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*Theatralia*. 2024, vol. 27, iss. 1, pp. 271-278

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2024-1-13>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80035>

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Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20240626

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# Acts of Assembly: The Performance Space Exhibition at PQ 2023

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*Acts of Assembly. Performance Space Exhibition.* Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space. Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery. 8–18 June 2023. Prague.

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The Performance Space Exhibition at the 2023 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space presented a broad spectrum of contemporary theatre and performance spaces through the conceptual lens of assembly. Responding to PQ Artistic Director Markéta Fantová's artistic concept of 'Rare', the exhibition focused on how theatres and performance spaces operate as sites of assembly and spaces for community. The exhibition expressed a vision of the diversity and dynamism of contemporary performance spaces and their responsiveness to the contingencies of locality, culture, and community. It also explored the productive continuities and antagonisms that exist between more traditional theatre architectures and the broader emergent qualities of performance spaces.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition included 35 exhibits sourced from 26 different countries and was located on the fifth floor of the Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery Prague. This building served as a secondary more reflective location for PQ 2023, a short walk away from the main location, the busy Holešovice Market. The exhibi-

tion shared the fifth floor with *Fragments II: The Magic of Scale*, an exhibition of scenographic models curated by Klára Zieglerová, and the Best Publication Award curated by Pavel Drábek. The ground floor hosted performances from the PQ Performance programme and projects from the [UN]Common Design Project.

Visitors to the exhibition encountered films, physical displays, and interactive exhibits which focussed on the sensory or atmospheric qualities of the spaces they presented. The majority of exhibits were short films, but a number took the form of installations which invited participation and offered experiences of performance space in action. *The Drifting Room*, a light-weight mobile theatre by New Zealand artist Stephen Bain, regularly traversed the streets outside the gallery (see Fig. 1). The installations *Assemble* by Suzon Fuks (Australia), and *Shattering Boundaries: A Virtual-Physical Space Interaction* (Serbia), proved popular with visitors because of their playful explorations of the materiality of digital and hybrid spaces. The fluidity of boundaries – between inside and outside, architecture and scenography, and the physical and the virtual – was noticeable across the range of spaces.

The appropriation of existing buildings, and public and private spaces, formed a strong thread through the exhibition,

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1 At the time of publication the online programme for the Performance Space Exhibition is available on the PQ website at: <https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/projects-2023/performance-space-exhibition/>. A Digital Archive documenting all of PQ23 is available here: <https://pq.cz/digital-archive/>.



**Fig. 1:** *The Drifting Room*, by Stephen Bain, travelling across the plaza outside the Trade Fair Palace. PQ 2023. Photo: Anna Benháková.

reflecting the way artists continue to explore new spatial possibilities for performance. The winner of the PQ award for Best Performance Space, Mhlanguli George's Theatre in the Backyard (South Africa), uses suburban backyards as performance spaces in an effort to decolonise theatre. Also from South Africa was a short film documenting the history and renovation of the Windybrow Arts Centre in Johannesburg, a colonial-era mansion repurposed as a theatre and community centre by the Market Theatre Foundation. *Nástupiště 1–12* [Platform 1–12] is a flexible art and performance space located in a pedestrian underpass in Topoľčany (Slovakia) and *Přístav/Port 18600* in Prague is an open-air art park on the banks of the Vltava River. The table-top installa-

tion *City as a Stage: Methodology of Reading Buildings* (North Macedonia) offered insights into the performance methods used to revivify and preserve socialist-era architecture in Skopje (see Fig. 2). An installation remembering two former wine silos at a seaside hotel in Kourouta (Greece) reflected on the fragility and precarity of found performance spaces.

Newly built theatres and performing arts centres, as well as renovations of existing theatres were also present in the exhibition; a common concern was the relationship between structures and their wider urban and community contexts. The large-scale new-build Taipei Performing Arts Centre (Taiwan) and the newly renovated Malmo Stadsteater (Sweden) have sought to establish more vital rela-



**Fig. 2:** *City as a Stage, Methodology of Reading Buildings*, by Filip Jovanovski and Ivana Vaseva. PQ 2023. Photo: Jakub Hrab.

tionships with their urban settings. The renovation of the historic La Mama Theatre in Melbourne (Australia) after a devastating fire in 2018 demonstrated the complicated act of reimagining a new life for a much-loved building (Fig. 3). The new Performing Arts Centre for the International School of Uganda in Kampala was presented as a building whose designers have ambitions that it serve as a new theatre for the whole city of Kampala. The Haduwa Apata in the coastal town of Apam (Ghana) is a striking bamboo and tarpaulin shell which supports performance making and is open to use by the local community. AGORA (Wales) was a temporary pavilion which formed part of a large-scale artwork reimagining possibilities for Welsh independence. A scale model, drawings, and slides used in the

reconstruction of the Subotica National Theatre (Serbia) offered insights into the design processes involved in its ongoing reconstruction.

A number of contributions to the exhibition presented spaces or performative spatial practices which mediate or stage encounters with the more-than-human world. *A Pedra de Abalar* [Swinging Stone] (Spain) explored the entangled natural and cultural significance of the large swinging stone at Muxía in northwestern Spain. *Proyector Tejidos* [The Knitters' Project] (Mexico) documented in intricate detail a series of restorative ecoscenographic interventions in a neglected urban park in Mexico City (see Fig. 4). *The Lively Assemble* by TAAT art collective (Belgium) presented an ongoing project of creating living encounter portals that collaborate



**Fig. 3:** Acts of Re-Assembly: The Re-Build of La Mama Theatre, by Meg White, Rob Cooke, and Helen Hopkins. Photo: Andrew Filmer.



