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Scenography with Purpose: Activism and Intervention

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By Christopher Baugh



Teatro da Vertigem – M. Siqueira and T. Cury: *BR-3*

We have finally abandoned our seat as spectator and are prepared to struggle with all our might to participate. We seek art, and hope to find it within ourselves. Breaking down the barriers, we rush up the steps that cut us off from the platform, and climb without hesitation into the arena. (Appia 238)

The judges at PQ 2011 awarded their highest honor, the Golden Triga, to Brazil and in the citation they noted, “Equal place is given to street art, site-specific interventions, socially conscious performance, puppetry as well as to more conventional theatre.” The Gold Medal for Best Realization of a Production was awarded to *BR-3* by Teatro da Vertigem also from Brazil and noted, “This extraordinary urban intervention transforms the main artery of the city with creative use of unconventional space: the banks of the Tietê River, the river itself and the barge on which the audience travelled and [where] much of the dramatic action occurred. The audience was completely immersed in a performance that brought to life and further provided a social critique of the landscape it traverses.” Mexico’s Teatro Ojo received a Gold Medal for Best Work in Theatre Architecture and Performance Space and the citation describes their exposition *Within a Failing State* (see p. 67), “... in which abandoned government buildings and public spaces of Mexico City are refigured as sites of memory, activism, and reflection on previous authoritarian abuses.”



Teatro Ojo – S.R.E. *Guided Visits*

In these entries and in many others, PQ 2011 illustrated ways in which scenography has achieved a very significant degree of artistic self-sufficiency. Engaging directly with a community and becoming the author of independent works of performance, its skills and technologies are being used to address, through activism and intervention, issues of ecology as broadly based as community memory, national identity, globalization as well as making scenographic responses to asylum, urbanization, and displacement. While there remains plenty of evidence to demonstrate ways in which scenography still serves to interpret dramatic literature within more or less traditional theatre architectures, PQ 2011 clearly evidenced Richard Schechner’s prophecy of 1992:

The fact is that theatre as we have known and practiced it—the staging of written dramas—will be the string quartet of the twenty-first century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, a subdivision of performance (Schechner 8).

This essay will consider ways in which scenography is increasingly finding ways of engaging with some of the major political, cultural, and ecological concerns of our contemporary world. It will suggest that the technologies of scenography—from the basic skills of modeling to scale; of mask, puppet, and costume making; of making a celebration and a procession, to sophisticated skills exploiting digital technologies—are serving to create new and demanding performance dramaturgies. Increasingly artists are engaging with specific sites and locations and creating temporary “performance habitats” of ecological enquiry that use the technologies of space, scene, and light to integrate an audience both with and within the performance. Mechanisms of framing and spatial juxtaposition serve to intervene and confront social and political issues of ownership, power, identity, exclusion, and especially of memory. As performance scholar Jen Harvie notes:

Site-specific performance can be especially powerful as a vehicle for remembrance and forming a community [...] its location can work as a potent mnemonic trigger, helping to evoke specific past times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meanings of those times (Harvie 42).

While clearly in evidence as recent developments at PQ 2011, I also suggest that this contemporary praxis has a strong underpinning within some of the earliest theoretical texts of scenography. Almost exactly one hundred years ago, both Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia had variously pronounced the founding principles of the attitude and practice of scenography:

– The rejection of the stage space as a place of verisimilitude and illusion.

- The rejection of the architecture of the theatre necessitated by the proscenium arch.
- The centrality of stage lighting and sophisticated new technologies within any newly envisioned theatre practice.
- The determination that the theatre could be an art in its own right.

During the year 1910/11, Craig took out the patent for “Screens” and asserted the fundamental reality of the site of performance: “... it is a place if it seem real – it is a scene if it seem false” (*Scene 1*), and the primacy of dramatic literature within the hierarchy of performance was rejected by 1907 in what might be thought of as a prophetic agenda for a century of scenography, “Today they *impersonate* and interpret; tomorrow they must *represent* and interpret; and the third day they must create” (*Art of the Theatre* 61). In addition, and especially significant for this reflection upon PQ 2011, there was the desire to create straightforward, organic, and efficacious relationships between the community that witnessed performance, the artistic functions and status of the performer, and the site of performance, or indeed architecture constructed to reflect and to contain the performance event.

