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1

Why Make Site-Specific Performance?

There is good cause to challenge any use of the word ‘site’. The word implies far more than, say, ‘space’ or ‘place’. It suggests that a human choice has already defined its boundaries, meaning and identity. A site is always the site *of* something; with the implication that it is a kind of container for what is really important, for the valuable property that is in it but is different from the space itself. It says that space accrues its meaning through its use by humans; which, in an overwhelmingly unhuman cosmos, is an odd way of describing things. ...

A section headed ‘Finding a site’, particularly in a handbook, might be expected to begin with some inventive tactics for exploring cities and natural expanses. Instead, it is important to begin by getting at what the ‘whys’ of site-specific theatre are; if only to dispel the idea that sites are neutral, natural places, blank pages on which you can write with impunity. Site-specific theatre is often characterised in terms of an impulsive and instinctual break from the dead weight of intellectual, building-based arts traditions, an escape to the freshness of the outdoors, to the randomness of the everyday world, even to the shock of the wild; but it is also a choice with its own traditions and legacies.

Where did site-specific performance come from? Why did it appear at all? What were, and what remain of, the original impulses, motives and motivations for making theatre and performance that consciously refuses designated sites and heads off in pursuit of a something ‘more real’ than

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staged illusions? Why turn to the churning of everyday life? And what new drives, if any, are emerging now to sustain this momentum?

Una Chaudhuri is just one of any number of academic critics and historians who identify the origins of these impulses with ‘an experimentation that began with Dadaism’ and that climaxes with ‘finally, site-specific theater’ (1995, p. 22). The extraordinary ‘moment’ of Dada in 1916, with its products and performances made and shared by exiled anti-war artists gathered together in neutral Zurich, meeting regularly to create the Cabaret Voltaire in a small bar, was goaded by a transnationalist bloodbath and reinforced in its escalating radicalism by the influence of the artists, thrown together by total war, on each other.

Dada has become a touchstone for artworks that seek to break from existing conventions of staging, presentation and representation. Dada’s paintings escaped from their frames. The episodic structure of its cabarets was used to parody to death live presence and representational performance. Through blasphemous pseudo-rituals, trances, contrived outrages and confrontations, and grotesquely masked buffoonery, the Dadaists generated an assault on nationalistic common sense and ‘rationality’. They disrupted artistic individualism, incorporated everyday things into privileged aesthetic discourses and macerated the literal and metaphorical meaningfulness of words.

Dada’s precedence for site-specific performance is manifest in the ‘Dadaist excursions’, inspired by Baudelaire’s rhetorical query ‘does there exist anything more charming, more fertile and more positively *exciting* than the commonplace?’ These ‘excursions’ were anti-touristic visits to places that had struck their organisers as lacking any reason for existing; most famously a 1921 foray to the repeatedly adapted and repurposed Church of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre in Paris where the Dadaists yelled gnomonic slogan-poems at passers-by.

The ‘moment’ of Dada has become something of an event horizon for radical art, a phenomenon from before which little information is allowed to radiate. Dada’s principles of rupture, rootlessness, fragmentation, nihilistic repetition, anti-art, irony and parody have often prevailed both in subsequent cultural practice and in critical theory, and they continue to inform an important seam of site-specific performance which is often closer to live art than theatre. These principles, however, are not

the whole story of site-specificity's roots. There are other less iconoclastic, though perhaps equally radical, strands.

Some of the later influences on site-specific performance have come from art forms that seem far from performance. Sculpture, painting and drawing, particularly through the fusions of land art as practised by the likes of Kazuo Shiraga and the Gutai group, Robert Smithson or Ana Mendieta, have all informed site-specific performance. These artists, given their prioritising of sensitivity to and enthusiasm for materials – Gutai is Japanese for 'concreteness'; Smithson used heavy machinery to make his installations; Mendieta sank her body into mud and snow – and their preference for immersion in and communion with terrains, over rupture and separation from them, showed that site-specific works could be just as critical and political as those based on modernist fragmentation and disruption.

Other strands of influence spring directly from building-based theatre. Most crudely this can consist of existing plays, often with naturalistic dialogue, linear narratives and psychological characterisations that are almost directly 'lifted out' of theatre buildings and restaged in spaces not usually designated for theatre. While theatre scholar Bertie Ferdman suggests that this is far from a recent phenomenon and that 'Theater has a rich history of taking place outside the traditional theatre building ... Long before modernism' (2013, p. 16), her citing of individual productions (e.g., a 1934 staging of *The Merchant of Venice* in a Venetian street and a play about the anarcho-syndicalist Buenaventura Durruti performed in a French factory in 1964) suggests an impulse repeatedly re-found and practice re-invented rather than a coherent ongoing tradition incrementally built upon.

In such productions, there are varying degrees of adaptation of the play to their new 'grounds', and varying degrees of adaptation of the spaces themselves. Today, there are numerous examples of companies making such work: Changeling Theatre in Kent (UK), the Castle Tours of the American Drama Group Europe/TNT throughout Europe, the plays staged on the plaza of the Art Tower Mito in Japan by the Mito Yagai-Geki and those of the many affiliates of the Institute of Outdoor Theatre in the USA. While it is possible to question quite what it is about many of these performances that is 'specific' to their sites, a significant

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proportion of what is described as site-specific theatre, particularly by journalists, looks much like this.

