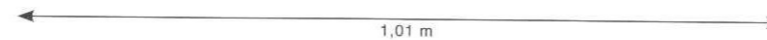


Arnold Aronson

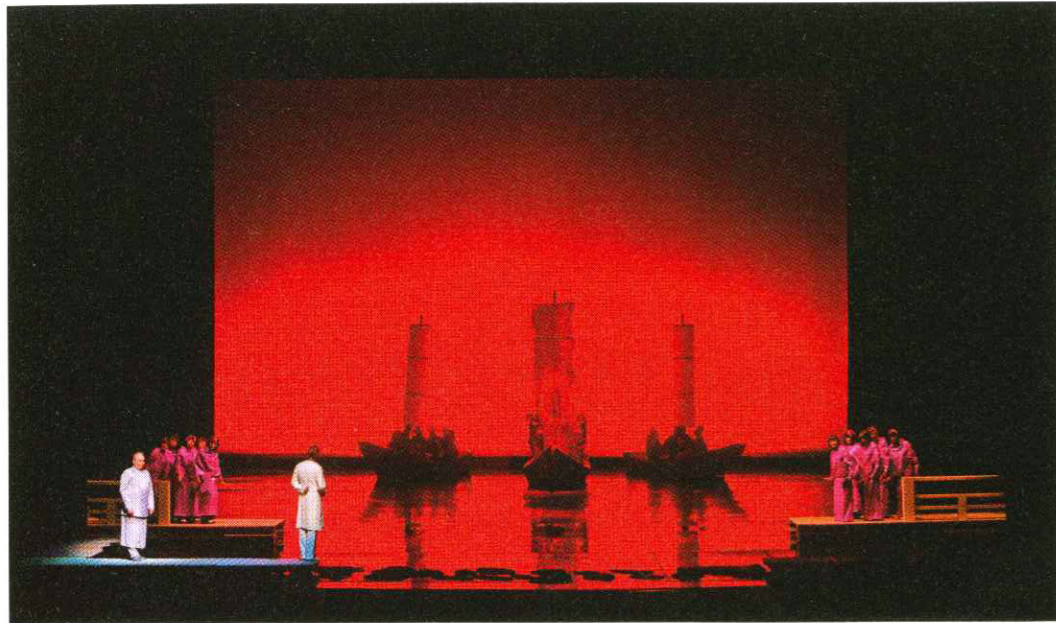
was General Commissioner of PQ 2007 and served as President of the International Jury at PQ 1991 and 1999. He has written extensively about scenography and his books include *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (University of Michigan, 2005) and *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (Routledge, 2000). He also edited *Exhibition on the Stage: Reflections on the 2007 Prague Quadrennial*. He is a Professor of Theatre at Columbia University in New York City.

# The Dematerialization of the Stage



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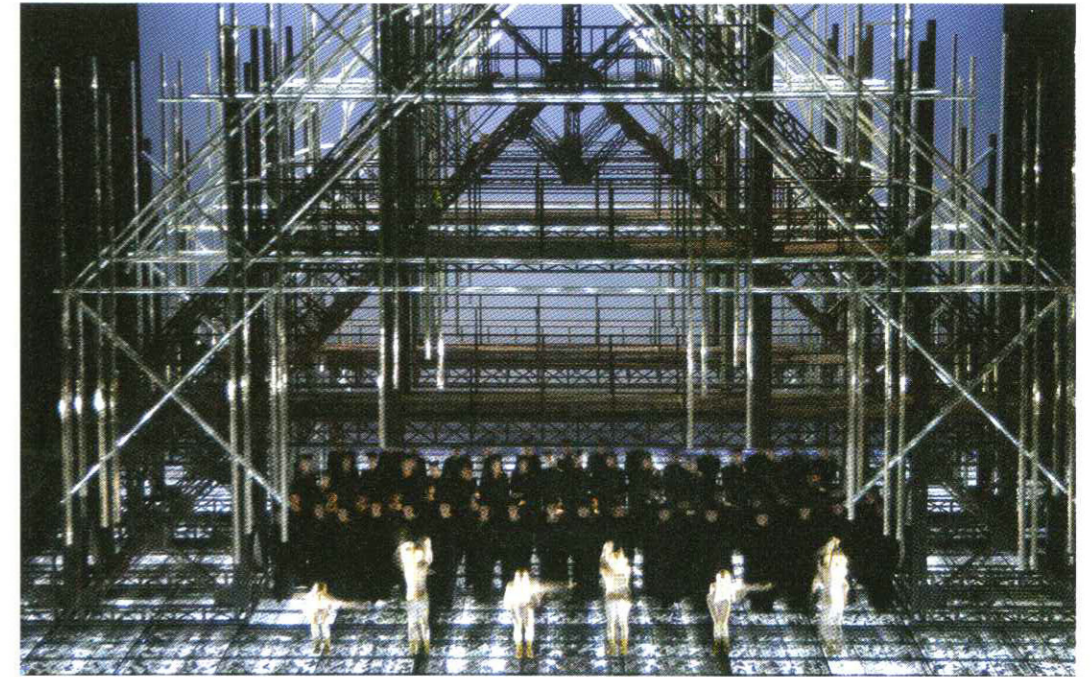
By Arnold Aronson