**Fig. 4:** Proyecto Tejidos: Sullivan Garden of Art – Ecoscenographic Actions to Design Restorative Territories, by Aris Pretelin-Estéves and Pamela Eliecer. PQ 2023. Photo: David Kumermann.



**Fig. 5:** *Artificio, Memorias de Los Teatros de Rio*, by Lucía Tayler, Ana Almenar, Irene Tayler, and Lucía Acuña. PQ 2023. Photo: Libor Galia.

with, and seek to regenerate, living systems. French scenographer Raymond Sarti's installation *Facing the World: An Art of Relationship* presented a model of his soon to be built *Mobilteat* [Mobile Theatre] as part of his ongoing scenographic exploration of landscape.

The importance of performance spaces as sites of communal celebration, reflection, and remembrance was expressed by a number of contributions to the exhibition. Photographs of the construction and performance of the Ramlila performances outside the Red Fort in New Delhi (India) captured the energy and excitement of these annual gatherings. Spectators' memories of five Uruguayan theatres were explored in the installation *Artificio, Memorias de Los Teatros de Rio* (Fig. 5). *The*

*Ubumuntu Arts Festival* uses the amphitheatre at the Kigali Genocide Memorial (Rwanda) – a site of mass burial and annual remembrance – as the grounds on which it seeks to foster new shared human experiences through art. The Tornspace Theater (United States) presented images and sound of their decade-long cycle of site-specific performances at a former grain elevator in the city of Buffalo. Large-format photographs paired with haiku poems and spaced through the gallery invited visitors to undertake a simulated walk through the United Nations buffer zone that runs through the city of Nicosia (Cyprus) and serves as the site for the annual *Buffer Zone Fringe Festival*. *The Parque de Producoes* [Production Park] run by scenographer Sonia Paiva (Brazil) is

[ events ]



**Fig. 6:** *Assemble*, by Suzon Fuks. PQ 2023. Photo: Libor Galia.

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a semi-rural location that facilitates scenographic education, experiment, and development. The short film *Colours of Country* by Alia Ardon (Australia) documented the painting of a large-scale mural by First Nations artists encompassing the PACT Centre for Emerging Artists in Sydney. The mural is intended as an act of cultural healing.

The possibilities of digital platforms and technologies as performance spaces were addressed through installations featuring spatial audio, extended reality, and hybrid digital-physical space. These were the most interactive of the exhibition, inviting active exploration of the potentials of spaces and technologies. *Assemble* (Australia) combined video and sculptural arrangements of computer waste to reflect on time, obsolescence, and the materiality of digital technology (Fig. 6). *This space is for you / cet espace est pour toi* (Canada) provided a mixed reality experience exploring concepts of orientation and refuge. *What We Want to Hear* (Netherlands) was a virtual sonic environment with locative audio. *Shattering Boundaries: A Virtual-Physical Space Interaction* (Serbia) offered a playful hybrid experience, involving a green screen, objects, and superimposed back drops. *Digital Benches* (Greece), located on the ground floor of the gallery, used geo-located audio to allow visitors to record and listen to stories shared on a public bench.

A number of contributions to the exhibition documented responses to the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes to physical spaces, to operations, and the popular use of digital platforms for meeting. The short films *260 Everything but the Roof* (Greece), *Dancing through the Pandemic* (United States),

and *Ave Lola's Tent* (Brazil) all demonstrated adaptations which opened up performance to fresh air. The film *The Club on the Edge of Town* (United Kingdom) documented theatre company Slung Low's experience providing food and sustenance to vulnerable communities, and *Creative Improvisation: Jamming under the COVID Cloud* (United Kingdom) documented the shift of creative processes from physical space to digital platforms.

A vital component of the exhibition were the gatherings and dialogues it facilitated. A panel of speakers from the exhibition took part in the PQ Talks programme, reflecting on the spatial politics of contemporary performance space, and the exhibition space played host to a workshop on 'Designing Theatre Space' by the OISTAT Architecture Commission (see Fig. 7) and meetings of the Scenography and Theatre and Architecture Working Groups of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR).

A section devoted to developments in theatre architecture has been part of every PQ since its first edition in 1967. But the evolving relationship *between* performance and architecture, rather than the design specifics of theatre architecture and performance spaces, is where the key critical issues now lie. The shift in the focus of the 'architecture' section of PQ to 'performance space' better reflects the emergence of site-specific approaches to performance making, the expansion of scenographic practice beyond traditional scenic design, and the diversity of sites, settings, platforms, and environments in which performances occur.

Past iterations of the exhibition at PQ 2011, PQ 2015, and PQ 2019 have negotiated this expanded territory by focusing





**Fig. 7:** The OISTAT Architecture Commission's Designing Theatre Space Workshop. PQ 2023. Photo: Jakub Červenka.

on the interactions and relations between performance and architecture, between scenography and urban space, and between designers and users of performance spaces. To this the exhibition at PQ 2023 highlighted the wide range of choices now available to performance makers in how and where their work takes place, and the importance of virtual, digital, and hybrid digital-physical spaces. The exhibition

also highlighted the ways in which performance spaces now increasingly serve multiple social functions. Not only are they places for performance, but they also increasingly serve as a vital form of social infrastructure, intimately engaged with, and facilitating, the broader life of the communities around them. Performance spaces, it seems, are as diverse and dynamic as performance itself.



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