More profoundly, however, though far less obviously, there is another building-based theatrical influence on site-specific performance. Long before Dada, there was a break from the burgeoning dominance of the binary of extravagant melodrama on the one hand and realist or naturalistic appearance on the other over nineteenth-century theatre; one that resonates in continuing attempts to represent things beyond and above appearance. This was Symbolist Theatre. Spectral and idealist, mostly now derided or ignored as reactionary or effete, its proponents set out to dissolve and transcend the same conventions and frames that Dada would smash, disrupt and escape. Their performances ‘ow[ed] much to the interdisciplinary fusions ... arguably evolved from Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* ... and early Romantic arguments for the inherent unity of all the arts’ (Machon, 2013, p. 29); an explosive concoction that all the time threatens to burst the limits of the theatre building. So, when Sara, a renegade Gnostic nun in Villiers De L’Isle-Adam’s *Axël* (1890), plunges a dagger into a heraldic sign and ‘the entire mass of the wall section [of the castle] cleaves into a wide, vaulted opening, glides and sinks gradually underground’ (De L’Isle-Adam, 1986, p. 149), or when the avalanche at the end of Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* (1867) swallows everything in ice, or when in his *The Master Builder* (1893) the steeple is built right up through the ceiling of the theatre, these are not just visual effects. They are questionings of the physical frame of appearance and representation itself. They point theatre out beyond the container of the theatre building – just as much as a work like Max Ernst’s *Culture Mechanism: The Robing of the Bride* (1924) is encouraging painting to escape from its frame, literally and prefiguratively – while retaining a deep commitment to the theatrical as a heightened form of life that is distinct from the everyday.

An example of the continuing resonance of this Symbolist theatre for site-specific theatre is evident in an immersive performance created by the American director Robert Wilson (much of whose stage work is suffused by Symbolist aesthetics) working with two young Dutch artists and theatre makers, Boukje Schweigman and Theun Mosk, for the Oreol Festival on the island of Terschelling. *Walking* (2008) required its audience/participants to walk for around three hours at half ‘normal’

pace, one by one, at intervals, along a designated path through dunes and bushes, encountering various portals, installations and soundscapes, both natural and artificial. While the attentive supervision of the participants by usher-guides, called ‘angels’, was suggestive to some participants of preparations for a trip through an ‘underworld’ or ‘otherworld’, Wilson and his collaborators were careful to leave literal space and symbolic ambiguity through which their ambulatory audience could explore their own associations with the augmented landscape by way of an altered moving and seeing.

These theatrical strands of influence share some things in common with older lineages of performance that were, or are, sited outside of designated or conventional performance spaces. As Anna Wilson observes, although groups like Punchdrunk have often been contextualised in academic writing as inheritors of a tradition from high modernist groups of the 1960s like The Performance Group led by Richard Schechner, in fact their ‘ancestry has more in common with ... [an] aesthetic reframing of populist everyday forms such as that of the game or theme park’ (2016, p. 173).

In discussions about site-specific art, the influence of these older (and sometimes imagined) traditions has been dampened by critical discourses that privilege ‘modernism’ and by the event horizon of Dada. Nevertheless, these much older traditions are demonstrably inspirational to site-based performances, from one-off productions like the Krampus play or ‘Nikolausspiel’ performed in the Church of the Angels at Pasadena (USA, 2016) to significant and long-standing practices like that of Red Earth (UK, founded 1989 and ongoing) who draw on or appropriate iconography and rituals from other cultures and from other times to inform spectacular landscape events and processions and even the speculative imagining of ‘lost’ prehistoric performances: ‘Butoh dancer Atsushi Takenouchi ... his flowing movement balancing the stillness of the landscape and the restless energy of the sheep. The enclosure is opened, and the sheep run down the valley, weaving around him’ (Prior, 2011, p. 26). The range of these influential traditional performances – often informed to some degree by re-creation, the finessing of repertoire, creative excavation of archives, reforms and speculative imagining – include plough plays, carnival parades, the devotional dancing of the Mevlevi,

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eighteenth-century freemasonic rituals performed on a chalked ground plan, the two ‘horses’ (with their teasers and supporters) of Padstow’s ‘*Obby* ‘*Oss*, and the processing of sacred Christian statues around cities and villages during Easter.

In the mid-1990s I attended a processing of church statues around the Andalusian town of Aracena (Spain). I was struck by the many modes of performance that were deployed that night; a multiplicity at odds with the narrow formal rigours that characterise much representational building-based theatre or even modern-day Catholic church services. Here was a rich resource of performance forms and discourses that a theatre, freed of its buildings, could draw upon or indulge itself in. There was the shattering physical labour of those lifting and carrying the *pasos* (floats), the hypnotic repetitions of simple creaky marching music, the thrill of the shaking ornaments each time the unsteady *pasos* were raised up, the randomness of a halt for one of the statues to be serenaded (with a secular aria) by a professional singer from the upstairs window of her home, and the high theatricality of the *nazarenos* (penitential robes) with their distinctive *capirotas* (pointed hoods) not quite fully explained by the requirement of anonymity.

