Off-stage: the interior of performance

Introduction: the interior performs

This paper examines how the interior of site-specific performance can be considered performative. Typically the term ‘site specificity’ is aligned to those practices of visual art inextricably linked to site whether inside or outside the gallery space and where meaning is located within the contextual boundaries of art theory and history. Recently, for example, in response to the mainstreaming of minimalism and post conceptual art and a widespread adoption of the term, an important address of site-specificity has been elaborated through a defense of disciplinary boundaries (Kwon 1997). However, addressing the interior in relationship to performance, the concept of site-specificity remains blurred if not under-theorised. My suggestion is that site specificity in relationship to the interdisciplinary practices of spatial design and performance would be better served by a description that denotes the temporal occupation of site such as ‘situated vagrancy.’

In the introduction to her book One Place After Another, Miwon Kwon refers to site-specific art as: ‘Site-determined, site orientated, site-referenced, site conscious, site related’ (Kwon 2002, 1). In approaching a description of site-specific performance, the question of the usefulness of these terms arises. None of the terms involve a sense of what happens between space and body: disruption, disorientation, permeability and continuity; and the experiencing of space and body: undetermined, sensed and haptic. But there is something we can borrow from Kwon for our project and yes it is still about art but it begins to embrace an idea of body and spatial experience.

‘Informed by the contextual thinking of Minimalism, various forms of institutional critique and Conceptual art developed a different model of site specificity that implicitly challenged the "innocence" of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal viewing subject (albeit one in possession of a corporeal body) as espoused in the phenomenological model’ (Kwon 1997, 87).

Figure 1

Replica: reconstruction of a public amenity, installation from the Shed*light project Cardiff, Wales 2004.
With collaborator Marc Rees, one of my first explorations with space and the body came out of a project where both were conceived as inseparable yet relatively temporal. The site-specific installation and performance Shed*light was installed in a derelict house in Cardiff, Wales (2004) and later at the ARCO2005 Art Fair in Madrid. The project is a 1:1 scale reconstruction of a boarded-up and decaying public toilet located in the centre of the Cardiff that was once used as a site for casual sex. The plan of the toilet block was designed as a two-point perspective and inserted into the main room of the derelict house to visually connect and intervene with its interior. As visitors moved through the structure and their bodies became less visible, they also had to negotiate tight and enclosed spaces created between the installation, the room and with other bodies. Open to the public for two weeks, visitors adapted this new social space: over the period there was evidence of small parties, dossing and the tell tale signs of sexual activity.

The re-siting of this performance installation in the open at ARCO2005 created new spatial opportunities and theorizations of site and specificity. Yet old meanings remained as exemplified by the boy’s literal reenactment of the structure’s origin (the public toilet) while others look on. Adjoining the installation was a series of video and photographic works based on the subject of identity, site and casual sex from the Shed*light project formerly exhibited in the derelict house. The works collectively titled Normal Behavior were installed and in the baggage hold and viewed through a glass floor of a damaged DC9 jet transformed into an exhibition space. Accompanying these visual works was a recorded interview with someone who frequented the original site some 20 years prior. Asked to recall the atmosphere the interviewee (re)-constructed a detailed description of the toilet block’s interior including: light, moisture, colour and texture of tiles, urinals and, the positioning of bodies within the space, their stance and movement. Notably, at no stage in the interview was sex directly addressed, all references were implicit. The redistribution of the project’s site-specific installation from the derelict house in Cardiff, to the open public space at ARCO brought new possibilities of working through inside/ outside dialectic, moving towards an intermingling interior and exterior.

Off-stage: the interior of performance
Figure 3

Normal Behaviour: photographic and video installation from the Shed*light project re-sited inside a DC9 jet, ARCO2005 Madrid.

