# Theatre as Suspended Space

*"The mind believes what it sees and does what it believes; that is the secret of fascination... Yet conditions must be found to give birth to a spectacle that can fascinate the mind."* Antonin Artaud, 1938.

Andrew Garton

Master of Arts Research
Centre for Animation and Interactive Media
Faculty of Art, Design and Communication
RMIT University

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## Abstract

This paper outlines the background to theatre as a *suspended space*, the exploration into alternate means of theatrical production and the use of  the Internet and World Wide Web to realise this pursuit.

The section titled *Theatre Commodified*, provides a premise for the *Theatre as Suspended Space* from an historical perspective. In the section titled *Make them Forget, make them Believe, and Silence them* we look into the power of traditional structures within theatre and the promise of their deconstruction. *Strategic Collapse* and, finally, *The Space of Change* we look at various strategies towards *Theatre as Suspended Space*.

*Theatre as Suspended Space* was presented as a performance lecture at the Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, University of Wien, Austria, 21 March 1997. The lecture opened with a spoken word piece penned by Sydney writer, David Nerlich, entitled, *With a Will*. Three short films (Puppenhead, David Cox; Shift, John Power; Autarky, Kim Bounds) were shown during the course of the lecture.

## Preparation Notes

The lecture room at the Institut für Theaterwissenschaft was rearranged in a way that was uncommon for the students. The seats were arranged in a semi-circle facing the front of the room (see Fig.1). Students would normally be seated behind desks.

Tables were placed on top of each other (see Fig. 2) and the windows were covered with heavy cloth which was taped back to prevent any light from entering the room. The lights were turned off and the students were then allowed to enter.

The idea was to create a space they were unfamiliar with *within* the room they generally take their lectures in. As they entered the room I was huddled on the floor, a pair of black buckets outstretched on either side of me in my hands. When the students were seated, the door was closed and no entry to the room was permitted to late comers until the performance component of the lecture was completed.

When the room had settled I leapt up off the floor, and using the buckets as a kind of amplifier, performed *With a Will*, a powerful lyric penned by Sydney writer, David Nerlich. Two assistants were on either side of the room with torches in each of their hands. These were flashed randomly across the room. At least one torch would track my face for the duration of the performance (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 1 Lecture room rearranged.



Fig. 2 Tables stacked.



Fig. 3 Torches used as only light source.

## Introduction

The 1980's introduced a variety of new business management techniques to ensure success, high productivity and quality work environments and relationships between staff and their peers. One such technique, popularised in the 1990's is *the suspension of assumption*. It requires of managers to withhold their pre-conditioned beliefs when in a dynamic relationship, often a one-to-one communication, with another employee. The technique enabled management to better understand their staff and to facilitate more effectively the day to day operations of the work-place. It created a break-down of stereo-typical management structures and offered an opportunity for new relationships and systems to be developed and re-developed with the employee as collaborator and/or contributor towards this process.

Theatre as suspended space offers a similar process. It works towards disengaging both audience and performer from traditional forms of theatre and its production, towards a spatial poetry,[1] an exploration of environment, gesture, communication and global universality in a world quickly closing in on itself. Moreover, it is about reclamation of public space, both traditional and

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[1] Artaud, A 1935, *The Theatre and its Double*, Calder & Boyers, ISBN 0-7145-4234-2.

emergent environments. Perhaps a rekindling of what the author Russell Hoban describes in his novel, *Ridley Walker*, as "first knowledge."

Given that we have access to theatres and the means with which to produce live works in countless ways, why a *suspended space*, why reclaim what [we perceive] already exists?

That which exists, is not for the changing, it is for the maintenance of a social order steeped in the absolute denial and prohibition of free expression. It opposes the liberation of the imagination and the discovery of its inert spiritual and creative capabilities.

## Theatre Commodified

The history of contemporary society is not short of examples of the co-option by the social elite of performance, ritual, theatre and music and the prohibition of these activities in public spaces. They did so in order to sustain a social order for the purpose of economic advantage and ensure the populace was cultivated for the machinations of this order.[2] As early as the Roman Empire the castration of public spectacle via theatre was evident. The High Pontiff, Scipio Nasica, had all the theatres in Rome reduced to rubble. St Augustine, in The City of the Gods, suggested that theatre induced mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in the entire nation.[3] The Pontiff, wrote St Augustine, "...prohibited the theatre to prevent a moral pestilence."