Here, procedure stood in for dramatic plot; rather than the events unfolding in novelty, the mystery was excavated predictably and always ‘once again’, high emotion erupted without preparation or crescendo as if there was always something hot and molten beneath the surface that the ritual could directly tap into. I was struck by the ways that rich symbolism and ordinariness were woven very closely; how beneath the ornately decorated *paso* the men lifting and carrying were only partially concealed, their fluorescent trainers shining and their heavily muscled and hairy legs straining beneath the frills.

Cathy Turner, in her book *Dramaturgy and Architecture* (2015), has described how performance, having burst out from the theatre building in the early twentieth century (in ways prefigured by Ibsen and others), did not then abandon architecture in the flurry of idealism and abstraction. Instead, performance often redirected its straining against the limitations of the stage onto new material ‘grounds’. Through various arts and esoteric groups, there were stagings of masques, pageants and processions

that tied varieties of collectivist politics and (often theosophy-based) idealism to the new architectural forms of innovative institutions and communities. Mass choreographed movement played a part in this; human beings performing as parts of a eurhythmic social machine. Turner shows how, alongside the Symbolist Theatre's drive towards a realistic representation of the unreal (ambience, death, mystery) and a Gnostic aspiration to be realised in its own negation, something else was advanced that was far more material, at times even steely and scaffolded, informed by the Constructivist and Bauhaus movements' exposures of the mechanics, forms and philosophies of design as agencies in themselves.

This particular influence has been represented, more recently, in the work of those small professional groups that were characteristic of post-1960s experimental performance. So, for example, in Brith Gof's *Gododdin* (1988), a seventh-century Celtic 'last stand' against Anglo-Saxon invaders was staged in the engine room of a disused car factory, directly engaging with and protesting the London-controlled neo-liberal dismantling of the architecture of heavy industry in Wales through the material revenant of its fading history. Even more explicitly in tune with the architectural performances of the 1920s are the interventions of the Office of Subversive Architecture (1995 and ongoing), mostly in Germany and Austria. These range from performative installations to the erection of 'permanent' structures as parts of a continuum of production along which the company can disperse narratives, objects, ideas and activism. They call this entanglement of their physical and intellectual products the 'fictionalisation' of their sites.

Developments in technical, artistic and productive practices and a renewed attention to terrains have all been crucial to repeated 'turns' to site-specificity; but theoretical ideas have also been influential. Such ideas have included the idealisation of fluidity and the privileging of rhizomic dispersal over and against fixed, vertical rooting in the work of critical theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the popularisation of neo-vitalism, the 'lure of the local' and the dematerialisation of the art object (as both theorised by Lucy Lippard), the ideas of the vibrant energy of non-human things in the work of Jane Bennett and the Object-Oriented Ontologists, the study of the performance of everyday life

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developed from pioneering work by Erving Goffman, the ‘spatial turn’ in geography, the ‘mobilities paradigm’ championed by John Urry and the increasing seriousness with which disciplines outside the arts, like human geography and anthropology, have come to regard performance as a tool of research.

The ‘why’ of site-specific performance, then, has arisen in numerous and various guises: in cultural-political subversion, in strains within theatre and theatre architecture which have then reached out to a more general architecture, in a nostalgia for older (or the invention of something *like* older) performance forms, in the uncontainable qualities of the numinous, and in shifts within critical theory that move across categories.

A cautionary note, however, is necessary here. Where these performances are driven by bright new ideas (or respect for and excavation of old ones) and take the form of transgressions of accepted or conformist practices, there is a temptation to assume that a common idealism, generous politics and thoughtful ethics inform all these works. Not always so. It is important to note that some artists have been accused of an indifference to the impact and sustainability of their interventions in the terrain involved in making spectacular land art. Localism can turn into petty nationalism and chauvinism. Critics have identified an opportunistic commercialism and neo-liberal individualism at work in some of the more immersive examples of site-specific theatre. The popularity of labour-intensive site-based theatre events like those of Secret Cinema and Punchdrunk have generated some unease, both around issues of unpaid or low-paid work of associate artists, the ‘hidden “scripting” – in terms of what is forbidden’ and policed at Punchdrunk performances by the company’s ‘black-masked crew’ (Wilson, 2016, pp. 168–169) – and the subservience of content to the imperative of sensorial impact. The initially enthusiastic critic Alice Saville (2016) explained how, now, for her, ‘immersive theatre feels like a capitalist playground, inviting the audience to play “freely” in an environment that is full of invisible restrictions, and costs’.

