

Re-Viewing the Heart: Making Sense of Building Babel.

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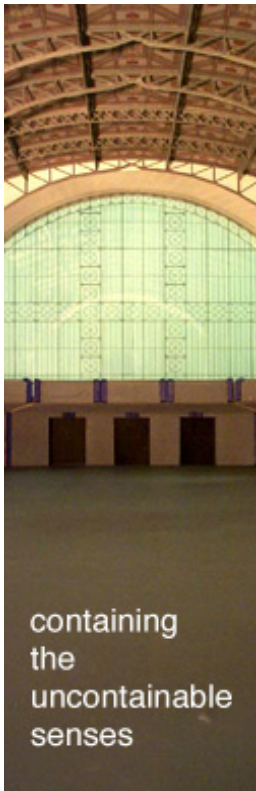
The 'Heart of PQ' was the central thematic exhibition in the 2003 Prague Quadrennial (a four yearly international exposition on stage design and theatre architecture) that focussed on the senses-in-performance. As a site-specific installation within the Middle Hall of Prague's Industrial Palace it sought to challenge, disrupt and eliminate the borders that traditionally exist in theatre, so new relationships could be explored between the body and the built.

The notion of gathering performers from a number of continents and placing them in a shared space to explore the limits of built form and their own bodies is, on one hand, a utopian idea fated to fail and, on the other hand, a dystopian experiment where failure is productive. Differing languages, cultural practices and spatial conventions lead to misinterpretations during the process and the production. Like the mythical city of Babel it proved an unsustainable dream, resulting in confusion, tension and the pervasive threat of collapse.

In re-viewing this multi-cultural inter-disciplinary event, its conflicts and contradictions, the Tower of Babel becomes a valuable model in which synesthesia establishes a necessary theatrical tension. Although the design team, SCAPE @ Massey, claimed to be the provocateurs of the 'Heart of PQ', the writings of Antonin Artaud initiated and continue to haunt the project.

Re-Viewing the Heart: Making Sense of Building Babel

1st July 2004



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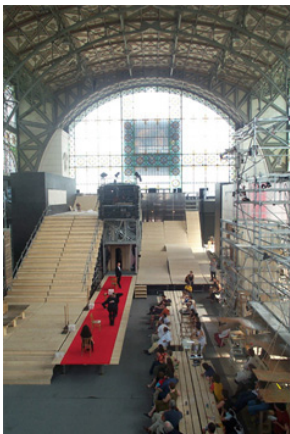
*“ Go like you would to a museum, like you would look at a painting. Appreciate the colour of the apple, the line of the dress, the glow of the light... just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements in time and space, the music, the feelings they all evoke. **Listen to the pictures.**”* (Robert Wilson)

In 1947, Antonin Artaud went to a Paris museum and found in the artworks there his unrealised Theatre of Cruelty. Standing in the Orangerie, Artaud was struck by the “bludgeon strokes” of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings, This manifested itself primarily through a sounding (1976, p.489); “these kinds of organ peals, these fireworks, these atmospheric epiphanies”, orchestrations of “a formidable musician” (ibid, p.502). The resonance of these images was heightened as embodied experiences that began their “somber recitations the very moment one has ceased looking...” It was this echo that haunts Artaud’s essay: ‘*Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society*’, his hymn to the synaesthetic experience of the work of art in a post World War II France. Skies are bruised, candles ring, colours torture and landscapes convulse. Van Gogh, through his “angle of vision” achieved what Artaud had not been able to achieve; “... upsetting the spectral conformity” of the status quo and embodying a world in post-war trauma, where people could no longer believe their eyes.

If “listening to the image” is a potential strategy for navigating the world and the image is of Palestinian youth running across a road in Israel, lifting their shirts to reveal naked explosive-free bellies, or of a young American soldier holding a leash attached to her prone naked Iraqi prisoner, how do we listen? What is the value of the performing

body in an age where the ultimate enactment is its own detonation or humiliation? To listen is not to hear but to concentrate, “to pay attention to something and take it into account”. To act with our ears and our hearts. To make sense of a world that seems to have lost its senses. Why else indulge in this curious and seemingly archaic art form we call “the theatre”? This was a question asked of a number of artists, gathered from around the world, to collaborate in a participatory event conceived between the Czech Theatre Institute and New Zealand’s design team, SCAPE @ Massey, called the *Heart of PQ*.