During the Middle Ages the jongleur, as a principal source of theatrical performance, both musician (vocalist, instrumentalist) and entertainer (story-teller, acrobat, mime, etc.) would travel from village to village and perform privately and publicly. The jongleurs' income was derived from these performances and their material was gathered, assimilated and modified from what they heard, what they saw along the way. They ensured that access to music and theatre remained the privilege of every social class. They were essential to the social circulation of information. The jongleur "...was music and the spectacle of the body. He alone created it, carried it with him, and completely organised its circulation within society."[4]

With few exceptions, theatre and music was inseparable from daily life. The streets of the feudal world were alive with song, dance, mime... an active theatre that engaged the community. It need not be watched. It was to be lived. It was not for the watching…

Up to the fourteenth century, the jongleur's lifestyle became increasingly unacceptable; the Church "...accusing [them] of paganism and magical practises."[5] Satirical songs about current events were banned and jongleurs threatened with imprisonment. As early as 1209, the Church announced "...that at saints' vigils, there shall not, in the churches, be any theatre dances, indecent entertainment, gatherings of singers, or worldly songs, such as to incite the souls of the listeners to sin..."[6] In 1212, it required of priests to "...prohibit, under penalty of excommunication, assemblies for dancing and singing from entering churches or cemeteries."[7]

Eventually, the Church secularised music, and the courts of the nobles of the time distanced music and theatre from the people, buying and/or hiring jongleurs, monopolising artistic creativity in its many forms. The jongleurs "...became professionals bound to a single master, domestics, producers of spectacles exclusively reserved for a minority."[8] Theatre became a commodity. Along with the other arts, it was used to pronounce reaffirmations of the tenents of Capitalism and the maintenance of power and social order. The theatre space became the physical manifestation

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[2] Attali, J 1977, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.
[3] Artaud, A 1935, *The Theatre and its Double*, Calder & Boyers, SBN 0-7145-4234-2.
[4] Attali, J 1977, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.
[5] Attali, J 1977, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.
[6] Council of Avignon, 1209.
[7] Council of Paris, 1212.
[8] Attali, J 1977, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2.

of this separation, creating an audience and excluding them from the process of theatre, transforming what had been the socialisation of information into a medium that would make people essential to the machinations of exchange, essential to the spread of capital. The medium is the message, but both the medium and the message is a lie.

## Make them Forget, make them Believe, and Silence them

Jacques Attali, in *Noise*, talks of three strategic uses of music by power. "...It seems that music is used and produced in the ritual in an attempt to make people forget the general violence; in another, it is employed to make people believe in the harmony of the world, that there is order in exchange and legitimacy in commercial power; and finally, there is one in which it serves to silence, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human voices."

He goes on to further stress the machinations of three essential zones towards a social order, "Make people Forget, make them Believe, Silence them. In all three cases music is a tool of power: of ritual power when it is a question of making people forget the fear of violence; of representative power when it is a question of making them believe in order and harmony; and of bureaucratic power when it is a question of silencing those who oppose it... When power wants to make people forget, music is ritual sacrifice, the scapegoat; when it wants them to believe, music is enactment, representation; when it wants to silence them, it is reproduced, normalised, repetition."

Theatre provides *power* with exactly the same formula for the maintenance of social order. Music is theatre, theatre is music. The two are synonymous and perform the same role, within mainstream society. "The mind believes what it sees and does what it believes..." The messengers of capital are thorough. Throughout the world it has created, and continues to create, an audience for its own message. The young that grow up in this environment are quickly consumed and co-opted into the service of capital. They cannot rebel against it, against something they have been taught so thoroughly to believe they want, need, cannot do without. All that glitters is not gold. There is no better example of this than in the phenomenon of Heldenplatz.

New technologies have long been in use in theatres the world over, but the use of communication technologies to create new means to increase the scope of theatre is unique to the 20th Century. As early as 1938, Adolf Hitler used a primitive public address system in Heldenplatz (Vienna) to advance the spectacle of his arrival in Austria. He was to write, "Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany."[9]

Hitler's audience, for the duration of his speech in Heldenplatz, was literally suspended within an entirely new space. They weren't in the Heldenplatz as they knew it. They audience were spellbound. They had probably never before heard a voice amplified, let alone as loud as it must have been for the time. Although we all know too well the end result of this manifestation, at the time there was hope, there was security, there was a future in this spectacle.