As early as 1904, Appia had pointed to the fragility (and absurdity) of the relationship between performer and audience in “How to Reform our Staging Practices.” He argued that “... the human body does not seek to create the illusion of reality *since it is itself reality!*” (237). This understanding was developed in his articulation of the studio or *atelier* space. Scenographic solutions must propose spatial ways of uniting the performer’s act of self-discovery alongside the aesthetic experience of an audience watching the performer:

It is a mistake therefore, to employ the same buildings both for the contemporary dramatic repertoire and for new experimental work. Their unyielding frame and prescriptive power greatly hinders our attempts to liberate ourselves. Let us therefore abandon such theatres to their dying past, and construct new buildings designed simply to provide a shell for the space in which our work will take place (Appia 217).

During 1910/11, Appia collaborated with Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, architect Heinrich Tessenow, and painter Alexander von Saltzmann to design Europe’s first studio theatre space at Hellerau. At its heart was the rejection of the architectural separation inherent in the concept of a theatre building: the stage and the auditorium. Further, there emerged the concept of the *place* of performance being answerable to the *needs* of the performance.

... a work of living art is the only one that exists completely without spectators (or listeners); without an audience because it already implicitly contains the audience within itself; and because it is a work *lived* through a definite period of time, those who live it – the participants and creators of the work – assure its integral existence solely through their activity (275).

However, in one of Appia’s final, visionary statements, *Le geste de l’art* (1927), he concluded:

The time approaches when theatre professionals and the dramas written for them will be completely obsolete – a time when a liberated humanity shall sing of its joys and pains, its thoughts labors, struggles defeats and victories. It will sing about them in moving, more or less dramatic symbols, agreed upon by all. And the only onlookers will be those whom age and infirmity will arrange around us in shared and avid sympathy. Then we shall be artists, *living* artists – because that is what we wish to be (239).



Hélio Leites – *Romeo and Juliet*

While the language of this early theory may not resonate with the hard-pressed communities whose concerns may now be the focus of scenographic intervention, nevertheless the connections are clear and within PQ 2011 there were important examples of ways in which these early theoretical judgments are being developed and implemented. Scenographic activism is increasingly being used as an intervention to register and empower the collective and individual memories of a local community. Through space, objects, memorabilia, playful procession, dance and clothes—all essentially scenographic qualities, intangible, ephemeral and transient—memories may be generated and archived.

In Brazil (where, significantly, their scenographers frequently list their range of skills to include those of set designer, costume designer, painter, sculptor, fashion designer, teacher, graffiti artist, historian, and fine artist), interventions take the memories of current and former inhabitants and question inherited assumptions such as progress and happiness, and use a dramaturgy of processions, street dance, and parties in order to confront social restlessness. The challenge is to work with the poetry of the images, the actions, and the collective

movements, and not to impose a “theatrical” dramaturgy or aesthetic. The importance lies within the *process* of an encounter between official artists and impoverished artists; for example, street children selling strips of candies hanging from their shoulders may have them converted into bright carnival costumes. This is provocation and a playful intervention that disturbs everyday life, and where efficacy lies in the ability to empower both participant and audience. Hélio Leites, as a solo artist, performer, and craftsman, tells epic stories and a personal adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* performed with tiny models and finger puppets at a street market at Largo da Ordem in Curitiba.

