

PHILOXENIA, A SOCIAL PERFORMATIVE PRACTICE?

ADONIS VOLANAKIS

A homage to my dear friend and colleague, the late Randy Martin, our beloved secret dancer

Abstract

What makes performative writing in the space of a page look like a dancer/philosopher in the streets? Why is space the vital condition of dramaturgy in the contemporary discourse of both visual and performing arts? How are scenography and its derivatives the pivot points for re-examining spectatorship? This article started as a performative lecture at the International Colloquium "Qu'est-ce que la scénographie?" held on 21–22 October 2011 in Paris,¹ which was then published in French as "La scénographie, une pratique sociale performative?" (2012).² After a number of fruitful discussions with Randy Martin, the article evolved into the present English version, opening for me new paths into space and performativity. Shared space: a bridge-maker between aesthetics and politics, visual and performing arts, theatre and dance, and, above all, human relationships. *Philoxenia*: the situation where the *xenos* (ξένος), the stranger, becomes a *philos* (φίλος), a friend. Is art able to build space for hospitality and movement for the viewer, witness, participant, spectator, co-author and co-producer of meaning?

Keywords

Scenography, spatial, performative, dance, theatre, spectatorship, social practice

I don't want to work for theatre but with theatre
Jannis Kounellis

While writing this paper, there were numerous times I turned back to the top of the page to change its beginning. The *mise en page* was moving like an inward spiral inside me, making me feel that the word "scenography" was not justified, since it was constantly underlined with a red zigzag line on my computer screen, suggesting that something was wrong. I believe that this

1 École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Grande Halle de la Villette.

2 *Qu'est-ce que la scénographie? Vol. II. Pratiques et enseignements. Revue Études théâtrales*, 54–55/2012. Edited by Luc Boucris, Marcel Freydefont, Véronique Lemaire, Raymond Sarti. Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), Louvain, Belgium.

discomfort is what keeps this word alive and what first brought it next to the notion of authoring in the performing arts.

The definition of the term “scenographic practice” has changed considerably over the past fifteen years or so, according to the various countries, cultural and educational institutions, exhibitions, conferences and art trajectories the practice was applied to. In the English language, it was in 2002 that Pamela Howard first published her book *What is Scenography?*, in which the term was reinvented³ in order to be differentiated from and juxtaposed with the term of stage/set design, which is tied with the representational role of the visual. New theoretical fields were then introduced, in which site-specific projects were revisited with new critical theory tools, mainly in Dance.

The familiarity of performance art and social projects was coming closer to the notions of theatre as a performative practice. Its axis was that of collaboration: a constructed poetic machine in which, if the function of one of its components is challenged, the whole structure is modified. That is why theatre (which encompasses all performing arts, notably dance), as well as a term, has been heavily questioned space-wise: reformative thoughts from practitioners and theorists have moved towards (sometimes vague) terms such as performance, time-based art, live art etc. in order to distinguish all the various performing arts from the regulated frontality and passivity of the spectacle. Nonetheless, it proved the obvious: theatre evolution was happening outside its dwelling, thus breaking the uniqueness of the art sharing the same name as its building. The plot is simple: some people do/act/perform and some people watch/relate/participate in an indivisible coexistence at a specific time and space. Trying to outline the word, I find the process to be its definition: endless questioning for the making of ephemeral axioms to sustain the ever-changing quality. Is it a building,⁴ the theatre stage itself⁵ with or without the stage design (Brook, 1996)? Is it the theatre building, the site-specific topos that encompasses the spectator’s experience from the moment s/he enters the space (Kaye, 2000)? Is it the city (Debord, 1999) or is it the whole world?⁶ *Graphy* is the process of writing which is destined to be “read”: an author who writes for herself/himself or the ideal reader/viewer/witness/participant. *Skene* is the place where possibilities of actions are awaiting, the place where events can take

3 That was a natural continuation of her research as Professor and Chair, in Central Saint Martins, of the Master’s Degree in Scenography, an odd term for English speakers.

4 As it is in the world’s first permanent theatre, the one of Dionysus under the Acropolis Rock in Athens, Greece.

5 In all the forms that theatre has transformed itself (the orchestra space, boîte italienne, thrust stage, black box, white cube etc.).

6 A reference is made here to “The world as a Stage”, an exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2007, where artists were invited to explore the relationship between visual art and theatre. The first page of the exhibition brochure read: “Throughout the exhibition, the practices of making and looking at art are set against those associated with the stage”.

place; thus, it can be transformed into a space.⁷ Is that a “real” space? The adjectives “practiced”, by Michel de Certeau, and “experienced”, by Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard, placed next to the word “space” provoked a fertile dialogue between such theatre theoreticians as Anne Ubersfeld, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Gay McAuley during the second half of the 20th century. Nowadays, a radical disassociation of the dramatic text as the pivot point in the performing arts is gaining ground, with Hans T. Lehmann⁸ being the protagonist legitimizing the above to the *old-school* theatre theorists in Europe.⁹

Is space enabled to be the author of a performance away from the notions of spectacle and theatre? And, if we take this as a fact per se, is it a liberating process where the viewer can willingly shift from a passive receiver to an active participant? Is that a decision made by the artists or by the art consumers? How do they consent to a mutual contract, as in every transaction? In keeping with Anais Nin’s famous quote “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are”, one can project the intimacies that this ephemeral “contract” can deliver between the art work and the receiver.