Boris Kudlička – G. Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*

Given the stunning array of scenography typically on display at the Prague Quadrennial, there is an inevitable impulse to seek out global trends. But if PQ 2011 revealed anything, it was more about what was missing than what was present. If set design is understood as the transformation of a stage by material scenery, and if a stage is understood as a designated space that is literally or metaphorically framed within a theatre of some sort, then design—and the stage—was surprisingly absent.<sup>1</sup> The question is, to what extent was the relative lack of traditional design a factor of more conceptual approaches to the exhibition of scenography (approaches that abandoned documentation and the display of design artifacts), and to what extent a true reflection of the state of scenography in the world today?

It is not as if traditional design has suddenly disappeared. Anyone who regularly attends theatre produced in state-supported or institutional venues, particularly opera with its monumental scale, could easily identify dominant visual trends: severe geometric forms, often at obliquely intersecting angles, as in the sets by Boris Kudlička for *Death in Venice* (Frankfurt, 2006) or *Madama Butterfly* (Valencia, 2009); the architectural décor of George Tsypin such as *La Juive* (Paris, 2007) or *Spiderman* (New York, 2010); or stark minimalism—often harshly lit—as in Jan Pappelbaum's *John Gabriel Borkman* (Berlin, 2009). Equally, one encounters an oppositional scenographic theme, a seeming response to the scenography of austerity or monumentality, that might be described as the clash of banality with theatricality—quotidian theatricalism: mundane domestic furniture, appliances, and objects set



George Tsypin – J. F. Halévy: *La Juive*

uncomfortably and surreally within the heightened world of the stage, and frequently descending into disorder over the course of the performance. Nina Wetzel's designs for *Susn* (Munich, 2009) or *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (Munich, 2007) exemplify this approach. Designer Anna Viebrock often manages to combine the architectural, monumental, minimalist, and quotidian in one.

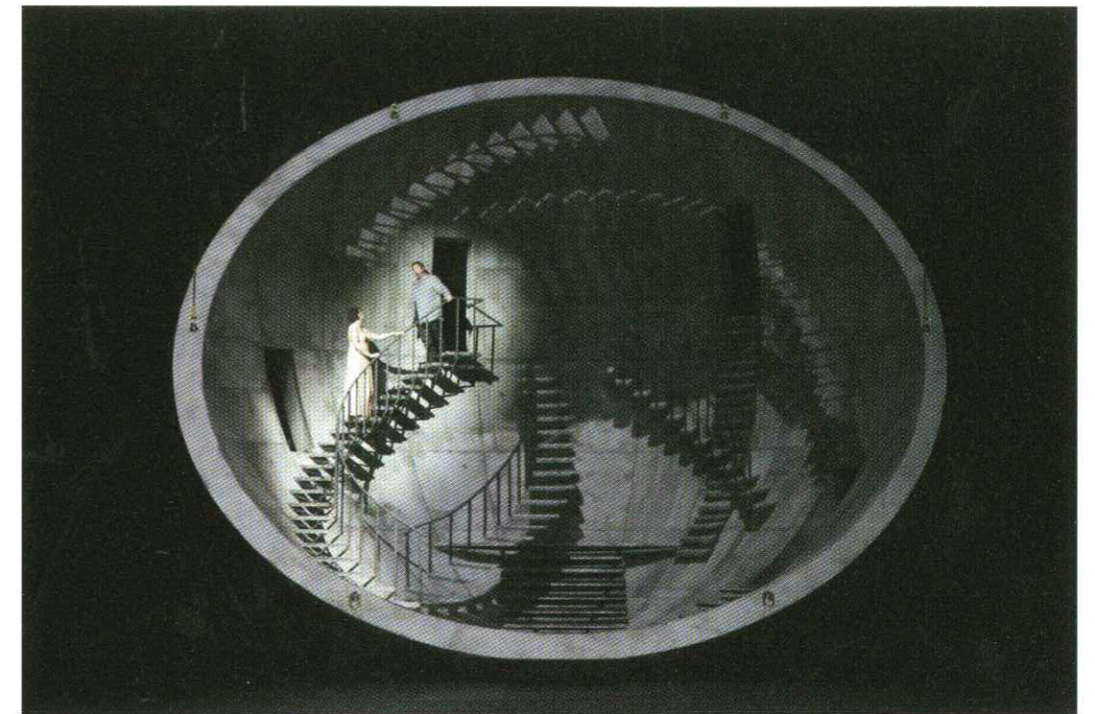
Taken together, these spatial and visual tropes suggest an internal battle raging within the scenographic realm: a tension between the attempts to contain a world within a strictly controlled space, often confined by the soaring verticality of an upstage wall, and the energy of disruption that leads to entropic chaos and leaves the stage in a state of disarray—a scenographic map of disintegration. Regardless of the visual and spatial vocabulary of the stage that these various approaches manifest, however, they remain part of an historical continuum of theatrical design. But there is another trend, an approach to scenography that denies the presence of the stage itself. Scenography is no longer defined by the architecture of the theatre or the confines of the stage or the conventional relationship of the spectator and the performer, or the performer to the design.