When performance vacated the interior of the theatre to work with site (factory, shop, square, street, landscape), it left us to ask the following: do we construct the experiencing of site and performance through the contract of the theatre that is performer/spectator, seen/unseen, sensed/felt, light/darkness, stasis/movement, silence/sound? Such dualities express a ‘coming to’ or a ‘going beyond’ – they are on the outer of experience, the perimeter and back again. Somehow site-specific performance re-initiated the idea of place, space and body as a becoming entity - appearing, reappearing and re-informing for its viewing. In site-specific performance, space became tangible and elusive, sectional and plan, architectural and most certainly the becoming for the new occupation of the interior.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer conceived the idea of becoming as something that ‘…embraces two claims: every event has a cause; similar causes are followed by similar effects (White 1992, 27). To understand this further, the following examples will position the interior and the concept of becoming – a coming into appearance, perception and temporality - as something performative. This argument is not be based on making more dualities as previously mentioned or more widely, a debate of formal space (theatre) versus informal space (site-specific), rather it will be about ‘positioning’ and ‘situating’. Positioning, it will be argued, is the resistance to fixity and permanence, conjuring an interior in a constant state of flux. Situating, the becoming of the interior, will be argued as the spatial exchange between spectator and performer through site and place. It can be said that the interior architecture of the theatre constructs a societal ‘self-fascination’, representing and mirroring society in and as performance. Theatre sets in motion an outmoded historical ‘visuality’, something Hal Foster informs us is ‘...a social construct for an organized collective vision’ (Foster 1998, 9). The question then arises: is the experiencing of

Off-stage: the interior of performance
site-specific performance a shift away from this outmoded historical ‘visuality’ or just a repositioning into other non-theatre spaces?

Away from the inner and outer of theatricalised appearances towards the realm of the interior is to appreciate that humans shape space allowing for spatial patterns (affect) to emerge and without end. They are inseparable. It is the same in the experiencing of site-specific performance – space and performance become inseparable yet remain intangible. Differently, in the highly defined and tangible space of the theatre such patterning of space is fashioned through a sublime triangulated relationship of controlled appearances among the theatre as an entity, performers and spectators. Together they collectively construct a society as a theatre for ‘a self-fascination’ and as spectacle. French theorist Guy Debord refers to such empathetic notions in his seminal project Society of the Spectacle whereby:

‘THE SPECTACLE MANIFESTS itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: "Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear." The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances’ (Debord 1994, 18).

If the theatre, we are to believe, is both production and reflection of society, it then proposes that its interior architecture is a contrived space for constructed ‘self-ruin’. Performing texts: the play, the dance, and especially the opera, as illuminated in Catherine Clément’s critique of operatic scenarios in Opera or the Undoing of Women, highlights the portraits of self ruin (authored by men, sung by women) of the tragic soprano as counterpoint to the heroic tenor (Clément 1997). According to French theorist Jacques Derrida, the capturing of oneself in self-portraiture is the simultaneous ruining of oneself. ‘In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze...for one can just as well read the pictures of ruin as the figures of a portrait, indeed a self-portrait’ (Derrida 1993, 52). Bringing this notion of self and ruin into the performing body is to postulate that in dance each movement is the ruining of all previous movements experienced. Each movement blurs out the previous leaving the audience held within the ruins of movement. Experiencing dance is an extended movement of the dance: its passage from an inner to outer body appearance emanating toward an empathetic location within each member of the audience. Inevitably, to capture movement is to forget it.

Positioning

In 2005 German choreographer Isabelle Schad, French lighting designer Bruno Pocheron and an Australian dramaturge, me, formed Good Work Productions in Berlin. We described our project as:

“... an international experimental performance project concerned with the presentation, representation and perception of the body on-stage as well as its status and exposure in society. Good Work starts by forming a collaborative research in ideas, then develops and spreads these towards the realisation of a series of public performances in Europe and in Canada.”

Off-stage: the interior of performance
To realise our intentions, we invited a number of choreographers and performers to collaborate with us from conception, production, to premier. Five works were produced over a four-year period from 2004 to 2008 and some are still being performed.

The extent of our touring grew from a West European-centric base (Canada exempted) of co-producers and performance venues to incorporate venues in Eastern Europe, China and Jordan. The aim was to position our collective thinking of body re-presentation through an interior passage in defining movement toward an outward presentation. The body we decided, was the site of affect; within the performer and body and, outwardly with audience and perception. Affect we understood is lived and as a consequence, descriptions of what it is, to what it does is predictably inadequate. In her book Relationscapes Erin Manning argues that: “Affect passes directly through the body, coupling with the nervous system, making the internal felt. This feltness is often experienced as a becoming-with. This becoming with is transformative...” (Manning 2009, 95). Our own transformations were explored towards formulating an inner and outer affect between body presentation and the communicating of this presencing for a collective yet individualized spectatorship. “Affect passes through, leaving intensive traces on a collective body-becoming” Manning asserts. “This body-becoming is not necessarily a human body. It is a conglomeration of forces that express a movement-with through which a relational individuation begins to make itself felt” (Manning 2009, 95).