There is nothing easy here. Today, practitioners have to navigate their own ways between aesthetic drives and the tempting opportunities for ‘added value’ offered by occupying and capitalising upon unfamiliar

and spectacular spaces; at the same time as finding a way through compromising practicalities and ‘an admixture of desire and necessity, the implementation of sets of both programmatic and pragmatic addresses to the possibilities and problems of a location’ (Pearson, 2012, p. 69). Performances, like young artists’ studios before them, play a recognised role in the redevelopment, gentrification and monetisation of ‘run-down’ neighbourhoods; indeed, Michael McKinnie redefines site-specificity as ‘monopolistic performance’ generating ‘value by appropriating and trading self-consciously on the non-replicable qualities of places’; he identifies this specificity as part of a raw material with its own value, while the ‘experiential benefits of the theatre event’ are what makes it exchangeable and tradable (2012, p. 23). Rather than a radical escape from property, site-specific performance, in this analysis, is a ‘rent-seeking’ (p. 24) process; and this is not simply due to the accidental fallout of using, for example, derelict (and subsequently developed) space. According to McKinnie, this proprietorial quality is integral to the nature of site-specific performances, taking ‘temporary “ownership” over a distinct and non-replicable time, place and experience’ comparable to other forms of private property and encouraging an audience experience that ‘allows spectators to imagine themselves as productive economic subjects of a particular kind – the property owning bourgeoisie’ (p. 29). All of this, according to Anna Wilson, is ‘underpinned by an individualist drive where participants compete against each other to receive the “optimum” experience’ (Wilson, 2016, p. 172).

While McKinnie’s thesis is reductive, it is no more than a theoretical version of complaints that have been made by spectators and critics about the latest (late 2000s to mid-2010s) trends in immersive theatre experiences. The ecology of a site is rarely so limited that performance makers have only aesthetics to consider; and McKinnie’s argument is a corrective to instances of such a blinkered view. Instead, site-specific performance making is an eclectic, conflicted and ambivalent business; and requires a matching set of inspirations, motivations and justifications.

Whatever your own ‘why’ or ‘whys’ for studying or making site-specific performance, they will find their place in some relation to this ragtag and contradictory range of issues and to others that I have omitted.

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Exercise

In site-specific performance you need to pay the closest attention to exactly what is in your site; what is specific to it. But there is another kind of specificity. What is missing? What is evidently and explicitly absent? Say, a swimming pool with no water in it. What happens when you perform as if the missing thing were still present, although you have not replaced it?

Your 'why?'

Write your own reasons for making site-specific performance in the space below.

Your 'whys' may be heartfelt, immediate, strong and clear. They may be ambiguous, vague, negative or obliged; just the same, write them. Creativity can begin with resistance. Your reasons may be conjectural – 'if I were to make site-specific performance, why would I be doing it?' – and that is just as valid. Leave room for future crossings out and rewriting.

If you need a model:

Because our cities are increasingly policed, militarised and made banal. Because there is a conspiracy of boredom against cities. Because the Great God Pan is long dead and we still don't have the new myths we were promised. Because the city is chopped and parcelled up like a rack of meat, streamlined for ignorance and meaninglessness. Because hidden inside the functionality of the city are the secrets of texture and the funny ghosts of pattern. Because the purloined symbols of the city are all still available for us to steal back. Because the self-possession of the non-rich has always been a work of imagination, and it needs to be practiced to be retained. Because of the erosion of public space. Because there are accidental playgrounds and launch pads and caves. Because of violence, property, loss and neglect. Because we are mobile and we want a fine time. For the sake of remnants and traces. To be prepared and spontaneous and happy whenever we need to be. And because we are prepared to be spontaneous. Right now...

(Crabman & Signpost, 2012, p. 5)*

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The broad range of motivations for, and influences upon, the making of site-specific performance does go some way to explaining why site-specific practices are quite as variegated, and sometimes as conflicted and contradictory, as they are. However, there is another significant part of that explanation lying within the very idea of specificity to site: if it truly is the sites that primarily determine the nature of the performances then there is nothing particular to the techniques or stylistics used in one site that would necessarily recommend them for use in any other.

The sheer breadth of the ranging across scales, across spectacle and intimacy, across image-theatre and autobiography, across mass choreography and one-to-one performance would suggest that there is little point in seeking *anything* in common among the narratives, interventions, concepts, personae and performance styles deployed in site-specific performances. Nevertheless, to give a sense both of the extreme disparities involved and how despite these there *are* significant affinities woven within these differences, I will point to two very different, but relatable performances from the early 1970s: firstly, the performance by the International Centre for Theatre Research of the Ted Hughes-scripted *Orghast* (1971) in the ruins at Persepolis as part of the prestigious Shiraz Festival and, then, Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scene* (1973) for which the artist created a private performance for fellow University of Iowa students in her own apartment.

Orghast was directed by Peter Brook, who had by 1971 combined considerable critical and popular success with classic plays in major theatre institutions with adventurous smaller-scale experimentally devised works, shifting productively between a literary tradition of theatre making and the serious social engagement, monkish corporeality and spiritual-theatricality of experimentalists such as Joan Littlewood, Jerzy Grotowski and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Brook is the author of the classic anti-specificity text: 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre' (1968, p. 7— a statement of universality that has been challenged on multiple accounts: Why specifically a man? In what sense is any space empty, free of its past and the events that took place there? And who is the 'I' that 'can take'? Another 'man'? These

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questions continued to be at work in *Orghast*, with its starting point in the myth of Prometheus, with Hughes's invention of a language – 'the language of man' (Smith, 1972, p. 108) – that would be less symbolic and 'more audial/visceral/muscular' (1972, p. 45), and with Brook's choosing the austere tomb of Artaxerxes II for one of the two spaces for *Orghast*'s performance at Persepolis, rather than a large terrace of ruins which he rejected as being 'too fussy as an image' on which to stage his production (Brook, 1968, p. 103).