The *Heart of PQ* was the central thematic exhibition in the 2003 Prague Quadrennial (a 4-yearly international exposition on stage design and theatre architecture) that focussed on the senses-in-performance. As a site-specific installation within the Middle Hall of Prague’s Industrial Palace it sought to challenge, disrupt and eliminate the borders that traditionally exist in theatre, so new relationships could be explored between the body & the built. This involved gathering performers from a number of continents (specifically Russia, Kazakhstan, Japan, Britain, Canada, Samoa, South Africa and the Netherlands) and placing them in a shared space to explore the limits of built form and their own bodies. As an inter-cultural, trans-disciplinary event it was on one hand, a utopian idea fated to fail and, on the other hand, a dystopian experiment where failure was productive. Differing languages, cultural practices and spatial conventions lead to misinterpretations during the process and the production. Like the mythical city of Babel it proved an unsustainable dream, resulting in confusion, tension and the pervasive threat of collapse.



In re-viewing this exhibition/performance/event, its conflicts and contradictions, the Tower of Babel becomes a valuable model in which synesthesia establishes a necessary theatrical tension. Although the design team, researching the limits of performance space, claimed to be the provocateurs of the *Heart of PQ*, the writings of Antonin Artaud initiated and continue to haunt the project.

STRUCTURES OF RECOVERY

The tormented Artaud saw the theatre as a fiercely transformative place of healing. Constantly estranged from the world, theatre was the double of an “archetypal and dangerous reality” (1958, p.48) as opposed to the everyday “sugar-coated” reality served up to us. His vision of theatre was a theatre of revolt and recovery, attacking the organism through an architecture of gesture and a gesture of architecture. But what are the spatial qualities of this Theatre of Cruelty? For Artaud the “secret of theatre in space is dissonance, dispersion of timbres and the dialectic discontinuity of expression” (ibid, p.113) denying the primacy of vision and requiring a more bodily engagement with performance and the limits of space.

The *Heart of PQ* provided SCAPE (Massey University’s design studio for Social Cultural and Performance Environments) an opportunity to research the corporeal dynamics and spatial limits of theatre. In March 2004 the architectural team installed a re-presentation of this design-lead project in the Hirschfeld space of Wellington’s City Gallery, as part of the visual arts program of the International Festival. Entitled ‘*DisPlay: remembering a performance landscape*’, it consisted of two undulating platforms, clad in shiny white, hovering on fluorescent light between the gallery walls, wrapped with a citation from French philosopher and playwright, Helene Cixous’ essay ‘*The Place of Crime, the Place of Pardon*’. This text that bound the space read:-

*" In truth we go as little to the theatre as to our **heart**, and what we feel the lack of is going to our heart, our own and that of things. We live exterior to ourselves, in a world whose walls are replaced by television screens, which has lost its thickness, its depths, its treasures, and we take the newspaper columns for our thoughts. We are printed daily. We lack even walls, **true walls**, on which divine messages are written. We lack **earth and flesh**."*

(Helene Cixous: from "The Place of Crime, the Place of Pardon", p.341)

As with Artaud, the theatre for Helene Cixous constitutes a site of recovery: a place where re-enactments of humanity's crimes can be transformed into a place of forgiveness; a site where we can visit the "country of others" (p.340) and deal with the horrors of the world as a community of participants. Her deferral to "earth and flesh" and "true walls upon which divine messages are written" returns us to the primacy of the material; the ground and the body, as well as the structures we erect to make sense of the world. These structures are not just metaphorical they are "true", rich in materiality and subject to the body's inscriptions. They are the architecture that simultaneously houses and unhouses performance. This philosophical link between ground, body and building locates architecture in relation to thought, what architectural theorist Mark Wigley refers to as '*The Edifice Complex*'. In his book *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, Wigley outlines the analogies to building in philosophies of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger and Derrida, claiming; "The philosopher is first and foremost an architect, endlessly attempting to produce a grounded structure" (1997, p.10). Architecture is both materiality (as built form) and metaphor (a figure representing metaphysical thought). Metaphysics, often referred to as an "edifice" erected on "secure foundations" and "stable ground", is, as Wigley (ibid, p.16) contends;

"constructed to make theory possible, then subordinated as a metaphor to defer to some higher, nonmaterial truth. Architecture is constructed as a material reality to liberate a supposedly higher domain. As material it is but metaphor."