The site-specific performance work California Roll (2004) is based on the visual foundation for appearance: disappearance, memory and pose and ultimately affect. The dance floor consists of a sculptured landscape created from thrown-out clothes collected from various suburbs in Berlin. The clothes were grouped in colours and spread on the dance floor creating a composite aesthetic object for the performance. Referencing Goethe’s colour theory, the clothes created a surface that required the negotiation of new movement vocabularies and body presentations for the dance. Radically shifting the choreographic intent and performers sense of their weight and balance through this materiality allowed for new sets of body types between performers and audience who occupied the same landscape in some of the performances.

The choreography was generated out of the search for a body presence through referencing various renaissance paintings and contemporary mediated body-icons (sexed and de-sexed). The thousands of second hand clothes prompted the performers to ‘pose’, ‘repose’ and ‘pattern’ the landscape creating an aesthetically pleasing ‘painting’ on the one hand and hard labored movements when traversing the soft landscape on the other. The work, at every movement, created its own self-ruin of what was possible to present. Overwhelming the performers and the visual senses of the audience, what became made and presented was a ruining of the dance from what was originally conceived. In some performances, the field of the dance was further extended and indeed doubled by mirrors hung from the ceiling that reflected the below landscape where both performers and audience populated the stage space.

In our projects body presence and audience expectation had moved into a new realm of the reflective inseparable interior and headlong towards a collective self-portrait. In the Analytical of the Sublime French philosopher Jean François Lyotard postulates a visual

Off-stage: the interior of performance
context for the nature of reflection by declaring, ‘The ‘weakness’ of reflection is what also constitutes its ‘strength’’ (Lyotard 1994, 2). The image of California Roll is that of the inseparable interior both weak and strengthened with reflective gazes. The performers’ vagrant occupations within the landscape of clothes took site-specific performance and the interior directly onto the body. The work argued for site-specificity to be un-sited, moving instead towards a new and transportable interior-site. In touring this work in Beijing, Amman and throughout Europe the same patterning of space in the quantities of the clothes and colours made available had come to suggest to us some type of world uniformity or world-interior-site.

Figure 4


Situating

The discursive nature of the interior in site-specificity involves site as theme and performance as context. Site-specific performance is primarily actualised through responding to the physical and material conditions of site and to the remnants of previous use and ruin. It is ‘off-stage’ and out of the theatre. In contrast, the theatre space held to its architecture of separation and unable to structurally transform, relies primarily on scenic images for spatial transformation. Transformation and separation are principally forged by concepts of (re)production - spectacle (performer) and vision (audience). In his book The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre states:

‘Their intervention occurs by way of construction - by way of architecture, conceived of not as the building…but rather as a project embedded in a spatial context and a texture which call for ‘representations’ that will not vanish into the symbolic or imaginary realms’¹ (Lefebvre 1991, 15).

¹ Lefebvre argues for the idea of retrieving space through Hegel’s “concrete universal” the “…concept of production and the act of producing…” in defining the particularity of spaces whether it be political, social, Off-stage: the interior of performance
Site-specific performance consists ‘out of’ the relationships with site, context and history but it can also exist within itself as cited in California Roll. Performances work themselves ‘in and out of’ site, engaging, responding, animating, disrupting. It denotes specificity with site through a conceived notion of ‘performative reaction’. Meaning, clarity or intention are subjected to the ephemer of bodies ‘in space.’ Whether interior or exterior, the presencing of the body and space combine to create a total and imbedded image. The spectacle of the moving body is only present if the same intensity is redirected at the space it occupies. It is through this occupation that the performance envelops space allowing for the space to appear spectacularly rather than any-one-body.