Despite all that, there *was* an attention to the narrative of place; taking themes of fire, light and darkness from the seventh-century BCE Zoroastrianism that predates the building of the complex at Persepolis by a century and Hughes's aspiration to 'mak[e] the place itself the main character of the work' (Brook, 1968, p. 141). Although Brook had arrived with the idea of building an acoustic cube 'suggested by the shape of a glass-walled garden in the centre of Tehran airport' (p. 61) in the ruins, he decided not to augment the site, except with ladders (which had previously been features of the site), and chose natural light and fire over electrical illumination and effects. Once in rehearsal, elements of the site began to perform with the cast: '[T]he actress playing the Vulture found her voice being doubled by a jackdaw' (p. 182).

In stark contrast to the high-profile nature of the *Orghast* event and its 'world heritage' setting, both the location and the initial social exposure for Ana Mendieta's performance were intimate. *Rape Scene* was her response to the rape and murder of Sarah Ann Ottens, a nursing student in a student hall of residence at the University of Iowa. On arrival at Mendieta's apartment, a handful of invited student colleagues found the front door ajar and Mendieta inside, motionless, and slumped across a table, arms tied and her face hidden, her buttocks exposed and covered in fake blood. A pool of this fake blood had collected at her feet. All this was lit from a low source that threw long shadows onto the walls. Mendieta remained motionless for the hour's duration of the performance; the audience remained, then sat down, shocked by what they had found, and talked about the work and what they felt. The performance was documented in a series of photographs, later supplemented by others taken with Mendieta in a similar pose in outdoor locations on the perimeter of the university campus.

Rape Scene was not a staging like that of *Orghast*, searching for some kind of universal cultural field, but rather it referenced recent and specific

events, in a space like those where there was a fear those events would be repeated, and performed the very sharpest of power imbalances and disjunctions. Social structures, behaviours and assumptions bore directly down on and marked a single female body. Where *Rape Scene* was literally self-effacing, *Orghast* was a global festive gesture, covered by international media. Nevertheless, and despite so many unlike qualities, within the opposites and contrasts of *Rape Scene* and *Orghast*, there are certain common features that arise from their attention to location in each piece.

(Resist any temptation to draw a conclusion that the common elements shared between a ‘signature’ intercultural high-art production for a celebration organised by a dictatorship and a female student-artist’s self-financed action against rape on her campus indicate a comforting demonstration of a broad liberal and progressive quality inherent in site-specific performance. It is just as likely to signify that site-specific practices can be put to work, equally, for radical, collective, exploitative, indifferent and authoritarian purposes.)

The performers’ bodies in both cases were put ‘at the mercy’ of the site. The actors at Persepolis were threatened by soldiers, struggled in the intense heat, and were joined in rehearsal and performance by snakes and scorpions, while Mendieta’s audience were relieved to arrive at her home before anyone uninvited arrived, fearing that they might have taken advantage of her. In both events there is an oblique reference to ritual; while Brook acknowledged ‘the ceremonial aspects of the work in Persepolis ... made by a cultural conspiracy of all those who meet to partake in it’ (Smith, 1972, p. 253), Mendieta’s copious use of blood (at odds with the forensic descriptions of the actual crime scene) was inspired by Santería rituals from her native Cuba; its excess was perhaps an attempt to go beyond reproducing the appearance of victimisation. Invitation and targeted selection (one based on conviviality and collegueship, the other on cultural and political status and media access) played a role in who was able to access each of the two performances; mediation and documentation – visual and textual – have since their performances distributed both works to far broader audiences than the few that experienced them live. Both involved places of death: one a tomb, the other ‘recreations’ of a murder scene.

The last of these connections, the nature of their sites (although the other connections also resonate, variably, with other examples of site-specific performance), is particularly relevant here. Following the logic of

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specificity, where there are commonalities, repetitions and connections these often seem to arise where certain 'kinds' of sites are favoured by performance makers. This was one of the findings of Fiona Wilkie (2002) in her pioneering paper 'Mapping the Terrain: A Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain', written on the wave of a sudden growth in site-specific performance in the UK in the late 1990s and around the millennium. Wilkie noted, then, the popularity of certain kinds of places over others, with makers particularly favouring parks, disused or 'out-of-hours' workplaces, churches, beaches, museums and tunnels. She speculated on how various qualities of playfulness, inhabitability, self-reflexivity, affordance for heightened emotion and reusable symbolic codes might have drawn the artists to these particular kinds of sites.

As well as the common qualities in the sites chosen, site-specific performance makers may also have been influenced by each other. One maker, or group of makers, may have been initially alerted or attracted to site-specific arts by the works of another; a certain influence may have been sustained when others heard of or attended performances. Equally, information about practices and sites was dispersed indirectly through publications, blogs, university courses and 'industry chatter', in shared anecdotes and tactics taught in workshops, and in discussions of notions of ethics and traditions (to be observed or transgressed). These varied, if ephemeral, discourses have engendered certain consistencies across what is otherwise an uneven field. So, for example, an impetus towards 'immersiveness' seems to have accelerated in the first decade after the millennium as the work of existing groups like Royal de Luxe, Blast Theory or De La Guarda began to reach greater numbers of people, spreading from their countries of origin to international festivals and high-profile events, and this impetus was repeatedly added to by the emergence of new groups like Ontroerend Goed, Punchdrunk or Coney. In various combinations, and under different categories, these works were then narrated by journalists, researchers, audiences and theorists as if they were parts of a shared practice; at times a tradition was unified for reasons of intimate collaboration and skill-sharing, at others for no better purpose than the requirements of a journalistic narrative or an academic convenience.

