it can cover a large area or be gathered into heaps. *(The Remains)*

5) *"Formless"* is all kind of fluids, liquid or gaseous. *Fluids* are never constant and needs some kind of container or membrane to be fixed or shaped into a form. It can soften, dissolve and destruct or mix, blend and gather a material and it can surround and absorb something or someone. *(The Body Fluids)*

On the other axis the matrix define the *things* on a scale from *material/element* to *product*, which can be read as follows:

A) By *"material"* is meant a substance not yet manufactured into at specific form or function.

B) By *"form"* is meant a material shaped into a well-defined unity not referring to any known function.

C) By *"function"* is meant a manufactured shape or unit referring to a certain purpose.

D) By *"figure"* is meant a shape or material designed to depict, represent or imitate any living being: Human, animal or plant - or something natural given (forest, hill).

Everything on the stage regardless of its characteristics is there to arouse associations by the performer and the spectator/ participant. Nevertheless there is a qualitatively difference in the character of the associations aroused, according to the expression or function of especially two types of things, which might be refered to as:

"Ready-Made" – things defined in relation to material, form and function, but not yet carrying tracks of use.

"Objet trouvé" – things that are *found*, old, used and marked by their previous use and destiny.

Between the *virginity* of the one and the *exhaustion* of the other there is a wide range of possible *"history"* for the performer to define - from the open-for-all-possibilities of the brand new, to the rather closed expression of the old and used.

This classification helps to judge in what way the specific thing is able to become an *object* of our attention and whether it signals that it has already been an *object* for someone else. In this way the system is a key to understand and work consciously with the establishment of the *subject/object relation*, with a point of departure in the materiality of the things.

Description of an experiment:

For the performer to change one object for another is a process,
which do not follow logical lines and arguments.
Often more hidden properties will be determing the choice:

1) a nightmare
2) an eiderdown/duvet
3) a feather from the eiderdown falling from an umbrella
(the protection offered by the eiderdown is disappeared)

1) a nightmare
2) an eiderdown/duvet
2) to be caught in a surface - a strait-jacket
(the restriction in movement caused by the eiderdown)

The most obvious choice of a figure instead of a material will
often be experienced as a limitation

The ventilator with its cable seen as an animal with a long tail,
sitting on the shoulder of the performer, the "tail" wrapping her
up

- replaced by the flexible ventilation tube, but keeping the
property of a "being" and the character of "wrapping up"

Such experiences and expressions are to be transformed to the
virtual space - to make a stick "sticky" and a stone "stoned"

The matrix as a princip might be used for education and training -
but could be formed to serve the needs of an actual project,
according to a "brainstorm", taking its starting point in the
producer/performers theme, idea, concept or story.
It could be used as a kind of standard test elements, to meet the
needs of the mainstream theater, and it might be used as an
analytic tool to investigate the changes of a (traditional) stage
design from idea to reality - the "why" and "how" made visible and
concious.
One might call it training at the bar - mirroring the daily
training at a ballet school, underlining the craft of the art.

The craft of the use of the NMO on stage has not yet been developed. We are borrowing methods from other art forms to use them for trying out and getting experiences.

The project of Katrine Nilsen is dealing with the materiality of the NMO - my projekt is dealing with the NMO's complexity and great range of possibilities.
This lead to a suggestion of an implementation order for the features, connected to the virtual expression, in relation to the performers understanding of and handling of the features of a given prototype.
....

The suggestion to introduce more simple features before more complicated might seem banal, but in my experience, due to the gab between the craft of the programmer and designer on one side, and the craft of performer on the other, really necessary to describe. It correspond to experiences known from classical puppetry, where a new puppet is to be tried very carefully out, despite of its perhaps very traditional and well known technic.

In the field of the NMO new prototypes are constantly invented, and the possibilities are numerous. Nevertheless they all have something in common - the performer and his/hers psychophysical ability and professional training.
Through the performers establishment of changing subject/object relations and connections the virtual, transient objects gain depth and establish themselves as new and fascinating, valid expressions in the eye and mind of the spectator.
The experience gained by the professional performers dealing with the possibilities can be transferred to other areas of use: E.g. Interactive installations, virtual guides etc.

The investigation of the dramaturgical possibilities of the different prototypes will have to follow.

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