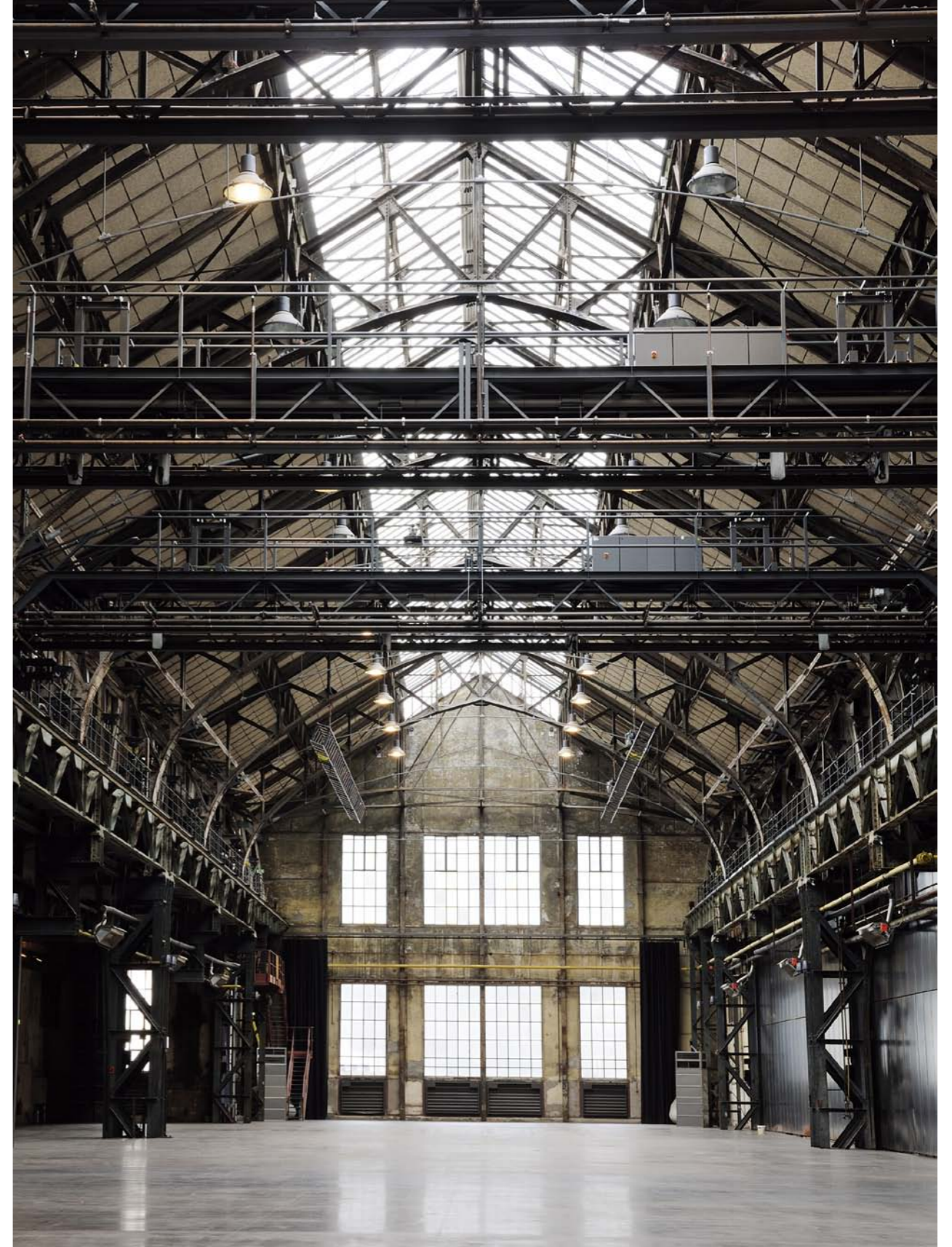
The process of using very basic scenographic technologies such as 1:25 scale modeling may help memory to coalesce into concrete form, to assert, reassure, and to celebrate. UK scenographer Fiona Watt explored the boundaries of practice by making experimental responses to the changing North Kent urban landscape in the massive Thames Gateway regeneration zone. *Créativité sans Frontières* is a transnational company of artists and musicians currently working with communities in Medway and Dunkerque via the Interreg IV Cross Border Programme of the European Union. Drawing on the traditions of traveling salesmen, hawkers, and street traders, and inspired by Marcel Duchamp’s *Bôîtes-en-Valise*, stories for performance are made by the simplest, most portable means possible: “suitcase museums” become a mode of enquiry into the transformation and regeneration of the urban environment. The suitcases of artifacts and models help articulate, develop, or interrogate the memory and identity of a people, or indeed a nation who have been subjected to a globalizing process, for example the dockyard closures and regeneration and its subsequent effects on communities in Chatham, UK and Dunkerque, France; or elsewhere the destruction of rain forest, or community farm land. The actions of *Créativité sans Frontières* involve walking and travel, which bring about discovery and mapping; scenography and performance serve to reveal and to guide both participant and spectator on their shared journeys. The guided journey and the concerns of map making have become recurring tropes of scenographic dramaturgy. Scenography has become an archiving technology of memory.