Part of what all this means is that any site you choose is no more empty of enticing scripts and scores than it is of cosmological and geological materials or of a history of human engagement. Feedback loops develop,

in mainstream and social media as well as academic discourses, so that certain kinds of effects and experiences are privileged, and the kinds of sites that favour the production of those effects and experiences also become privileged in turn. Thus, it may be important to see that what is valued across the range of site-specific performances – from the ‘why’ of motivations to any commonly perceived affordant qualities ascribed to certain kinds of sites – are not empty categories, clean tools or discrete spatial entities to be taken up without obligation or significance in themselves. Rather, they should all be regarded with some suspicion; all are likely to carry with them influences, histories and values that arrive from across the range of site-specific practices and practitioners as well as from elsewhere.

So, here is a paradox to give any maker of site-specific performance pause: because site-specific performance is now communicated as a ‘thing’, a discipline (enough to trigger this publication and others similar to it), a recognisable and significant cultural activity, each specificity that a performance maker now approaches, whether that be a new site or a performance idea, is likely to be interpreted by others – critics, colleagues, audiences – through conventions shared with others engaged with making or discussing site-specific performances. This means that site-based performances – whether they be ceremonies, processions, solo dance pieces, activist interventions, walks, augmented reality games, museum interpretation, plays or fire spectacles, and whether their sites be epic ruins or night-time suburban streets, sports stadia or intimate domestic settings – are always in danger of succumbing to a site-specific homogenisation. By acknowledging these conventions, however, it may become possible to do more than discuss the problem as a recognisable one, and either skirt the conventions or transform them.

Thus, in order to realise a genuine and rigorous specificity to your site not only will it be necessary to surrender some of your accustomed power and autonomy – as The Olimpias say of their ‘Salamander’ project (2013), ‘the water is the director, the choreographer’ – it will also help (or be necessary) to know what the tics, habits and etiquettes of similar work might be, in order, if appropriate, to strip them away and get to what is special about your site. On the other hand, it may be more true to the dynamics of your site, to knowingly commandeer existing conventions in order to create work that plays between what you bring to the site and what you find there.

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One of the conventions, probably best avoided, is an assumption that an essential identity for a site can be discovered in the documentation of its past; that the everyday and living transformations of the contemporary site are but an ephemeral distraction from the essence that can be established by historical (or some other absolute) veracity. This need not apply only to antiquarian performances, but to any that seek to find and express the fixed essence of a site. Indeed, there is always some danger in any rigorous insistence on the specificity of performance to its site; particularly when such faithfulness to the specifics through performance reproduces them in a rigid, doctrinal and monocular account. In Victoria Hunter's schematic model of 'influence' in site-specific performance 'detailing the relationship between the site and the creative process', a quite different rigour (which Hunter, boldly, claims as 'perhaps the "true" and desired outcome of site-specific performance') is described in which the emphasis is not on what can be fixed by definition, but on an 'interaction between the spatial and the performative [that] is ephemeral in nature, existing only in the moment'. Hunter uses a diagram to demonstrate the variety of interactions; what then drops down from, or out of, the model's linear trajectory from 'site' to 'product' is 'New space created' (2015, pp. 36–38).

There is something in common here with one of the outcomes of a partnership between performance maker Mike Pearson and archaeologist Michael Shanks, to find a mutual illumination of their own disciplines in the workings of that of the other. Indeed, they also found traces of each other's disciplines in their own, and this interwoven-ness is pertinent to Hunter's formula. When Shanks writes of archaeology as 'a practice of cultural production ... within which the archaeologist is implicated as an active agent of interpretation' there is a clear echo of the work of the performance maker, of making something new rather than simply recording and finessing documentation in another form. Furthermore, Shanks describes an archaeologist 'work[ing] with material traces, with evidence, in order to create something – a meaning, a narrative, an image – which stands for the past in the present'. All this could just about be sustained within a making rigid, an essentialising of the multiplicity of those traces in a dogmatic telling of the site, except that what Shanks then concludes about archaeology is that 'Rather than being a reconstruction ... this is a recontextualisation' (Pearson & Shanks, 2001, p. 11).

Together, Hunter's model and Shanks's description constitute a general 'why?' for site-specificity that is not about its veracity to a fixed idea of the site, either to its past history or to its present-day norms, or even about fixing the meaning of the site in the moment, but – by acknowledging a performance's implication in the production of the space in materials and meanings; a process that is never completed, even in the fluidity of performance – it takes responsibility for the next iteration of the place, for its part in its production as new space and the transformation of its contexts from one set of frames to a whole new other.

