

Interregnum: In Between States
PSi # 14 Conference
August 20-24, 2008

Constructing Presence - aspects of dramaturgy in performance art and experimental theater

Jette Lund, warehouse9.dk: "The Meaning of Presence"

Jørgen Callesen, warehouse9.dk: "Between physical presence and media representation"

Gritt Uldall-Jessen, warehouse9.dk: "Between the presented text and the present picture"

The theme will encompass experiences within contemporary scenic art presented in theatres and/or exhibitions in the broadest sense. Art forms which employ a variety of different media, crossing traditional borders between professions and genres and between artist and audience.

These scenic art forms demand new skills, not only of its creators and its hosts, but also of its users as well.

Performance art and experimental theatre have been given varying attention from audiences, writers and theorists throughout history and **there has never been outlined a uniformed genre, aesthetics or dramaturgy**. One reason is that the techniques, skills and contexts in experimental projects are in constant change and "in-between states". In addition **there has never been a formulated coherent theory and vocabulary to describe what these art forms have in common**. They seem to be transient by nature.

However we have all experienced a need to pinpoint special characteristics in individual experimental projects to communicate its different aspects - both in the process of creation and in the actual presentation.

In order to define the notion of space, presence and dramaturgy we all benefit from taking a point of departure in the physical objects, the scenic images, the site specific environment, the musical scores or a conceptual principle, rather than in the dramatic text and its characters as in the traditional theatre.

In the presentation we will outline some characteristics of this form of "scenic presence" between the theatre and fine arts and give examples of our work.

.....

My role in connection to Gritt Uldall-Jessen and Jørgen Callesen is the role of the dramaturge. This role imply conventional dramaturgical work as finding background material and analyzing texts, but as for the kind of productions we are doing it is rather the role of the "reflector" (a term coined by theatre scientist Lene Kobbarnagel) - the "other eye", mirroring and commenting on a production, but not correcting or telling anyone what to do.

My experience on this field cover many different productions and situations, from exhibitions to traditional theatre, live theatre, dance theatre and - first of all - puppet theatre (in its broadest sense).

My contribution to this "in-between states" is to offer the puppet theatre as a model for analyzing and understanding at least some of the many different phenomenons of this field: performance art, installations and performance theatre.

The Meaning of Presence

Contemporary scenic art not only mix the different genres and the means of expression, it is "taking place" in lots of different "places" - "place" usually means a physical space of some continuity, with some history - but what is the meaning of "place" in this (scenic) context?

What makes a website - virtual worlds like for instance "Second Life" - "a place" ?

And what makes the exhibition of a piece of art, an installation, "scenic"?

The term "presence", presupposes first of all a "place", but presupposes too the presence of someone or something else - and some kind of communication. So the website is made "a place" for presence and communication, through its ability to mirror the user and make her feel "noticed".

This communicative activity need not to involve spoken or written words, it relies on the possibility to exchange activity, to "answer" on actions - in short, to establish changes between on one side being a subject opposed to an object, and being made an object and taking subject status on the other.

.....

Our statement in the abstract - that there has never been outlined a uniformed genre, aesthetics or dramaturgy - and there has never been a formulated coherent theory and vocabulary to describe what these art forms have in common - could be modified a bit:

I would like to refer to Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Ästhetik des Performativen*, 2004 (unfortunately not yet in English?) and her definition of "presence", adding some of my own experiences and findings from the theory of the puppet theatre.

"Between the observer and the observed is a continuous interchange ... [oscillating]... between subject and object positions, permanently sliding between the two ... subject and object is no longer oppositions, but are only marking different states or positions for the observer and the observed, which follow each other or sometimes could be taken simultaneously. This might be the case with everyday experiences too. But after all we will first recognize it through the attention, we are producing during a performance. Here we experience ourselves in the act of observing as active observers, at the same time as being affected by the observations, as subject and objects at the same time" (p.301, my translation)

My thesis is, that on the contemporary stage this situation is created by performers, oscillating or continuously changing between subject and object status, and so mirrored in the audience.

In traditional puppet theatre the puppeteer is making himself an "engine" for the puppet, and is thereby letting the object, the puppet, take subject status. In more recent puppet theatre we often experience the puppeteer in action on the stage, together

with the puppet, and so continuously changing between being "a subject" - a scenic figure - and "an object" - a "engine" for the scenic figure played by the puppet/subject.