The author John Berger suggests, "There is always a danger that the relative freedom of art can render it meaningless. Yet it is this same freedom which allows art, and art alone, to express and preserve the profoundest expectations of a period [in history]."[10] Perhaps it is via a collapse of the manifestation of capital that the liberation of imagination and free thought becomes possible.

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[9] Hitler, A 1938, *Manual of German Radio*.
[10] Berger, J 1969, *Art and Revolution*, Granta Books, ISBN 1-3579-10-8642.

## Strategic Collapse

The stage in its traditional form, the physical space comprised of prosarch, rigging, curtain-calls, seating, etc., is under attack. Cubism rejected the way of seeing; the Futurists attempted to transcend the doctrines of capitalism, bourgeois individuality and utilitarianism. "Cubism and Futurism," wrote Kasimir Malevich in 1921, "were the revolutionary forms in art, foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917." In 1914 Apollinare wrote:

> *Where then is my youth fallen*
> *You see the future ablaze*
> *I speak today you must know*
> *To tell all the world*
> *That the art of prophecy is born at last*

As capitalism was settling in for the forthcoming century, artists throughout Europe were gaining ground in their pursuit for new forms of expression. They would deconstruct the art and function of representation and challenge the status quo with a critique that established the avant garde, seeking to make the fringe and experimental arts essential to the free-flow of imagination, "...revealing new, more open and more complex possibilities."[11] The 20th Century also brought with it the ability to transform theatre to the screen and, more recently, on to the Internet. The *collapse* may not be strategically orchestrated, but the challenge set by Artaud is most certainly being met.

## The Space of Change

Both the computer and the modem have given artists the means with which to explore entirely new spaces (space suspended in a notion of time we have yet to fully come to grasp), virtual constructs, and, of course, the imagination.
Traditionally, the performing arts is comprised of three essential components - the performer, the audience, the stage. The performer engages the attention of the audience; the audience observes and responds to the gestures and prose articulated by the performer; the stage provides a formal structure within which the relationship between performer and audience is cultivated and sustained. Separation from the creative process is perpetuated whilst the stage imposes its own criteria upon it. This is rapidly changing.

The concept of *suspending assumption*, or belief, within the context of theatre and the stage is found in the idea of *the suspended space*. Nowhere is it more explored than in the interconnections of communication and information media, like a spider on caffeine, frantically encircling the globe.

The concept of an *Internet theatre* was probably best introduced into the world by The Hamnet Players. In December 1993 they created a "participatory performance"[12] with a production of *Hamnet*, an 80-line version of *Hamlet*. The first of several productions, *Hamnet* consisted of actors from London, Tel Aviv, Durban, Slovenia and Oslo. Many other regions were represented including the USA.

The Hamnet Players had developed their new theatre with the use of Internet Relay Chat, a text based facility generally used for communication between interest groups in real-time. Since *Hamnet*, the Players produced another five Internet based theatrical productions, the more recent being, an IRC channel named *#desire*, an adaptation of a play from playwright Tennessee Williams.

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[11] Berger, J 1969, *Art and Revolution*, Granta Books, ISBN 1-3579-10-8642.
[12] The Hamnet Players 1996, *About the Hamnet Players*, [online] http://www.sandiego.com/hamnet/ [Accessed 1996].

The performance artist, Stelarc, is no stranger to the *suspended space*. Describing himself as an artist interested in "alternate aesthetic strategies," Stelarc uses medical, robotic and virtual reality systems to "explore, extend and enhance the body's performance parameters."[13] Within his suspended space he has "developed strategies to augment its capabilities, interfacing the body with prosthetics and computer technologies."

In 1995, Stelarc began working on a touch-screen interface for remote access and actuation of the body. STIMBOD enabled users in different locations to create a sequence of motions which could be replayed continuously or choreographed in real-time. It was also "possible to paste sequences together from a library of gesture icons."[14]

The performance, *Split Body - Voltage In/Voltage Out*, was performed in November 1995, linking Luxembourg (Telepolis) with Paris (the Pompidou Centre), Helsinki (The Media Lab) and Amsterdam (Doors of Perception Conference). Each site was linked via a Web site with which the Internet audience could "remotely access, view and actuate the body via a computer-interfaced muscle-stimulation system based at the main performance site in Luxembourg."[15]

In 1996 STIMBOD was integrated into the performance, *Ping Body*. Internet activity was represented by body movements throughout the performance – "the body's proprioception and musculature stimulated not by its internal nervous system but by the external ebb and flow of data."[16]

Stelarc describes Ping Body as producing "a powerful inversion of the usual interface of the body to the Net. Instead of collective bodies determining the operation of the Internet, the collective Internet activity moves the body. The Internet becomes not merely a mode of information transmission, but also a transducer, affecting physical action."