The stage is a hegemonic construct, by definition a framing device that has the power to impose an aesthetic unity, even upon depictions of disunity. The stage possesses what Peter Szondi called “absoluteness” in which “the world of the drama can . . . stand for the real world” (223). As Maaïke Bleeker explains, “Drama is ‘absolute’ in that it presents itself as a coherent, unitary world with an autonomous existence” (42). Similarly, we might say that scenography is absolute in that the ability of the stage to frame whatever is present creates a unitary or cohesive visio-spatial world, even if what is depicted is chaos. But the hegemonic power of the stage can construct a deceptive image. Doreen Massey, paraphrasing political theorist Ernesto Laclau, discusses hegemonization as “a picture of the essentially dislocated world as somehow coherent” (25). The world, however, is no longer unitary or coherent, at least as that has been understood since the early modern period.

The presentational stage—a synecdochical theatrical structure—that was at one time taken for granted as the locus and foundation for the majority of exhibitions at the PQ, has been called into question, challenged, and frequently abandoned. In order to read a stage we must first recognize the frame that separates a particular space from the world around it, thereby transforming the images and objects within that space into a readable sign system. What allows for the process of translation is a correspondence between the imagistic and spatial constructs on the stage and the spectators' visual and spatial perception of the experiential world. The stage can be understood only if it relates to the spatial and imagistic codes of its society. And ours is a multitasking society, a culture of the instantaneous, the temporary, the fragmented, the polyvalent, the intangible and ephemeral, the distant and the near. A stage that depicts solidity, linearity, and continuity—in other words, coherence—is not merely a false depiction of the current world, it may be unreadable to a contemporary audience.

The disintegration of the unitary and coherent is manifesting itself in what I call the “dematerialization of the stage.” In 1968, art critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler described a phenomenon they labeled the “dematerialization of art” resulting in the devaluation and even elimination of the art object. The visual arts of the 1960s and '70s were reacting against the commodification of art and, following more than a half century of practical and theoretical work, were replacing the aesthetic object with conceptual art, action, and performance. The tangible was being replaced by the ephemeral. The “disintegration of art,” declared Lippard and Chandler, “is implicit in the breakup ... of traditional media, and in the introduction of electronics, light, sound, and more important, performance attitudes into painting and sculpture—the so far unrealized intermedia revolution whose prophet is John Cage” (218). If the underlying reasons and resultant consequences for today's dematerialization of the stage are somewhat—though not entirely—different from those that led to the profound transformations within the art world, something nonetheless equally radical has happened to theatre. And just as electronics and light were contributing factors to the upheavals of art some four decades ago, so are new media and digital technologies transforming the theatre of today.