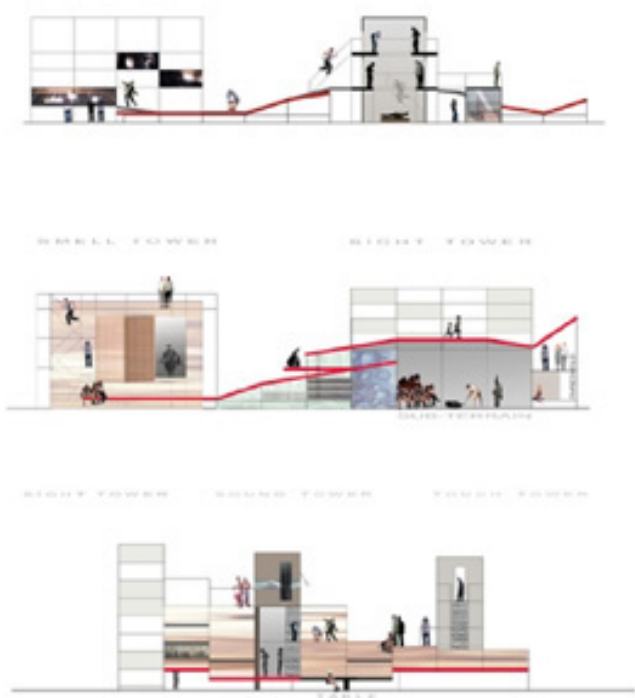
However he also points out that philosophy shifts the ground and constantly re-erects the edifice, that the structure is subject to falling apart, discovering its assertions are "groundless". For Derrida the concept of a centred structure on fundamental ground limits the "play of the structure". (cited by Wigley, 1997, p.10). This sense of "play" refers to its performance, and the mobility of action; a dynamic interplay.

The tower becomes an architectural motif for play within the context of the *Heart of PQ*. This is not only in reaction to the epic nature of our given site, the 22-metre high Middle Hall, but also as a

vertiginous, flexing vessel to contain the inherently uncontainable senses. According to Wigley the tower is the figure of philosophy, the figure of deconstruction and the figure of architecture itself. He refers (1992, p.248) to Jacques Derrida's account of the Tower of Babel commonly associated with a confusion of tongues; God's punishment on the sons of Noah for attempting to build a unified global culture and an indestructible tower after the Great Flood. For Derrida the failure of the tower (and the resulting dispersal of its inhabitants) marks "the necessity for translation, the multiplicity of languages, the free play of representation, which is to say the necessity for controlling representation." This unfinished edifice, that reveals its incomplete and visible structures, questions not only issues of translatability but the very ground upon which it is erected. Heir to failure, it stands in for the instability of communication and structural weakness. This seems even more pertinent in a time when towers designed to withstand attack, and representing the global centre of virtual capitalism, are reduced to a disintegrating spectacle of steel, glass, concrete and flesh.

The Tower of Babel marked the collapse of a totalising language and the resulting confusion recalls Artaud's dissonance, dispersion and discontinuity. The commanding overview of the tower (and its attendant associations with singularity, stability and endurance) is reduced to a convoluted labyrinth where vision is no longer privileged. This more sensory space favours the local, holding the global in check. As Gayatri Spivak contends, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, the rational mapping of the "trans-national dominant" no longer applies. Instead the "(im)possible perspective" of the "local informant" is required, evoking the residual and the emergent. Spivak critiques Fredric Jameson's anxiety towards the heterogeneity of postmodern space, specifically referred to in his analysis of the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel, where the mirror-glass towers and transparent capsule elevators produce spatial disorientation, endless reflections and repetitions, causing him to lose his bearings. Inside and outside collapse upon each other in this spatial babble that "lacks some sense of a cultural dominant" and prohibits "cognitive mapping"(Jameson, p.*). Homi Bhabha (p.218) also

critiques Jameson's disturbed vision, which elaborates the 'sensorium' of the decentred subject but falls back on the visual faculty rather than an extension or reworking of the senses. For Bhabha the descent into alien territory encourages a truly *international* culture (p.38), achieved through the in-between zones where borderline engagements, both consensual and conflictual, have the power to realign customary boundaries (p.2). He illustrates this with the literal architecture of stairwells and interstitial passages; a three-dimensional spatial network of habitable borders that inscribes and articulates cultural hybridity. This in-between zone is dynamic, fluctuating and open to contamination as a creative force.