Teatro Ojo – *¿No!*

Kathleen Irwin explores scenography as a machine of remembrance and focuses upon relationships between individuals and their locations, but has an especial concern for the opportunities but also the challenges offered by digital technologies and the consequences of intermedial intervention in the making of memory. Her project uses digital technology to explore memory and identity in both local and global neighborhoods. Performance may be “... extrapolated from the specificities of the site itself and, importantly, the communities that claim ownership of it” (Irwin 10–11). Using indie rock band Arcade Fire’s “The Wilderness Downtown” (www.thewildernessdowntown.com), the Google Maps-based software takes the individual “audience” on a journey through the landscape of their youth where “the material traces evoke worlds that are intangible and unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and insight” (Irwin 37). But Irwin also acknowledges the difficulties where mediatization structures the memories that are generated—in this instance the hoodie-wearing young person who guides us through our neighborhood.

Mexico’s Teatro Ojo’s *¿No!* project (2008) arises from Paul Ricoeur’s question, “Does there not exist an intermediate level of reference between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong?” (Ricoeur 131). Their work focuses upon the performative dimensions of both individual and a collective, politically generated memory. *¿No!* created a series of interventions and “image-actions” in Mexico City’s public spaces. These site-specific events and installations, seen as struggles against forgetting, served to evoke accounts of what had happened in those spaces. To this extent, scenography becomes a mode of archaeology that ponders over material traces of the past, and the process of interpretation becomes the act of performance that frequently, as in project *¿No!*, aims to resist the “induced amnesia” of politically constructed collective memory. “How to recognize those erased footprints embedded in the thoughts and behaviors of the subjects and the social urbanized life within Mexico City?” (Villareal Avila 2011). They consider their work as the construction of “... poetic interventions that seek to set off, interrogate or provoke the social, urban fabric, and by making spectators into participants that reconfigure the actions according to the degree of their collaboration” (Diéguez). But importantly, the burden of constructing memory is the joint responsibility of both performer and spectator. What Ileana Diéguez calls the *processuality* of the event is more important than an attempt to create or display (as in a museum or a theatre) objects or artworks of memory. Both



Jahrhunderthalle Bochum

Appia and Craig would recognize the rejection of imitation of a reality in favor of a focus upon the reality and true process of performance. Teatro Ojo's *S.R.E. Guided Visits* (see p. 39) inhabited the former building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico City. Four spectators at a time are taken upon a guided tour by eight performers who made "[a] series of minimum actions, just the necessary amount to establish precise relations with space, an object, or with the process itself. In other words they should make a space, an object, or a document visible, audible, perceptible [...]" Rather than lodging a representation, it had to deal with the disposition of a direct link between the spectator, the actions and the real" (Valles).

Abandoned emblems of the industrial and the political past frequently serve as sites for scenographic performance intervention. The municipality of Saint Nazaire in France has enabled performance projects that regenerate a former German submarine base. The entire theme of the German contribution to PQ 2011 was an exploration of the theatrical and scenographic potential of the past age of industrial modernism through the regeneration of gigantic factory buildings of the Ruhr region. The Ruhrtriennale occupies the *Jahrhunderthalle* in Bochum (see p. 43) as a festival space for opera, theatre, concerts, and installation.