The primary technologies that are effecting a theatrical dematerialization are projection and video. These are hardly new, of course. The use of projection in theatre dates back at least to the 18th century (and in theory can be seen as the underlying principle of Plato's cave); video monitors have been showing up onstage since at least the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> For years, perhaps decades, there have been pronouncements and prognostications that new media, digital technology, and projection represent the future of scenography. But these predictions and declarations were often met with derision or outright dismissal, in large part because these technologies were frequently awkward intrusions onto the stage, used as gimmicks or as poor substitutes for more traditional forms of scenery, or employed without a real understanding of the vocabulary of these media and how to incorporate them into the language of the stage.<sup>3</sup> (There were notable exceptions, of course. The Hungarian company Squat Theatre brought innovative uses of video into their performances, as did the Wooster Group whose experiments with video in the 1980s led the way toward a disruption of the coherent stage image and even unity of time.) But with the increasing sophistication of technology, and perhaps more important, the increasing familiarity of directors and designers with this technology, the stage is losing its hegemonic power to frame and focus the theatrical event and to provide a concrete and singular



Franc Aleu – R. Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

locus in relation to an assembled body of spectators. It is becoming fragmented, ephemeral, and incorporeal.

Unlike most art throughout history, scenography was always ephemeral in the sense that, as a physical object (whether two or three-dimensional), its functionality as a readable sign system lasted only as long as the production itself. But during the production it remained “absolute” in Szondi's sense of the word. The introduction of new media into live theatre, however, began the process of dematerialization because it ruptured time and space. The fundamental definition of theatre has always been the presence of a performer in front of a spectator. The shared physical presence has always meant that it existed in the here and now—a live performer doing something in real time in the same physical location as the spectator. But media such as a pre-recorded image, film, or video brings another time and place into the present. A live video feed of an offstage locale, for instance, is synchronous but disrupts space; a live video of an onstage event pulls the spectator's gaze in two directions—the live and the mediated, with the mediated often triumphing. Not unlike the “real world” in which someone may be engaging with a smartphone or tablet computer while simultaneously engaging with the immediate environment (and perhaps even with other media), the theatre now confronts us with a multivalent sensual experience that combines live and mediated, present and absent, tangible and ephemeral.

#### **Dematerialization: The Image**

It is increasingly rare to attend a theatre performance that does not include some sort of projection, but it is often decorative, a means for creating mood, a vehicle for conveying information, or a substitute for other types of scenery. In other words, little different than the work of Erwin Piscator and others in the 1920s. Modern projection art begins with the transformative work of Josef Svoboda, especially in



*World of Wires* – dir. Jay Scheib

the 1950s-70s, and his creation of new lighting and projection equipment. His work often enveloped the stage in spectacular projections that sometimes dwarfed the performers. Since then, increasingly sophisticated technology and a deeper understanding of the ways in which projection can be employed in the theatre have led to a greater integration of still and moving images with live performance, although the greater the integration, the greater the dematerialization of the stage. South African artist William Kentridge's films and projections for his production of *Die Zauberflöte* (2005) created an aesthetic dialogue between performer and projection. But for the Shostakovich opera, *The Nose* (2010), nearly continuous projection of frenetic imagery on the façade of the shallow set became the primary scenographic device. The projections incorporated Piscator-like agit-prop text and images, shadow-puppet-like animations of street scenes and crowds, and of course animated images of the peripatetic title object. At times the performers and set alike were obliterated as the audience was plunged into the surreal world of Kentridge's imagery, and at other times the material set stood out in relief as the attention shifted focus to the actions of the characters. While the outlines and dimensions of the actual set were not always obvious, there was rarely any question as to what was projection and what was live.

In the work of Catalan projection and video designer Franc Aleu (see p. 89), however, who works with the innovative company La Fura dels Baus, a new threshold seems to have been crossed. In his creations it is often difficult to distinguish the real from the projected; there is a constant transubstantiation between live and image. The ever-changing video projections on multiple surfaces, including in front of the performers, create a world in which nothing is stable. Performers seem to emerge from projections or disappear into ethereal images; seemingly three-dimensional platforms, stairways, spheres, clouds, and wheels of fire appear and disappear. Marx's phrase, "all that is solid melts into air" takes on a whole new meaning in this context. In his work, as in the work of Svoboda, Piscator, *et al.*, the stage is still present, the performance is contained, yet the image becomes unreliable. An audience can accept almost any construct for a performance as long as the rules are

clear and consistent. Yet within the world of these productions it is difficult for a spectator to define the parameters and physics of the stage. Even such normally self-evident elements as the stage floor, stairs, and even flesh-and-blood performers are no longer a trustworthy means of measuring and comprehending the stage.