Austrian-based artists Kathy Rae Huffman and Margaret Jahrmann in their paper, *Micronations*, discuss the opportunities for artists in establishing permanent residence in virtual landscape. "Artists are often the first to move into new psychological territory, and have been known to establish fashionable trends and lifestyles. It is common knowledge that geophysical realities are ambiguous, and political boundaries are subject to change, depending on national interests and economic strategies... Accordingly, artists have been quick to grasp real estate opportunities in the virtual landscape. Artists States and Virtual Republics give new economic potential and personal freedom not only for artists, but for everyone, and they offer a practical solution to real problems, too." [17]

As of late 1996, artists states in existence are: Virtual Embassy NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst); Refugee Republic (Ingo Guenther); RR bei T0; West Bank Industries; Nomad Territories; Invisible Embassy of Seborga.

The composer Tod Machover and the MIT Media Lab's, *The Brain Opera*, premiered at the Lincoln Center Summer Festival in New York, from July 23, 1996. Described as "an all-encompassing emotional and psychological experience" both the online and live audience were able to participate in the evolution of the opera. Although the success of the *Brain Opera* process was difficult to gauge, it was clear there was an attempt to redefine the traditional notions of opera and of the performance space. It would draw its audience "into the mysteries of music and the human mind, to discover and explore the interplay of sensory perception, musical structure,

[13] Stelarc 1996, *Biography*, [online] http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/biog/biog.html [Accessed July 2000].
[14] Stelarc 1995, *Spilt Body - Voltage In/Voltage Out*, [online] http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/stimbod/stimbod.html [Accessed July 2000].
[15] Stelarc 1995, *Spilt Body - Voltage In/Voltage Out*, [online] http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/stimbod/stimbod.html [Accessed July 2000].
[16] Stelarc 1996, *Ping Body*, [online] http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/pingbody/ [Accessed July 2000].
[17] Huffman, K, Jahrmann, M 1997, Micronations, *Pop~TARTS*, [online] http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/pop/topic_1/4020/1.html [Accessed July 2000].

language, memory, thinking and emotion, and actively take part in creating a multimedia work of art in which the composer's musical concepts will be enhanced and transformed by material emerging from the individual and collective contributions of the audience."[18]

In Austria, Kis Productions have been developing a re-interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*, *Oudeis - a world wide odyssey*.[19] It is proposed that seven stages, in different locations around the world, will provide for a real actor to not only perform, but interact with his virtual counterparts via the Internet. The Internet is being utilised as a kind of contemporary metaphor for the Odyssey with the suspended space as both stage and map of this exotic new terrain. Oudeis will be premiered at the 1997 Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, Austria.

The author has been producing two net-based performance installations, the web opera *Ausländer und Staatenlose* and *The Sensorium*.

*Ausländer und Staatenlose* is comprised of an interrelated series of images, sounds and text viewed in real-time over the Internet. A live performance will be networked to various locations including the Ars Electronica centre in November 1997. The score is totally generative, meaning that it may never be heard the same twice.

*The Sensorium*, the culmination of several projects, is a living multimedia space, an immersive hyper-reality space evolving out of real-time events processed into an ever mutating experience. Three *Sensorium* projects have been produced, one of which, *Sensorium Connect*, is a radio-Internet composition which will be broadcast simultaneously on national radio in Australia and over the Internet. The piece will remain accessible via a Web site as a mutating soundscape, re-generating itself twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for up to four months.

*The Sensorium* is proposed as a definitive *theatre as suspended space* and *space as instrument*. The audience, upon entering *The Sensorium* will, immediately be integrated within the space. Their mere presence will add to the evolution of the space, its visual and aural components, diminishing further the separation between audience and performer/performance.


## Space of Change

Theatre is undoubtably changing, as are many other traditional arts practices. The Internet and computers in general are influencing the work of artists the world over. It is a time of enriching exploration and discovery that is akin to the period during which Francesco Pierro was to discover perspective and the body's relationship to space.