But the imposing and disturbing materiality of abandoned spaces are also being used to create scenic spaces for journeys exploring community and collective memory. Mike Pearson identifies such spaces as representing "... new kinds of informational site in changing technological circumstances, and the role of human agency in place-making in a transitory moment of absorption of actors and things and an intensification of effect" (13). Such intensification was reflected in the project of Hungarian artistic group Krétakör, which took over the former Prague headquarters of the Czechoslovak Communist Party newspaper *Rudé právo* for their project *Crisis Trilogy/Part 1: jp.co.de* (2011) that used space, installation, and film to guide its visitors through its experiment in community building involving twelve volunteers and their durational attempt to create community in and through the space.

Brazil's Teatro de Vertigem project *BR-3* (2007) was performed along five kilometers of the Tietê River running through Sao Paulo (see p.38). The spectators are invited to board a boat, a kind of floating evangelical church with a neon sign proclaiming, "Jesus is whiter than snow," where the recorded voice of a dead evangelical minister seemed to promise salvation. *BR-3* concerns three historical conditions of Brazil: *Brasileia*, a lost city of the River Amazon; *Brasilandia*, a poor, drug trafficking area of Sao Paulo; and *Brasília*, the monumental and powerful contemporary Brazilian capital. The Tietê is one of the most polluted rivers in Brazil, a powerful and noxious result of rapid, unplanned urbanization. The dark river itself, the glittering cityscape beyond its banks, bridges and adjacent buildings serve as screens for projections. Again, performers serve as guides who refer the spectator to performance actions and scenic tableaux of sophisticated projection but also of frequently simple scenic resource. For example, the disturbing stillness of a hanged man suspended from a mast that has become a gibbet on a tiny boat slowly floating past the spectator; or on the river bank a woman searching for her lost husband, whose cheap labor has been exploited to build monumental cities like Brasilia. Antônio Araújo, director scenographer of *BR-3*, uses religious resonance and the catholic imagery of Brazil's history alongside new technologies of sound and projection to reflect on the globalized passion play of urbanization and development, and the seemingly remorseless transfiguration of its political underclass.



Krétakör – *Crisis Trilogy/Part 1: jp.co.de*

Performance takes the city as its stage in much the way that narratives of genesis, exodus, trial, and redemption were made within the streets of medieval Europe. Places, smells, and architecture become stopping places, or "image actions" on a scenographic map that reflects upon questions of responsibility, memory, and of our ecology with the natural world. Site-specific performance events such as these have the potential to generate forms of intense engagement with the everyday world, as Pearson suggests: "... it has the capacity to articulate and cultivate local particularities, accentuating difference in the face of global tendencies" (12). Mapping experience and the memory of community are central concerns of recent scenographic performance; finding ways to approach and reflect upon the large and demanding issues of our world (without waiting upon the dramatist to write the play).

The guided journey frequently forms the heart of the dramaturgical infrastructure of practice. The project of four Dutch scenographers, Lena Müller, Roos van Geffen, Theun Mosk, and Marlocke van der Vlugt, used smartphone technology to provide impulses, sounds, and guidance in *Looking for . . .* (2011) in which visitors/ spectators/ audience were invited to make a guided journey through Prague to confront the spaces frozen by the lens of an unknown photographer whose untitled 1960s images were discovered in 2003. The client community becomes inseparably both participant and the audience. Meaning and significance are generated by the process of the journey.

R1 was a Swedish experimental nuclear reactor built into the rock 25 meters below the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) close to Stockholm. It operated from 1954 until it was decommissioned in 1970. The reactor hall is almost completely covered in letters, numerals, and other traces of its past; remnants of vast pipes and valves surround a dug out ominously "raw" rock space in the center, again divided by numbers and linear divisions: a chilling scenography that reflects upon the



Opera Mecaonica

imposition of science on the material world. The space is now used as a performance laboratory that explores the interface between science, technology, and performance. *Opera Mecaonica* represents a collaboration between robot scientist Magnus Lundin and lighting scenographer Anders Larson who experiment with the interfaces between dance and robotics and with electroacoustic and acousmatic music sounding through the disturbing space.