In order to redefine scenography as a performative practice, whose space is the author of triggering and withholding the spectator’s experience, I will refer to Poland’s participation in the Prague Quadrennial 2011 (which does justice to the title of the Prague Quadrennial’s publication entitled *The Disappearing Stage*¹⁰). The project entitled *Liberated Energy*,¹¹ which was curated by Ewa Machnio and Agata Skwarczyńska, took place in the interior of a white painted glass cube. Inside the cube were scattered video monitors (showing community and participatory projects by Polish artists), as well as some scrapers that were used by the viewers/witnesses/spectators/participants to scrape off the white paint and thus slowly reveal the empty seats of the Polish Parliament. The ephemerally working community where everybody is happily sharing the process of a revelation as the counter-position of the empty political leaders’ seats was bringing the social and thus political values back in the game. They created a performative installation where all levels of communication and participation were possible. Each person in the space had a wide range of engaging modules – they could scrape or not, in a passionate manner or not, while on a ladder or not, paying attention or not etc. It was a multi-layered creative process: visitors were engraving various messages and drawings on the glass, creating a great notice board. Rather than a meeting point, a melting pot was formed.

7 For distinctions between “space” and “place”, see Michel de Certeau (1984), p. 117.

8 See Lehmann (2006).

9 On the other hand, in the USA there is a great tradition in performance practice and theory, which was inaugurated by Richard Schechner, Peggy Phelan and RoseLee Goldberg. This tradition is more anchored to the discipline of Performance Art rather than theatre, although theatre theoreticians like Marvin Carlson easily followed the expanding notion of performance.

10 See Aronson (2012), in which Thea Brejzek explores the notion of “scenography as making space”, a prolific open-ended approach. See also <http://www.pq.cz/res/data/334/035031.pdf>.

11 See <http://www.pq11.pl/en/liberated-energy/>.

Their piece's title, although didactic, showcases their commitment to Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*¹² and, in my opinion, surpasses the backward twist that Rancière provides in the end of his paper, de-escalating the emancipation to the active interpretation, inventing a unique translation for the spectators to make their own story out of it. Indeed, it is bridging Roland Barthes's famous "Death of the Author" (and the elevation of the reader), which echoes the writings of Antonin Artaud: it would seem that every 30–40 years someone comes out to stir the lake's water with regard to spectatorship.¹³

Randy Martin, in *Critical Moves* (1998, p. 58), generously continues Barthes's thinking:

The reader brings a certain capacity for making sense out of the text to bear on it, the precise interpretive outcome cannot be predicted by the fact of the text, but more profoundly, this very multiplicity of outcomes is what grants each text its specificity. The text is in this sense fundamentally plural.

The repetitive cycle period of these radical thoughts can be an unveiling of an inversely analogous slipping into conservative strata over the in-between years. It is like a stone thrown into the sea, at first causing an amazing explosion on the surface of the water, but then, after the praxis, the velocity of the stone becomes slower and it fades into oblivion. Josephine Machon (2011) proposes an expanding notion in which she delivers a framework of what is now perceived as new theatre – being immersive, technological, cutting-edge live art – according to artists' interviews. What is missing from her book is a bridge towards politics, the critical framework which Joe Kelleher¹⁴ and Nicholas Ridout,¹⁵ the English-speaking top scouts in performance, have come to enlighten – alongside, of course, Randy Martin, who connected dance with politics and cultural theory, and André Lepecki, who took over the relay race.

In the visual arts, Claire Bishop (2006) argues that the creativity behind socially engaged art is said to "rehumanize" a "numb and fragmented" society. Art activism is becoming a critical dialogue between everyday reality and art: about how art enriches social life. The relation between art and society and the role of the artist in civic life is a major issue that has been raised over the last years in fine-art practices. Theatre is a collaborative platform, a practice of meeting people that constitutes a participatory ethos, thus a political one. The issue of exploring the artist's political framework and how it can be communicated to the audience is the area that, I feel, needs to be further explored.