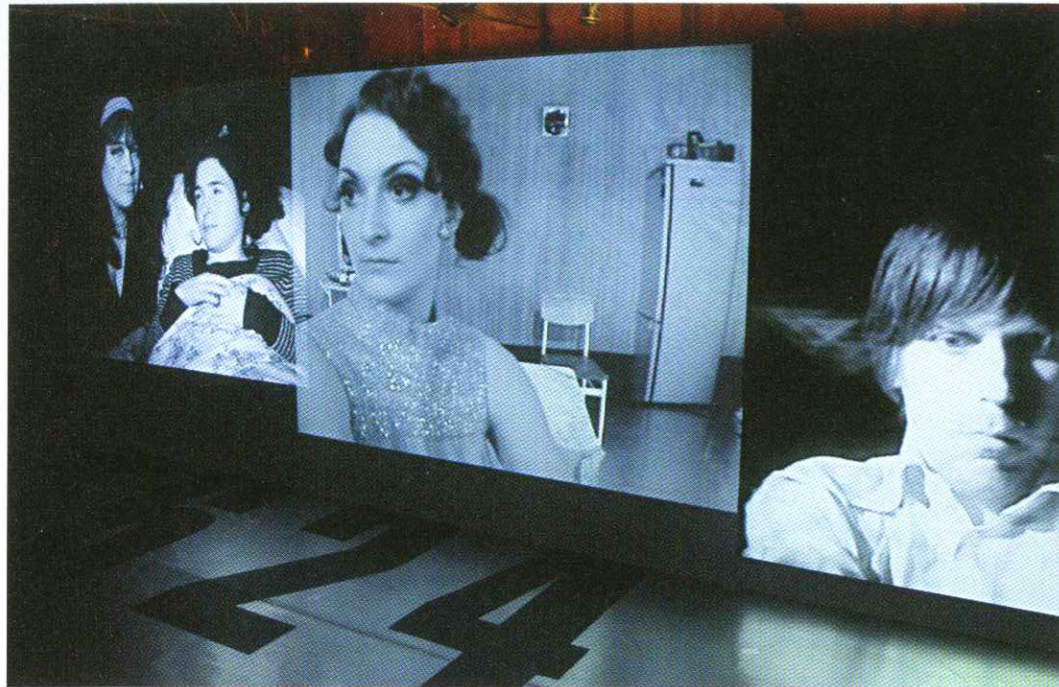
#### Dematerialization: Time and Space

Two recent productions can serve as examples of the new shifting ground of scenography. In *World of Wires* (New York, 2012), adapted and directed by Jay Scheib after the film, *Welt am Draht*, by Rainer Werner Fassbinder (which was based on the novel *Simulacron-3* by Daniel F. Galouye), as the audience entered and sat on a bank of seats, it faced a screen on which was projected a video of performers already engaged in action in a domestic/office environment, though a setting that seemed highly irregular at best. Half the screen appeared to be made of some sort of rectangular modules, the other side apparently a more conventional projection surface. But the screen did not entirely hide the stage—from either side one could glimpse the set and see even more reflected in mirrors on both sides of the stage, thus, in combination with the live video, creating a multiperspectival yet incomplete image of the stage. As the play proper began, the actions evolved from the seemingly casual and informal activities of the performers into theatrical actions of characters accompanied by dialogue. For perhaps 10 minutes it seemed as if the entire production would be seen through live, projected video with the tantalizing knowledge that the set and live performers were just on the other side—glimpsed yet inaccessible to the spectators. But then a performer removed a box (for that is what the modules were) from the center of the stage right projection wall, providing a peephole into the space beyond, and a moment later a character knocked down the entire wall with some of the cardboard boxes collapsing into the first row of the audience. Several minutes later, the curtain that made up the other half was torn down so that most of the stage set was revealed. (Though there were some spaces upstage that were not entirely visible to the audience.) But there were two video monitors hanging above the stage showing the production through the eye of the videocam operator (who was also the actual director-creator of the piece) who was continuously present throughout the performance. So the audience was confronted by two realities—the live performance on the visible stage, and the video presentation which was framed and composed differently and mostly seen from angles not possible from the audience's point of view. In one reality the videographer was a very active, perhaps central, presence—often becoming the focal point for the audience, though mostly "invisible" to the performers, like the *kokken* of the Noh. In the other, the videographer, of course, was absent, and it was the image he captured