The changing subject/object (outer)connections and (inner) relations can be seen as a characteristic as well as a means of expression in modern scenic art.

This use of oppositions and changes evokes - as stated by EFL - the audience's feeling of "presence", it arouses the attention and is a strong carrier of expression, even if it is - as EFL puts it - a quality of performance, not of expression, in the term of "content". (p. 165)

By taking the experiences of the puppet theatre in consideration we are leaving the concept of space, scenography and objects on stage, taken as mere background and "props", and passing through an area which EFL (with Gernot Böhme "Atmosphäre" p. 173) labels as "the ecstasy of the things" - meaning that space, scenography and objects or "things" are "expressing themselves", and so used as means of expression, as carriers of "content".

Another term, I would like to introduce is "contract of fiction" (Janek Szatkowski m.fl.: Dramaturgisk Analyse. Århus 1989)

The ability of humans to step into a fiction, knowing that it is a fiction and yet behaving "as if", according to accepted guiding rules, is indeed very special for mankind and does not only offer us the possibility of gaming and playing - for instance in the theatre - but it also fathers our ability to invent and construct and so utilize and exploit the resources of (our) world.

As every piece of art has a certain element of fiction, or relate to the notion of fiction by claming, it is non-fiction, one can say, that every piece of art implyes a "contract of fiction" - guiding us to receive it as it was "meant". If a said autobiography turns out to be a fiction, people will feel cheated.

The "contract of fiction" in scenic art creates a "place", where every day's rules are not necessarily valid, and tells the audience how to manage the event, what they can expect, and what is expected from them as an audience. It signals to what extent there is a construction of fiction, which you as an audience will have to accept in order to enjoy the event.

Marco Evaristti's notorious event with the goldfish in the blenders: The responsibility for the "contract of fiction" was put into the hands of every single member of the audience, who had to decide for herself, whether to press the button or not - principally the same construction as we find in Yoko Ono's famous performance "Cut Piece".

To outline some characteristics of these very different forms of "scenic presence" we might set out by looking into the term "scenic" -

the exhibition

The physical conditions for the "exhibition" can be described as a situation, where an audience is invited in, is free to leave one piece of art and go to the next, and undisturbed can leave the building or the ground of the exhibition again, whenever one might want to. Every single piece of art of an exhibition will have to work for itself, to attract, sustain and relate¹ to the interest of every single member of the audience.

The experience of a piece of fine art is principally dependent on the spectator alone. The quality of the art is a part of it, but principally it is a personal matter for every individual spectator.

The piece of art of course must be "placed" somewhere for a spectator to find (exception confirming the rule: Eric Andersen's "invisible painting" at Statens Museum for Kunst..), but as for the feeling of "presence" the spectator has to establish a connection or a relation with the work of art on her own premises.

If the spectator experiences "a presence" it is due to the spectator's own actual mood, former experiences, views and feelings - the work itself is doing nothing but existing for the spectator, to look at, or to pass by.

We might value the quality of a piece of art by its ability to arouse such feelings of "presence": The art work is "speaking" to it's audience. But basically it is a very personal thing. A piece of art might in a given situation be of great significance for an individual spectator, even if others could label it as indifferent, conventional or even bad.

But if the artist wants to restrict the movements of the audience in any way, to structure the audiences experiences in any succession, (thereby "adding time") the demand made on every single piece of the exhibition to be of interest for the audience will be higher, and the same claim will be made on the succession in itself. This "route" through an exhibition can be seen as a "stage", and organizing it as the first step of "staging", making the art "scenic".

¹ REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

On creative engagement

ERNEST EDMONDS AND LIZZIE MULLER

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

MATTHEW CONNELL

Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia

the stage art

The convention of the stage arts (- the theatre, the circus, the music hall, the opera, the ballet aso) - tells the audience to arrive to a certain locality on a said time, to experience a certain piece of art for a certain amount of time. The audience is placed in the given room or "space" according to a plan, made by the artists/ producers.

The audience accept the invitation and these conditions (to sit, walk, lay down or something else) and accept to stay for the said time. Not to follow such "given instructions" or implicit conditions is disturbing for the rest of the audience and might be considered "not allowed" or at least embarrassing.