The experiencing of space in the movement of dance is an interchange of ‘falling in’ and ‘falling out of space’. This seamless failing of joinery - of walls, floor and ceiling accounts for the disruptive nature dance has on the dancer’s spatial experience and the viewer’s spatial awareness. As a dramaturge, this experience envelops my perception when I move and work in the space of performance. The ‘outside eye’, a phrase often attributed to the dramaturge’s role, is a notion of the safe positioning and distance of his/her gaze and the ability to intellectualise and to talk of structure. By involving myself in the XYZ coordinates of space is to become informed by movement and affect and to position these toward a dynamic spatial composition. This sensing for spatial appearances is only possible in the interior of the dance where there is no direct description and understanding of affect or sensation. In his book Parallels for the Virtual Brian Massumi argues:

‘Sensation is the direct registering of potential. It is a kind of zero-degree of thought perception, and of the possibility it disengages, at the point at which it all folds vaguely together, only sensed, pending action and a reconnect to need and utility. Despite its constitutive vagueness, it is a pole of thought-perception, whose every conjunction is accompanied to a varying degree of sensation-by the real unthinkability of things...Sensation is an extremity of perception’ (Massumi 2002, 97).

Performing the interior allows for it to appear sensibly within the appearance of the viewer. Space then is senseless when no-bodies appear. Making sense of space is the continuity for appearances that accounts for the program of becoming. In site-specific performance, appearance and becoming are based on spatial dynamics and perceptual shifts where the performance constantly re-informs the interior space and vice versa. If we are to agree that exterior environments program interior space or alternatively, interior space is a condition of the exterior environment then performance is the exterior condition that writes itself into the interior.

**Situated Vagrancy**

I became aware of site-specificity and performance in an unconventional and with hindsight, obvious way. In my earlier work as a scenographer, being ‘back stage’ was inevitably more interesting then the on-stage performance. Dancers preparing to enter on-stage often combined this time with ‘small talk’ with subjects ranging from boyfriends/girlfriends, their

---

natural, historical etc. Lefebvre asks, “What does it mean to speak of ‘producing space’?” We might well propose another question: ‘What does it mean to reproduce space’? Lefebvre, The Production of Space 1991.

**Off-stage: the interior of performance**
sex lives and career wishes. My witnessing of these off-stage performances had shifted my perception of what performance is and how such spaces could be represented. Henri Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space* argues that: ‘Representations of space must have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space...’ Lefebvre suggests that space is in constant in a state of flux and in an on-going process of invention and innovation over and on the same space: ‘To speak of ‘producing space’ sounds bizarre, so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it’ (Lefebvre 1991, 15). What made these off-stage performances interesting were their non-rehearsed and spatial spread in the backstage, a space filled with the mechanics that supported the on-stage appearances. These performances I subsequently understood were already outside of the theatre space – already on the move towards a new interior.

The installation *Forest* was conceived as metaphorically combining the landscape as expressed in *California Roll* and the off-stage within the architecture of the church. Home to one of the Europe's largest elliptical domes, the church formed part of a vast complex of buildings known as Laboral located near the city of Gijon in Asturias, Spain. Designed in the renaissance style and constructed during the 1950s and 1960s under the dictator General Franco, the imposing scale of the interior posed an overwhelming challenge to create a site-specific work. How to connect with this vast interior came about by an underground venture into the labyrinth of corridors beneath the church. Filling these subterranean spaces were the church pews, stacked in rows and caked in dust. Standing a pew on end and visualising them en masse, I became aware of the possibility of bridging the height of the dome by visual suggestion of an inner ceiling along with the creation of a focused spatial experience for the viewer. Later it was revealed to me that each pew accounted for a tree that was cut from forests of a former Spanish African colony and transported to Laboral.
Curtin University

The pews were hauled from the underground corridors and assembled in a series of 3, 5 and 7 triangulations radiating from the central axis in the marble floor. The pews were braced with red clamps to each other with various dimensions of wooden beams taken from a demolished house. Visitors could wander through the space and ascend to the first and second levels of the church to view the pews in plan. This up-ending of the pews and a de-bunking of religious order had a profound effect, drawing intense emotional responses from the public. These still but ‘loud’ memorials to the original desecrated forest were supplemented with a solo performance that contrasted the scale of the body to that of the pews. Collectively weighing more than 20 tons the construction had no permanent fixtures. The installation was erected in a 2 days and dismantled in 2 days. A new occupational relationship to site-specific performance, epitomizing the notion of ‘situated vagrancy’ had come into my work.