The 'play' of architecture, as both container and contaminant, tower and labyrinth was foregrounded in the *'Heart of PQ'*, as was its connection to body and ground. It took on the role of provocateur in this design exposition, as a "*sceno-architecture*", neither scenography (which suspends reality to formulate a fictive environment) nor architecture (defined by its enduring qualities and materiality). Instead a hybrid environment was proposed for a hybrid event; neither exhibition nor theatre. The design proposal of an "*architectonic performance landscape*" emerged from a studio project with Interior Design students at Massey, ongoing global dialogue over two years, three embodied workshops in Europe during 2002, with the artists curating the senses,

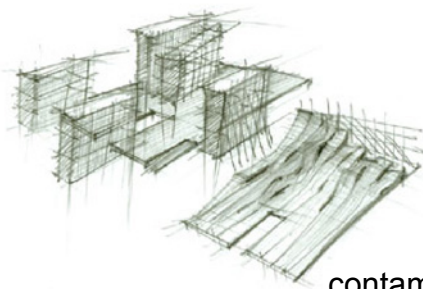
and the need to harness an unwieldy conception of a sensorial labyrinth for an ever-growing number of participants. The proposed temporary installation with its flexing sense of instability, vertigo and decentredness was to be a site of negotiation, contestation and experimentation.

In order to present this complex project and touch upon a few major research objectives, the paper is divided into the following sections outlining theory, process and production. *'Flesh'* introduces an investigation into shaping theatrical space through the feverish body. This uncontainable contaminated body establishes an *'Architecture of Cruelty'*, based on Antonin Artaud's *'Theatre of Cruelty'*. The notions of containment and contamination in performance are taken up in the process of developing a labyrinthine sensorium, outlined in the section entitled *'Earth'*. Babel is expanded under the title of *'True Walls'*, which concludes the paper with an examination of the event itself, specifically the collaboration between two artistic groups whose work reveals a more visceral relationship between architecture and performance.

FLESH: SITES OF DIS-EASE

"Our petrified idea of the theatre is connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind encounters only emptiness, though space is full."

(Artaud, 1958, p.12)



This project began with a feverish body of Antonin Artaud; a contaminated body, and body as contaminant, threatening to erupt through the borders of its own skin and refusing to be contained within established forms for housing performance. Artaud likened theatre to the plague and his pursuit of cruelty's palpable materiality called for a "concretisation of thought". This conflation of the concrete and the

abstract posits '*praxis*' as his all-consuming and unfulfilled desire. Practice as a physical manifestation of theory transforms the abstract into the concrete and is central to architecture as built-thought. The focus, for performer and architect, is on the act of orchestrating the body within the material space of performance. Within the confines of hermetically sealed theatre interiors scenographers and directors can challenge the relationships and preconceptions of the audience by exposing them as a collective body, which could be physiologically affected by performance; disturbed, discomforted and displaced... diseased. Such dis-easy sites call for a play between the existing space of the auditorium and the fictive space of the performance, by folding both audience and architecture into the performance site, pushing the proxemics between bodies, and denying the viewer a passive relationship with the event. In directly confronting well established boundaries a set of surprising conditions can be presented to shift the ground, creating a destabilising effect, challenging the spectators' perception of performance space and implicating them more in the act of '*live theatre*'. Those gathered to share the event are no longer an anonymous collective, isolated in the dark but acknowledged as sensory participants in performance.