As the audience is giving itself in the hands of the producers, it expects to be entertained and engaged, accordingly to the given conditions and promises, made by the producers, and will tend to be disappointed, offended or direct angry, when these expectations are not met.

The experience of the art piece is dependent of the spectator, as is any experience of art, but do not rest on the spectator alone, the experience has to be structured in order to guide the expectations of the spectator. The quality of the art is a part of it, but the quality is not only the form and the content, but the presentation - the dramaturgy - as well.

The exception confirming the rule could be the famous performance "Lips of Thomas" by Maria Abramowić, where - after two hours - the audience took over to prevent intolerable consequences for the performer ².

Hence the necessity for the producers of considerations about a structure, a dramaturgy, and - not least - considerations about how to communicate their intentions, the "contract of fiction", in order to adjust the expectations of the audience in relation to traditional and therefore well defined conventions for the stage art situation.

Between these two basic situations there is an infinite number of possible variations, but in the relation to an audience, an artist/producer is bound to make decisions to the level of "freedom" versus "control" and so to the structure, in which the audience is invited (or provoked) to participate.

This obligation can not be repealed by a claim of every single member of an audience being free to interpret the piece of art as he or she might want or be able to. This precondition was - as mentioned above - always there and will always be there - hopefully.

The obligation is to define the conditions and to guide the expectations of the audience, which basically means for the artist to express due respect for the audience.

² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, p.9-10

The more such a variation differs from the conventions of the society, in which the event takes place, the more crucial is the communication of the conditions and the expectations.

On this basis it is possible to construct a situation where an audience willingly and free and for a given amount of time is presented with the possibility of leaving reality and stepping into a "fiction", without any un-wanted and not self-chosen consequences for their personal reality later on.

What makes a work of art "scenic" is the establishment - the staging, by adding time - of a possibility of "a place for presence", and the establishment of some "rules" guiding the activity - which might be called a "contract of fiction".

new skills

The contemporary art forms employ a variety of different media, and are crossing traditional borders between professions and genres and between artist and audience, and they are thereby breaking the known expectations and conventions.

These scenic art forms demand new skills, not only of their creators and their hosts, but also of their users as well.

However, the demands on the audience in these projects are not demands which imply something like an academic education, on the contrary, people without a particular interest or experience with theatre often get more benefit from the events, because they meet the pieces of art without the conventional expectations and prejudices.

In relation to the reception of the contemporary stage art, performance and installations, the strong conventions of traditional, dramatic theatre are not valid. Even if the physical situation is more like "theatre" than "exhibition" - the reception of the art will be more like "the exhibition", where every member of the audience will have to put the many various means of expression together in her own way.

Because the audience has to relate to many different means of expression, each of which might present new layers of narration, and because "meaning" is not "expressed" but rather "emerge" - the audience needs time to digest - the dramaturgy of the dramatic theatre or the "Hollywood model" does not fit in. In an exhibition you can use as much time as you need to absorb a piece of art - when the artist has "added time" to her product, a structure is needed to guide the audience and make it possible for meaning to emerge - (EFL p. 243 pp) - and make it possible for an audience to experience "presence".

.....

Presence and media:

The actual physical "presence" of audience and performers is crucial for the stage arts - and for the (scenic) exhibitions as well. Can this "presence of someone or something" be replaced by media ?

EFL speaks about "presence effects" and reserve the notion of "presence" for the actual physical presence. (p.174)
It is however a paradox, that a mediated piece of art often tends to engage and "immerse" an audience even deeper than the actual, physical presence of the performer and the art piece.
My suggestion is, that this is due to the contract of fiction. The mediated art piece, like film, video or a computer game, is very obviously based on fiction - it is very obviously "as if". Because of the distance between the "real" and the "virtual" (mediated) event, implying a clear contract of fiction, an audience often will tend to be more daring, and so get an experience of "presence", even in a virtual world or by virtual means of expression. The ability of the puppet to be a strong therapeutic medium rely on this psychological fact.

.....

"Construction presence" so - for me - imply a place, and someone or something communicative, which is able to attract an audience, to which the audience can sustain and relate, and a contract of fiction.

© Jette Lund