My practice as a dramaturge in site-specific performance sits within choreography, performer/dancer, the dance, space, context and history. Formulated through spatial dynamics to reflect the choreographic idea into spatial propositions my work embraces the abstraction of space through the performing body. Performance and dance are in essence abstract in conception but when I talk about the work being made I invariably employ narrative structures to communicate even though I am not interested in narrative works. Narrative or fiction immediately becomes abstract once talked, interpreted and ‘written’ into the body by the dancer/performer. The concept of science fiction works in the same way where language driven by narrative, allows for the production of fantastic spaces but where there is no experience. These are the spaces of projection and invariably for an outer space. The appearance of the body in performance is a fictional language; it is constantly constructing new spaces for it moves continually ‘out-of-space’.

In distinction to the theatre stage, site-specific performance establishes the interior as a social environment between performer, audience and space. Site-specific spaces work through, and in and out through the body: a temporal and ephemeral inhabitation or ‘sit-in’. Constrained not to the banalities of viewing structures (the theatre auditorium) spectators spatially inhabit the interior ‘as site’ as much as the performer does. It’s a different exchange - a different experiencing. This new combined intervention between performer, audience and the space occurs by way of site conceived as the project. The interior becomes the subject embedded in the performance rather than ‘representations’ that inevitably vanish into the symbolic or imaginary realm of the theatre. Lefebvre asks: What does it mean to speak of ‘producing space’? The crux of this argument lies in not finding an answer but in the proposition: What does it mean to reproduce space?

Site-specificity is not about bringing to life or performing in disused, dilapidated buildings and spaces; rather it is a spatial experience and a social appearance between spectator and performer. Space appears as particular through the characteristics of these exchanges, by ‘making history go’\(^2\), and not by the histrionics of site (Pollack 1998, 4). Site-specific performance is not without its own problematic, for it can become the opposite of what is

\(^2\) Performance writer and historian Della Pollack refers to this notion of “making history go” in the act of performing. Performing historical works is essentially performing the historical reference in present time and through that act history is removed. Spectators viewing the performing of historical works witness the historical reference purely as action and as an act of history, whereas producers of historical works make actions and take decisions in activating the historical reference. Exceptional Spaces - Essays in Performance and History 1998.

Off-stage: the interior of performance
Curtin University

supposed to be, that is, non-specific. Reliance on the new-found spectacle of the off-stage site, its recurring curiosity of something new, like the newness a theme-park pretends to be at every turn, leads the spectator back to structured theatrical entertainment. It makes the interior site of performance safe - something that it is not. To work in site-specific performance you have to radicalize the space so it appears normal, so that spectacle goes and new spatial occurrences come into being. Site-specific performance is that shared state of coming-into-being. The appearance of bodies, spectators and performers experiencing each other in a space, evolves the interior towards ‘situated vagrancy’.

References
Clément, Catherine 1997, Opera or the Undoing of Women translated by Betsy Wing Tauris Publishers London.
Kwon, Miwon (Spring, 1997), One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity, October, Vol. 80 pp. 85-110 MIT Press.

Photographic Credits
Figure 1. Replica: reconstruction of a public amenity; installation from the Shed*light project Cardiff, Wales 2004, photo author.
Figure 2. Replica: reconstruction of a public amenity; installation from the Shed*light project re-sited at the ARCO2005 Madrid, photo Marc Rees.
Figure 3. Normal Behaviour: photographic and video installation from the Shed*light project re-sited inside a DC9 jet,ARCO2005 Madrid, photo author.
Figure 4. California Roll: image taken from mirrored ceiling, Good Work Productions, Ausland, Berlin 2005, photo Bruno Pocheron.

Off-stage: the interior of performance
Curtin University

Figure 5. *Forest, En Residencia*, Laboral Asturias Gijon Spain 2009, *photo Warren Orchard*.

Off-stage: *the interior of performance*