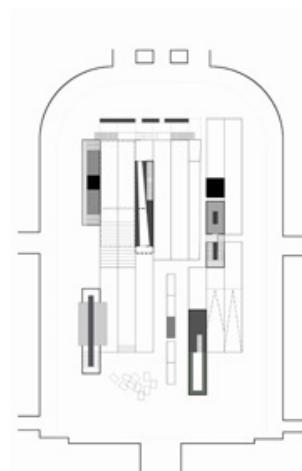
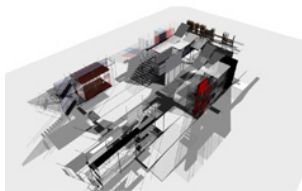
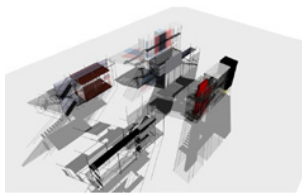
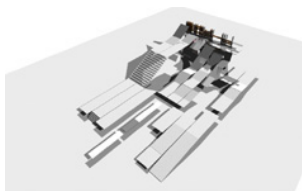
Whilst scenography can be a tool for exploring the role that architecture plays in the theatrical experience, the opportunity for architecture itself to become a vehicle for pushing the relationships within performance is not as easy to achieve. The more permanent and conservative reality of architecture, as well as political and economic factors, makes experimentation extremely difficult. Theatre buildings continue to be constructed as passive vessels for performance, maintaining (rather than challenging) the art-form and disciplining the collective body into well-behaved citizens instead of creative participants. Theatrical space that plays with the inherent uncontainability of the performing body, acknowledging it as a spatial contaminant, suggests a more dynamic architecture, re-activating both performers and spectators.

EARTH: A PERFORMANCE LANDSCAPE FOR THE SENSES

“The problem is to make space speak, to feed and furnish it; like mines laid in a wall of rock which all of a sudden turns into geysers and bouquets of stone.”

(Artaud: 1958, p.98)

In his first manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud calls for the abolition of stage and auditorium in favour of a theatre of action that engulfs and physically affects the spectator. The *Heart of PQ* became a research ground for exploring a more direct relationship between participants as an exhibition/event. Since 1967 the Prague Quadrennial had a well-established formula for re-presenting performance principally through its archival remains (ie: drawings, photos, model boxes, props and costumes). This encapsulates the dilemma of how to represent the un-representable nature of performance, discussed by Peggy Phelan as that which “becomes itself through disappearance.” Extending the notion of performance as a disappearing act where, as Phelan asserts (p.146-7), “...description itself does not reproduce the object, it rather helps us to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost,” the *Heart of PQ* sought to present rather than represent the performing body as the object on display, simultaneously implicating the spectators’ bodies within the exhibition.



The senses in performance were to be housed (and unhoused) within a three-dimensional labyrinth, constructed of habitable walls, that formed towers embedded within flooring strips of variable heights creating under-ground and over-ground spaces. A series of random journeys were created via passages and stairways, leading visitors into the literal heart of the space, a 16 metre long table (where all the senses cohere). The towers comprised sensory vessels, which through their structure and materiality acknowledged the uncontainability of the senses they were allocated to contain. This porous spatial maze negotiated between

spectral overview and dislocated navigation, weaving between inside and outside, allowing participants to be lost and found within the hall. As architect, Bernard Tschumi writes (p.39); “here is where my body tries to find its lost unity, its energies and impulses, its rhythms and its flux”. The notion of space-in-flux became pivotal to the project developed and communicated through SCAPE @ Massey’s website.



TRUE WALLS: BABEL, CONTAINMENT AND CONTAMINATION

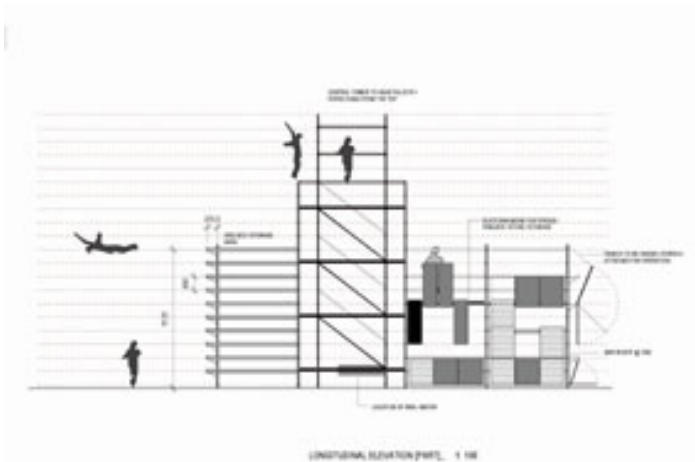
“The action will unfold, will extend its trajectory from level to level, point to point, paroxysms will suddenly burst forth, will flare up like fires in different spots... For this diffusion of action over an immense space will oblige the lighting of ... a performance to fall upon the public as much as upon the actors ... ” (Artaud, 1958, p.87)