*The Forsythe Company* – Kammer/Kammer

that was the focus of the gaze. In one world the image was continuously mutable, a constantly shifting arrangement of electrons; in the other the concrete reality of the stage and its temporality was reinforced by the accumulation of the detritus of the performance—cast off props and costume elements, spilled drinks, sheets of paper—covering the floor, providing a record of the performance over its 90-minute length. Some critics predictably likened the collapsing screen to a literal breaking of the fourth wall, but that is not entirely accurate. The elimination of the large projection surface actually made the creation of the

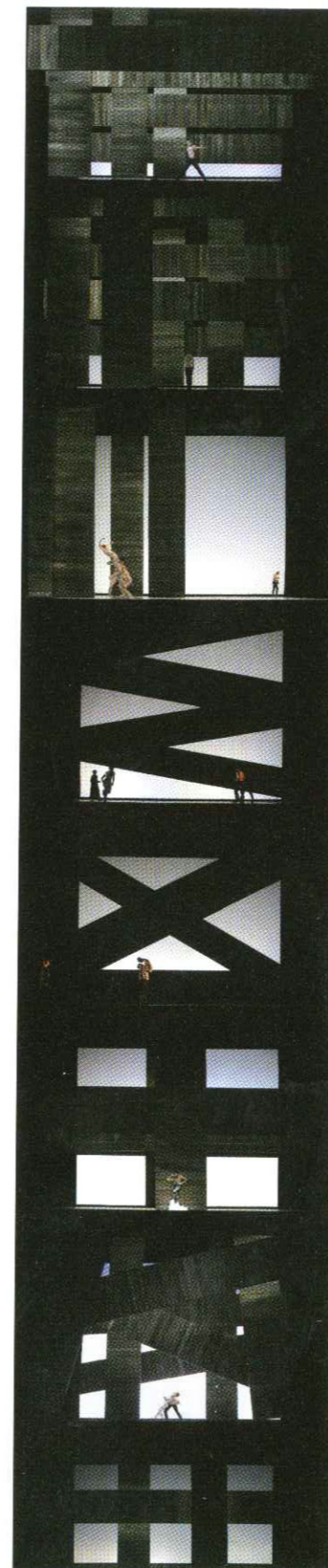


Gob Squad – *Gob Squad's Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good)*

metaphoric fourth wall between the spectators and the stage possible. If the fourth wall is the one through which the spectators view the performance, then the camera was the fourth wall—and it had never been destroyed. Only the size and placement of the image it captured had been altered.

The tension of the camera image vs. the live has been exploited in many ways. In *Lipsynch*, created by Robert Lepage and Ex Machina (2007), there was a *coup de théâtre* (coup de video?) in which seemingly random pieces of wood were arranged on the stage, but when viewed through a video camera and projected on an upstage screen, the image that was presented was that of a solid table and piano. In William Forsythe's *Kammer/Kammer* (Ballett Frankfurt, 2000; Forsythe Company, 2005) [see p. 91] parts of the stage were regularly fragmented by several moveable wall units that concealed some of the performers behind them. The audience could see the movements and actions behind the walls on several video monitors above and alongside the stage, but it was not always possible to tell which hidden space was being shown (except for the spectators in the balconies who could see over the tops of the walls). Where did the performance exist? As Forsythe explained, "The set is only there as a movie set; it's not there as a stage set at all. It has no value as a stage set, no meaning. Often the stage set supports an idea. This doesn't support the idea of the stage production, it supports the film" (qtd. in La Rocco).

In many ways, one of the greatest challenges to the materiality of the stage was made manifest in a production by Gob Squad, a British-German company. *Gob Squad's Kitchen (You've Never Had It So Good)* (Berlin, 2007), based on Andy Warhol's *Kitchen* and other Warhol films, was, from a technological standpoint, remarkably simple. A projection screen covered most of the front of the stage, but unlike *World of Wires*, the stage behind the screen could not be seen from the auditorium. However, upon entering the theatre the audience was invited to tour "backstage" where they saw three minimal and rather crude sets, three fixed-position video cameras, and had a chance