Theatre is changing. Not before our eyes, but in our perception of its traditional physical space. It is a participatory change. Reading this paper contributes to the process, engaging the space, whether you participate via the Internet, or never have anything to do with computers.

The *suspended space* is expanding and the physical world as we believe we know will change. The distance between audience and performer is fast becoming reclaimed physical space. We are all engaged in the space of change, "giving birth to a spectacle [to] fascinate the mind."

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[18] Machover, T 1996, *The Brain Opera*, [online] http://brainop.media.mit.edu/text-site/big.html [Accessed July 2000].
[19] Kis Prod. 1997, *Oudeis - a web odyssey*, [online] http://iguwnext.tuwien.ac.at/~oudeis [Accessed 1997].

## Postscript

In section (5), The Space of Change, I refer to the proposed performance of *Ausländer und Staatenlose* at the 1997 Ars Electronica Festival. At the 97 Festival, components of the online version of *Ausländer* were developed as a project in residence. A live, networked performance for KunstRadio and Ars Electronica '97, *Future Malaise / Unsound* was performed between participants at Toy Satellite (Kim Bounds and Dale Nason) in Melbourne, and myself in Linz, Austria.

*The Sensorium* was not produced as an Ars Electronica project for 1998, however all but one of the *Sensorium* projects had been completed. See [online] http://www.toysatellite.org/sensorium/ [Accessed July 2000] for more information.

Reading this paper now one may not be wrong in thinking that I'd been writing in a vacuum. You have to remember that it was written early 1997. Within three and a-half years there's been an unprecedented increase in technological breakthroughs in communications, many of which artists are embracing world-wide. The Internet alone has seen advances in compression technologies for audio and video streaming, more robust browser capabilities and some attempts at more consistent Web publishing standards.

There's so much enthusiasm for networked event streaming that in some places it's become second nature. In concert with these developments must come the industry back-lash, *power* exerting its control over the new mediums of expression and independent distribution.

As I write this hundreds of articles and thousands of emails are being posted throughout the Internet in response to the US Court ruling on the lawsuit filed by the RIAA[20] against Napster[21]. Napster is a file sharing tool that has encouraged up to 20 million people to download, run and retrieve MP3 audio files stored on servers the world over. On the grounds that Napster had "created a safe haven for Internet music piracy"[22] it was ordered to halt the use of its file sharing service.

Once more we see, almost copy-book like, a dominant, economically powerful elite attempt to control the flow of creative endeavor between artist and audience. Record companies want to maintain their control on distribution. Control the distribution and you control the market place, right down to what people will listen to and where and how they will buy it. Artists don't have access to these systems unless they agree to sell, not license, the rights to their music to these companies.

"The present system keeps artists from finding an audience because it has too many artificial scarcities…" says singer/songwriter Courtney Love. "…limited radio promotion, limited bin space in stores and a limited number of spots on the record company roster."[23] I can hear reverberations of Hitler's admission, "Without the loudspeaker, we would have never conquered…"

As I append this postscript the Australian Federal Government announces that audio and video streaming will not be regarded as *broadcasting* after its extensive review of the medium.[24] Streaming initiatives may be maintained without the burden of legislation and licensing that

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[20] Record Industry Association of America.
[21] Napster, [online] http://www.napster.com [Accessed 27 July 2000].
[22] King, B 2000, Napster's File-Trading No More, *Wired News*, [online] http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,37558,00.html [Accessed 28 July 2000].
[23] Love, C 2000, Courtney Love does the math, *Salon.com tech*, [online] http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2000/06/14/love/index2.html [Accessed 28 July 2000].
[24] Alston, R 2000, *Video and Audio Streaming*, DCITA Media Release, [online] http://www.dcita.gov.au/nsapi-graphics/?MIval=dca_dispdoc&ID=5127&template=Newsroom [Accessed 28 July 2000].

comes with the responsibility of being a broadcaster as identified in *Broadcasting Services Act*. As one Internet media is legislated against, another is given reprieve.

And as I bring this document to a close I receive a call from a local charity requesting donations, and another offering raffle tickets… Australian Aboriginal communities are planning to march on the Olympics and the World Trade Forum will no doubt be greeted with trajectories of dissent when it meets in Melbourne on September 11… I am also aware of the chasm this paper will be consumed by, this insignificant and yet personal contribution to the malaise and contradictions in this ever unfolding *space of change*.