The Heart of PQ, like all performances, was a disappearing act. Two and a half years in development, two weeks under construction and a fortnight in performance, it took less than twenty-four hours to dismantle. The performers were contracted to inhabit the space for 14 days with a constantly shifting program of scheduled and spontaneous events. Visitors drifted into the hall via a number of entrances and exits, happening upon the installation, described by British-based dancer Carol Brown as; “a *polyphonic mapping of performance and a contestatory site for strong energies and competing passions.*” All who entered the site became in some way implicated in its dramatic

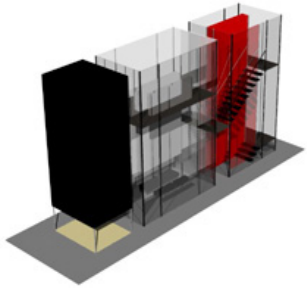
environs. The dynamics of this fluctuating sensorium ranged from a visceral onslaught on its occupants to offering a place of calm and rest. Whilst the artists in each tower focussed on their own specified domains, they also played with the places in-between and the hall's peripheral zones. Visiting performers negotiated the site, children enjoyed the physical challenges of the landform and more cautious bodies avoided its vertiginous qualities. As Brown contends it "... *required a supple framing of the performance installation with a large and diverse public rather than the customary knowing art specific audience.*" This carnivalesque market-place with its hit-and-miss events, bathed in daylight and summer heat was contrasted by the evening program which allowed each group, focussing on their specific sense, to present their artistry with a greater control of light, movement, sound, taste, touch, image and smell. They either placed the audience in seating zones or moved them through the installation's labyrinth. At times the unwieldiness of the overall program and the fatigue of the performers seemed to exhaust the project itself, yet as the event recedes, its value as a research vehicle becomes foregrounded.

Each tower vacillated between the notions of containment and contamination, controlling and corrupting space in turn. The 'tower of smell', occupied by South African company Monkey's Wedding Theatre, conjured up the 'exotic' of unknown Africa as a complex package spilling its contents into a wooden crate where stories and rituals were shared. The foreign objects of this pungent space leaked, drifted and permeated from above and below. A more contained sound-box in the 'tower of hearing' was perched high above the platform, inside which Japanese sound artist, Sachiyo Takahashi, invited guests to mix sounds from the other towers in a low-tech sound ceremony. Canadian multi-media group, Recto-Verso, occupied their blind-box, blurring vision as performers slid up and down a smoke-filled vitrine of sound, light and moving image; viewed from platforms either side. This 'tower of sight' (housing the most privileged of senses in western culture) was the least visible, and its occupants the least active, within the greater installation itself. However towers of 'taste' and 'touch'

embraced both the design process and its provocations resulting in installations and events that confounded relationships between the senses.

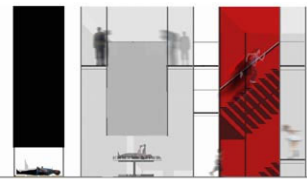


Akhe Group and their 'tower of taste', proved the uncontainable contaminant of the Heart. The structure of their anarchic kitchen and its contents steamed, smoked, clanged and swayed as the performers laid siege to it and their surroundings. The voracious appetite for performance of its inhabitants continued to flesh the skeletal structure of the tower with the remains of its spectacles... the walls were literally clad with food, utensils and curious objects that rusted, rotted and decayed over the two weeks. Their work, like the tower itself was expansive and visceral as they interacted with other performers and other spaces, leaving culinary traces behind. Over two weeks they contributed to the creation of a pungent and pervasive odour. Although 'taste' was their allocated sense, these visual artists from St Petersburg engaged with the other senses with gusto, manipulating images, smells, tastes, sounds and textures in an orchestrated assault on the senses. Their music leaked through the space, used to contestable effect when they played a tango to protest and disrupt the ritual killing of a chicken. They utilised fire in their evening performance, despite the ban on open flames by the authorities. Contamination, as an active agent, works with the boundaries of body and space and Akhe's anarchic kitchen proved contagious in more ways than one.