Numen/For Use – *Symphony of Sorrowful Things*

to meet the actors. But once the show began, the performance was available only on the projection screen showing three images simultaneously—though with the majority of action and dialogue occurring in the "kitchen" set in the center part of screen. Once again, where was the performance? Did it exist on the screen? In the space behind the screen? Could the audience even be sure that what they were seeing was not, at least in part, pre-recorded? The actors often spoke directly to the audience, but through the video camera of course, meaning that the immediacy—and potential discomfort—of a live actor onstage addressing the audience was negated, but the large images talking to the audience created a peculiar intimacy. Well into the performance, when the audience had come to accept that it would be watching a totally mediated event, the four actors began to come out from behind the screen to find members of the audience to take their places—first one, then another, until all four had been replaced and some of the original actors were seated in the house. The concept of a spectator entering a movie, or an actor stepping out from the screen into the real world, dates back to the early days of cinema, but in film it is a conceptual conceit since the cinematic world and "real world" are actually both on film. With *Gob Squad*, though, it was literal; the world behind the screen was united with the world of the auditorium. But once the actors stepped in front of the screen they looked tiny in front of the projected images of their compatriots. The image was paramount, the living actor almost meaningless. In most theatre (other than environmental or some site-specific forms), the audience can never experience the onstage space, yet the liveness of the event and the shared space of the theatre create a kind of intimacy or knowledge. But with *Gob Squad's Kitchen*, the audience has, in fact, experienced the stage space and seen and touched the sets, yet the experience is distanced and cinematic.

In all the above situations the very notion of the stage is called into question. Video monitors on the stage function almost as science fiction wormholes through time-space. They present another reality—offstage, other geographic locations, alternate views of live action, recordings made earlier, fragments of well-known films and television shows or historical events; performers can interact with live or recorded images including themselves, and even with the deceased.<sup>4</sup> In a world in which we are surrounded by and interact with electronic screens constantly—personal screens such as those on smartphones, tablets, computers, and electronic readers; large public ones at stadiums, airports, urban entertainment districts, advertising billboards, etc.—in which these screens, both large and small, disrupt our interaction with the tangible world around us, in which we may be communicating with individuals around the world while walking down the street, in which stable urban landscapes are pierced by moving, transmogrifying images, in which time and space lose their historical import, the theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is increasingly incomprehensible. A performance in a theatre requires a spectator to travel to a specific location at a specific time, sit in a fixed seat for a given duration, and observe action in a stable, circumscribed space. This does not in any way reflect the world view or sensibility of contemporary experience.

At PQ 2011 the Gold Medal for Best Stage Design went to *Númen/For Use* (see p. 93), a Croatian team of scenic and industrial designers. What was unusual—unprecedented, in fact—about this award was that the work was available for view only as a 44-minute video. No artifacts or objects, nothing to touch; nothing that existed within the exhibition space. In their catalogue the group explained the origin of their name.

*Númen* (noumenon) is a word derived from the Kantian Theory of Knowledge signifying a thing viewed as a purely transcendental object. Kant posits that objects must exist as the unfathomable, presumed “things-in-themselves” (noumena), separate and independent of the senses, before they can be manifested as appearances (phenomena), which constitute experience. Pure forms acquired through perception and pure concepts delivered by reason are here useless, since they give a systematic view of only the phenomenal, experiential realm but reveal nothing of the noumenal realm which is by definition unknowable and thus forever given over to metaphysics. Noumenon is hence the eternally latent reality of an object, a total and absolute existence of an object; an ideal form of which every phenomenon is merely a Platonian shadow.

The scenic stage is a phenomenal one, the result of perception and reason; the dematerialized stage is the noumenal—transcendent and unfathomable. Several years ago German theoretician Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the term “post-dramatic theatre”<sup>5</sup> to describe the contemporary theatre based primarily on performative elements rather than literary text. Perhaps the dematerialized stage might be described as a post-scenographic theatre which has abandoned the spatial and visual vocabulary that has dominated much theatre since ancient times.

#### Notes:

1 As noted in the Introduction to this volume, there was still a substantial amount of conventional scenography. But given that traditionally the PQ has been a place to exhibit such work, its absence from many national/regional pavilions was remarkable.

2 For more examination of these trends see, for example, Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005; and S. Broadhurst and J. Machon, *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006.

3 See my essay, “Can Theatre and Media Speak the Same Language” in Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays in Scenography*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 86-96.

4 In 2003, the Wooster Group mounted a revival of their 1991 production, *Brace Up!* In the intervening years two of the original cast members had died, but their images were retained on video and the actors, including the two who were now in those roles, interacted with the images.

5 Lehman, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

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