So, depending on where you mark the origins in site-specific performance, after at least half a century of practice, this break from conventional cultural spaces not only has accrued its own conventions, but – through criticism and experiment – has also questioned an imperative at least partially driving that break; that new spaces would revivify art and performance. Hunter, Pearson and Shanks (and many practitioners who not only attend carefully to their sites, but reflect unflinchingly on their work) emphasise the reciprocity that was not always acknowledged: that the 'why?' of site-specificity is equally, maybe primarily, about how its attention revives the site. Is this why so many of the sites chosen are ones of abjection (abandoned or in ruins), of trauma (empty hospitals and institutions), of colonial heritage (and un-restituted appropriation) and so on? Is the primary emerging 'why?' of site specificity the making of new sites?

Idea

'Asymmetric action' is a term with two core meanings; firstly, it describes a general imbalance (e.g., where the limbs on one side of a body are better coordinated than those on the other), and secondly – and this is where the idea is probably more helpful to you – it describes where a weak force generates disproportionate effects by recruiting (and sometimes transforming) circumstances to its own ends and as its own allies. This second sense is often exemplified in terms of warfare. A famous instance of asymmetric warfare is at the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE), recently popularised by the *300* graphic novel and movie: a small force raised by an alliance of Greek city states took advantage of a feature in the local terrain, a very narrow defile, to limit the effectiveness of a much larger Persian enemy.

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The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York were asymmetrical; both immediately and in the longer term. Not only were a handful of individuals, armed only with small blades and rudimentary flying skills, able to capture commercial airliners and turn them into flying bombs, but the subsequent media coverage of the destruction and killing and then the political-military responses to them triggered regional and global events which are far from resolved at the time of writing. Compared to the fairly simple advantage-taking of one small feature of the landscape at Thermopylae, the 9/11 attackers and those organising them were able to exploit and redirect the resources and tendencies of a variety of powerful and complex systems.

A far more creative example of asymmetric action might be the way that the makers of some prehistoric structures, including the third millennium (BCE) Stonehenge, and the more recent planners and builders of the Midsummer Boulevard in modern Milton Keynes (a new town built in the UK beginning in the 1960s) have aligned their architecture so as to recruit the predictable rise of the sun on Midsummer's Day morning. Not only does this enhance the impact of their structures by annual illumination, but it culturally implants the idea that they (and their stewards) are, or were, connected, imaginatively if not spiritually, with the rhythms of the cosmos.

If a theatre maker approaches their site with the assumption that they are not entering a fixed state or exploiting a backdrop, but addressing themselves to living systems, then, by understanding what those systems are and how they work, those makers can amplify, prolong and entangle their interventions. Spending sustained periods of time in a site can reveal all sorts of unexpected dynamics; for example, a modern workplace being used 'after hours' might begin to perform its own sound score as central heating closes down overnight and the materials in the building contract at different rates. This could become the incidental and predictable music for your performance. A suburban garden might receive brief but regular visits from bats feeding on the wing, becoming reliable performers in a twilight piece. The question, then, for the observant and site-engaged performance maker is how to 'recruit' these reliable rhythmic systems; dancing to the creaks of the building may be all it takes. But how would you recruit the bats?

The above examples are of living, material and biological circumstances; but more elusive and ephemeral systems can also be engaged. So, in 1997, in a piece called *The Rumor*, Francis Alÿs – an artist who has paid very careful attention to the sites of his art making – visited a small Mexican town and was able to initiate gossip about a guest at a local hotel who had, he suggested, disappeared without explanation. The circulation, retelling, development and embroidering of this story (and various emerging subplots) reached sufficient levels of distribution and complexity for the local police to have an artist's impression of the 'missing person' drawn up and circulated on posters. This is fecund, powerful and perilous practice, not far from 'fake news' in its effects if dissimilar in intention; when not explained, it can produce attractive simulacra which others then colour with their assumptions.

So, if you were to create a similar project to Francis Alÿs's, how could you connect your own intervention to powerful assumptions and, rather than simply amplifying them (as is the dynamic with 'fake news'), transform and recruit them to your own dynamic? How would you use rumour to change assumptions?

The 'why' of performance shifts the grounds – and is the bridge – from a moment when you are most interested in how a site affects you, to one where you are more interested in finding out how – by using its own resources – you can affect it. This is the moment when neither the site's agency nor yours need be dominant; when site-specificity becomes a kind of reciprocity.

Exercise

The resources for Claire Blundell Jones's *Tumbleweed* (Loughborough and Cardiff [UK], Kuopio [Finland], 2007–2009) were simple, if partly exotic: a tumbleweed purchased online and a leaf blower. By deploying these, blowing the tumbleweed with the blower through city streets, Jones's action could transform the ambience of a busy shopping area or a financial district into that of a ghost town. The associations conjured by the sight of the tumbleweed blowing past a bank, a department store or along the pavement of a busy arterial road gave pause to the passers-by who witnessed it. The future dereliction of the bank, silence of the bankrupted retail centre, stillness of the road blocked by the rusting chassis of abandoned cars, all

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these were for a moment imaginable possibilities emerging out of the busy city. For some this was a momentary discordance, but the more that an observer looked the more the ordinariness was challenged, while Jones's focus on her task and lack of interaction with other trajectories (other than the wind) magnified the disjunction she caused. Follow Jones's example. Use a practically simple, but visually powerful associative intervention in an everyday space that you are familiar with. Maybe it will require a machinic assemblage like Jones's. Maybe a particular way of moving. Maybe the placing of a barely obstructive obstacle that begs a question, or the alteration of a sign. Consider what low-impact and gentle intervention you can make to generate a disproportionately profound effect on the imaginations of audiences/passers-by. Begin by studying the place; working out what its dynamics might be, and how you can recruit them for your intervention. Are there large windows in which to manipulate the reflections? Do the crowds flow in predictable, but subtly disruptable ways? Is there some ignored element that you could use to transform the space simply by illuminating, highlighting or signposting? Recruit the resources of the powerful space to your own meaning. What kinds of site do you discover by this performative visiting?