The artistic independence and self-sufficiency that scenography now represents is further illustrated by research projects which use the skills of architecture and scenography to explore



Tom Rijven – S2 Stanica Žilina-Záriečie

relationships between art and performance and the natural world and the urgent issues of vanishing resources, energy, and environmental destruction. *Circus in the Kingdom of Crystal*, begun in 2008 by Swedish artist Åsa Johannisson, examined relationships between glass blowing and the circus-like and equilibristic skills that similarly appear to defy gravity an physical laws. *Catch!*, one of the works within the project, created by scenographer Nina Westman, was described as “2 glass artists, 2 circus artists. 1 set of glass-drums and 1 string orchestra in a fireworks of sound, air and heat. Performed in an industrial environment . . .”¹ Perhaps because glass is one of our most frequent re-cycleable commodities and also because it is made from primal elements of silicon fused into formation at very great heat, its qualities offer opportunities for performance that connect with broader concerns of the physical world. In Wales, UK, performance scenographer, Richard Downing is making a work currently called “Butterfly Man” where a “village” of 300 pairs of hands are cast in re-cycled glass. The hands are cast with thumbs together and fingers spread wide in imitation of “butterflies”. These are suspended, as it were, in “flight” as a landscape intervention. But equally important is his process that uses a new kind of glass melting furnace powered by low-carbon biomass fuel. He describes his ambition: “Apart from the broader goal of joining up some thinking of wider relevance, usefulness and concern, all this is important to me for the transformative “chain” underpinning the work – a chain ultimately embodied in the “butterfly” metaphor and anamorphic assembly. Roughly, it goes like this: sunlight captured and stored by plants; this energy released – the whole work should read as a release of energy – by new technology to transform (melt) waste glass (itself once sand) to be re-shaped as individual butterflies/hands, captured in one moment of their change; these gathered as both unique individuals [...] and a sum of parts transforming/ revealing further potentials (depending upon viewer and viewpoint) all revealed, in a loop, by light.”² The process of transformation and change and the concern for the exploration of alternative technologies is an important and significant development within contemporary performance and scenography.

“How we built it is like one of the pages of the theatre itself” (Rijven). The process of making a place of performance adjacent to an abandoned railway station became an act of community performance. In Slovakia the performance space called *S2 Stanica Žilina-Záriečie* (2009) [see p. 48] has been built from 3,000 donated plastic beer crates that form a remarkably modern looking external shell and then from 800 bales of straw impregnated with several truck loads of local clay that forms the studio space within. The theatre has been built entirely by the local community responding to desires for a place of performance, but also with a concern for the recycled and the regenerated conservation of resources and a need for community self-sufficiency. The project has been advised and inspired by Dutch straw bale builder Tom Rijven. The unusual nature of the building process that involved about 150 volunteers and the scenographic spectacle of the wall of beer crates and the “puddling” of clay into the straw became an act of community performance and of playful celebration of independence and self-sufficiency. It is a significant example of the way in which, in this instance, low skill technologies enable artists to confront and respond to both local and to global issues.

Through such varied interventions as these, it is the technologies of scenography that provide a unifying theme. Scenography may be thought of as a performance-making mechanism of considerable autonomy. The scenographer brings to the community their skills of modeling, graphic representation, costume, and public celebration; alongside sophisticated skills of ways in which digital technologies may provide a forum for research, interrogation, publication, and performance; a paradigm of performance where a community may collaborate with artists and work to develop skills to record and celebrate thoughts, memories, and emotions collectively experienced. Importantly, however, scenography has found proactive ways whereby its artists can confront and create narratives that respond to the major concerns of our contemporary world.

Notes:

¹ Švédsko/Sweden, in PQ 2011 Catalogue, p. 246.

² Email correspondence with the author, 17 August 2011.

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