In contrast to this expansive tower of taste, was its neighbour, Carol Brown's 'tower of touch', an installation that relied on control and containment to elicit a subtle spatial infection. This anatomical theatre, where touch was technological and distanced, brought the viewers so close to the body many wanted to avert their eyes (which along with the camera lens, were the primary organs of touch). The dancer, lying on a stainless steel table/slab/bed, within the structure encased in an opaque plastic shroud, was viewed from above through a vertical slot that fragmented the view and the vulnerable body of the performer (herself speaking stories in fragments) moving in and out of the narrow frame. Brown speaks of "...stitching the performer's body into space" and placing the audience into a situation of "perilous vertigo and instability". Distance and fragmentation were further emphasised when the spectator lay under the adjoining black projection silo, gazing at fragmented video images of the live performer, separated from the viewer by the skin of the shroud.

The lightness of touch in Carol Brown's work was often threatened and sometimes sabotaged by the sensorial cacophony of the hall. Its minimalism relied on subtle interplays and therefore a more defined framing. Yet for Brown "the tower existed as an oasis of calm amidst a sprawling event of confrontational sounds, materials, bodies and gestures."



CONCLUSION

“If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized.”

(Artaud, 1958, p.30)

Artaud called for theatrical expression in time and space to reveal the dark double of life. For him the image, like the paintings of van Gogh, should physically overcome the sensory body, undermining the myth of a stable world. In a *Third Text* publication on ‘*Contaminations*’ that focussed on issues of hybridity, the editor advocates that visual art assert its materially-based process (p.4), functioning on the level of *affect*:-

“ie: a synaesthetic relation is established between work and viewer which is in excess of visibility. It involves rather enigmatic sensations such as vibrations of rhythm and spatiality, a sense of scale and volume, of lightness, stillness, silence or noise, all of which resonate with the body and its reminiscences and operate on the level of ‘sense’ not ‘meaning’.”

Writing on the plague, Artaud (1958, p.31) drew parallels with the potential of theatre because it “releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities...” This is compounded by the feverish body of the crowd; a multiplicitous body, both united and fragmented by the environment. The *Heart*’s incorporation of both performers and audience within the same territory, with its labyrinthine spaces and precarious structures, required a constant challenging and realignment of the ‘frames of play’. As Carol Brown notes;

“The intention to explore an inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural performance research process which was design-driven,

required a complex negotiation of spaces, times and ecologies of perception.”

Artaud, who insisted on moving “... from the abstract to the concrete and not from the concrete toward the abstract” (1976, p.362) desired a physical manifestation of his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ (1958, p.125); a fusion of space and action:-

“So composed and so constructed, the spectacle will be extended, by elimination of the stage, to the entire hall of the theatre and will scale the walls from the ground up on light catwalks, will physically envelop the spectator and immerse him in a constant bath of light, images, movement and noises.”

An immersion in the image resists the flatlands of spectral conformity and allows for a sensorial echo that outlasts the fleeting moment of performance.

Globalisation is an attempt to build towers that unite the world through technology and western cultural imperialism. But as we have learnt the towers are neither stable, nor enduring. The Tower of Babel becomes a spatial/temporal motif between the totalising goal and the fragmented collapse. It is the time of babble, before the dispersal, when the external overview is folded into the internal structure that exposes its weakness, where the body is revealed as fragile and the ground treacherous.

Calling on Artaud’s vision of a Theatre of Cruelty, the *Heart of PQ*, was a de-centred, ex-plosive, dis-easy site where the body of both performer and spectator were challenged and implicated. It allowed for an exteriorisation of the internal, a concretisation of hypothesis and the building of thought, through a sceno-architecture that necessarily required the spatial and performative presencing of both containment and contamination in its disappearing acts.

CREDITS

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