Exercise

Walk arm in arm with a blindfolded spectator (eyes shut may suffice), keeping them safe, telling them lies about what you see. Then swap roles. A variation: arm in arm, blindfold, but this time describe the terrain through the eyes of a character.

Exercise

The Russian movie director Ilya Khrzhanovsky, responsible for the highly regarded film *4* (2004), reputedly shot footage over more than two years (2008–2011) in a specially constructed set assembled near the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine. This film set, called 'The Institute', was the largest one ever made in Europe; 12,000 square metres in extent, a micro-world recreation of a 1950s Soviet-era institute in which the actors were resident throughout the filming period and barred from bringing modern devices onto the set. Journalists who visited were given 1950s costumes to wear and were expected to accept the fiction that this was no film project; but a science

institute. The editing of the movie itself has as yet (2018) to be completed, but reportedly continues. Not all sites are real. Or not what they present themselves to be. Investigate simulations, recreations and simulacra as places to perform.

Reading

Environmental Theater by Richard Schechner (first published in 1973) is a book that both illuminates the dynamic history and developments of site-specific practices and contains numerous general ideas and technical models for making such performances. The earlier introductory sections and the chapter on 'Space' will be particularly useful to read prior to undertaking a first site-specific project; Schechner discusses principles but in a practical way and with plenty of concrete examples, many from his own work with The Performance Group (founded in New York in 1967 and evolving into the Wooster Group after Schechner's resignation as artistic director in 1980).

While mostly what are cited in this book are projects and performance makers that broke from theatre-designated building-based productions, Schechner articulates performance aesthetics that are committed to the particularities of the site of performance and yet describe principles, forms and techniques that can survive transfer from site to theatre or from rehearsal room to street. Emblematic of this (and in a move similar to the escape of the painting from its frame), in The Performance Group's production of *Dionysus in 69* (1968) the action erupted out of the theatre and the final scenes were played in the surrounding streets: the actors chanting 'no more rituals, we want the real thing!' (de Palma, Fiore & Rubin, 1970).

Schechner is not, however, unmindful of the problems and tensions that arise from a transfer between sites. Rehearsing *Macbeth* with the Performance Group in 'an open pasture bordering a stream and a small woods' (1978, p. xvii) in Baocic, near Dubrovnik (then Yugoslavia) and then returning to perform it on the street in New York in 1969, Schechner describes how their 'big mistake... was that we rehearsed it in Baocic... [because] the space-field of that outdoor meadow stayed with us' (1994, p. 27). The continuing impact of the original site did not fit well with the demands of urban streets; rather than simply transferring the performance, they had also transferred the imprint of the earlier site: 'I hope I've learned the lesson: *Text, action, and environment must develop together*' (p. 28, emphasis in original). The site for Schechner is not a container, nor a backdrop: 'environments ecological or theatrical can be imagined not only as spaces but as active players in complex systems of transformation. Neither... are passive' (p. x).

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Schechner does not distinguish between high art and popular cultural forms when discussing space and performance; whether it is 'Peter Brook's "Tempest" and "Orghast"... or a pig kill and dance at Kurumugl in New Guinea... each example is of an event whose expression in space is a complete statement of what the event is' (p. 25); so the expression of the art is not what remains in a text or even in the experiences of all participants, but is realised in its spatial expression: the controlled site of the theatre building is not abolished, but it is expanded and its accoutrements (box office, lobby, bar, kiosk, fixed seating, boxes, flying gallery, stage door and dressing rooms) are absorbed into the organic site. There is no immutable separation of spectators from actors, all the space is available to both. Likewise everyday life and theatre are interwoven (see Schechner 1994, pp. 20–22); and Schechner describes a number of variations on this entanglement.

Finally, Schechner is aware (even in 1973) of the dangers and opportunities accompanying the incorporation of site-specificity. He describes a "'new mainstream" rang[ing] across the gamut of performance from the educational to the avant-garde, from crass commercialism to experimentation' and cites 'the Disney theme parks and their imitators; the hundreds of "restored villages" and "living museums" that entertain and educate millions' (1994, p. xv) as instances of incorporation of radical, environmental ideas. This appropriation is not always the work of giant corporations, however, but can be present in small-scale 'innocent' projects, such as Sandra Jiménez's *Se Traspasa* (2017), a show about objects, ornaments, costumes and romance performed in a small antiques and vintage clothing store in Madrid, where the proprietor seeks to 'combine both retail and theatre experiences' (Barrero, 2017). Flagging up the issues under discussion here, Schechner, almost generations ago, was alerting us to how they are active from the edges of a marginal artform to the very centre of the currents of the mainstream.

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