Cultural intervention could be realized by the audience through the space (physical and mental) given by the artist for them to exercise freedom. It is the notion of theatricality embossed in Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* (1998), as a negative quality in Minimal Art

12 See <http://Ranciere.blogspot.gr/2007/09/Ranciere-emancipated-spectator.html> and Rancière (2009).

13 See Schumacher (2004).

14 See Kelleher (2009).

15 See Ridout (2008).

or “Literarist” Art, as he calls it. Theatricality for Fried was the time- and space-based art, where temporality and objecthood are embedded with the presence of the spectator. The 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 came with the title of “The Dictatorship of the Viewer” and anchored spectatorship in the opposite way, bridging it with the individual experience and separating it from the popular notion of audience that theatre is used to.

Theatre and dance makers could or should be looking at their practice through sociopolitical lenses, seeking feedback and, why not, a mentorship scheme from the community they live in prior to the completion of their project. We need crowd sourcing, not for money but for ideas: to locate the trajectories where each community can shape and participate in the global decision-making. Just think of how many initiatives around the world are presently flourishing on participatory urban planning – which is not an ephemeral art form like the performing arts. The point is not to pick up what is already known to the audience, but to connect with them by creating a space of common discovery that can sustain both the artists’ and the audiences’ need for inner liberation; and all that in a state of co-authorship, without micro-managing or mega-manipulating from either.

Theatre, as art practice and as space, contains (re-)production, (re-)presentation, performance and (re-)enactment always combined with the simultaneous physical presence of spectators and performers (even in real-time online theatre), otherwise it can slip into hybrids of cinematic experience.¹⁶ Today, the *art total* might exist as a present condition (and not only an art form) but is, at the same time, a terminus. New terms can be coined that encapsulate the original idea of scenography but also encompass the physical presence of the spectator within the dramatic space, as well as the engagement (as a social contract) of the artist towards the spectator as a guest.

In this context I propose the term *Χωρογραφία*, written in Greek with the letter ω (omega), the last letter of the Greek alphabet (*χώρος* meaning space): an unfamiliar term that, in its proposed form, could intrude other languages as an unknown lettering space, a *terra non grata* (instead of *χορογραφία*, which means choreography). *Χωρογραφία* in the performing arts, as well as the time-based arts, is the result of the convergence of all contributing processes: conception, directing, performing, scenography, choreography etc. – along with the possible spectator’s inaction, reaction or action in the space.

The *œuvre d’art totale* must be conceived again (over and above Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*) from the moment the artist inaugurates his or her concept, consciously intending to include the embodied physical presence of the spectator. The hypothesis of the artist providing the spectator with the possibility of participating in the creative process turns the latter into a visitor. This thought process can suggest the reusing of the ancient Greek term *philoxenia* (*φιλοξενία*), the

16 See <http://insitu.arte.tv>, an interactive web film created by Antoine Viviani, where the audience can add their own film.

situation where the *xenos* (ξένος), the *stranger*, becomes a *filos* (φίλος), a *friend*. The host, thus the artist, according to the word's etymology, provides housing, food and care. The previous three elements are the ideal hyperlinks between the theatre-making process and philoxenia: space, sensual/senti-mental nourishing substances, and nurturing that the provider/ facilitator artist can offer within a framework of consciousness and knowledge. At present, it is urgently necessary to break boundaries between strangers and provide a space for them to coexist. As Richard Sennet (1993, p. 39) has aptly written, the city is a "human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet [...] an event without a past or an event without a future".

Tino Seghal's piece *This Progress*, which was commissioned for the 50th anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2010, is evangelizing what I would call a hospitality blind date. The spectator, he argues, is no longer a passive one but one who bears a responsibility for shaping and at times even contributing to the actual realization of the piece. Is this an internationally acknowledged work, which brings closer the artist/creator to his partner, the viewer/co-producer? I am patient to see.

Reading what I have written, I criticize myself for explosive namedropping: texts, books, thinkers, exhibitions, practitioners. The text is the mirror image of the actual space where I am writing: a table full of books, A4 papers, pens and pencils, wine glasses and espresso cups, and the wind blowing notes towards books that I should probably have mentioned. Imagine a study room in a house where people are going up and down the wooden stairs, phones are ringing, and all balcony doors are widely open for the afternoon breeze to enter on its way from the Acropolis, while strangers are constructing a performance in the touristy streets below. I plunder all of those ideas to build up an archipelagos discourse: to feel comfortable and familiar within it, in order to abandon the role of the prompter and discharge the audience of the character of a claque. A performative installation is not necessarily a bizarre catastasis: a *χωρογραφική philoxenia* is what scenography could be.

I stand up to catch the hovering notepapers around me, place them on the table and relocate my thoughts back to the beginning: what scenography is, is this constant flux; this continuous self-reflecting process of the discourse which has been long awaited for. A scenographer could be the equivalent to a polymath from praxis to theory, from experience to concept, from re-enactment to perception, who could provide free and open space¹⁷ for playing, expressing, creating for artists and non-artists.

If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution
Emma Goldman

17 This may not big enough but it is your free space to fill in your thoughts:

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