

# a theatre of ghosts?

some thoughts relating to the representation of art and scenography  
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Sophie Calle – Take care of yourself

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## New Atlantis, Utopia

*"We have also houses of deceits of the senses; where we represent all manner of feats of juggling, false apparitions, impostures, and illusions; and their fallacies. And surely you will easily believe that we that have so many things truly natural which induce admiration, could in a world of particulars deceive the senses, if we would disguise those things and labor to make them seem more miraculous. But we do hate all impostures, and lies; insomuch as we have severely forbidden it to all our fellows, under pain of ignominy and fines, that they do not show any natural work or thing, adorned or swelling; but only pure as it is, and without all affectation of strangeness. These are (my son) the riches of Salomon's house."* [Bacon, 164].

In 1626, Francis Bacon described two modes of representing natural and theatrical wonders, the "pure" and the "adorned," one laying open its mechanics and the other disguising it. Adoration is not encouraged, it is rather the education of the mind, the empirical method of observation, dissection and truth-finding that the diverse houses of Salomon on the island of New Atlantis stand for. Critical distance invites critical discourse and furthers scientific progress, and the theatrical arts are an integral part of Bacon's utopic academy of the arts and sciences. There is no crisis of representation detectable in Bacon's writing as there is in so much contemporary artistic, political, and sociological debate [see Latour and Weibel]. As the museum is discovered as a "discursive instrument" [Teckert, 181], the display itself has become an object of examination and analysis. The modernist's "white box" has ceased to be a neutral space for contemplation but has rather become a stage on which aesthetic, cultural, and political concerns

form a metatext overlaying and referencing the individual exhibit.

## Prague, Industrial Palace

The Prague Quadrennial of Scenography and Theatre Architecture (PQ) is no exception. Faced with the inherent dilemma of any international show with nationally curated exhibits, namely "showing only the best" and "showing everything," the exhibition of 2007 was a mirror of recent developments and debates in exhibition, art, and scenography. Content, context, and representation don't always form an easy alliance and it could be argued (and will be argued in the following) that the way in which spaces are read now is fuelled by a want for a critical discourse on space, spatiality, and the politics of display. The merging in practice of art, installation, and scenography denotes both the dissolution of formerly separated genres and the recognition of the production of space as a cultural practice.

## Venice, Giardini

The long-established art exhibition, the Venice Biennale, takes place in two primary sites—the Giardini and the Arsenale. If in 2007 some of those air freight containers directed towards the Venice Biennale and the Prague Quadrennial had been misdirected by chance—those intended for Venice shipped to Prague instead and vice versa—the impressions would have been quite different. Sophie Calle's multi-storytelling installation in Venice, "take care of yourself," for instance, would have been shown as the French National Exhibit in Prague. Calle's introduction which greeted visitors to the exhibit in Venice read:

I received an email telling me it was over.  
I didn't know how to respond.  
It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.  
It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."  
And so I did.  
I asked 107 women, chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter.

To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.  
Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me.  
It was a way of taking the time to break up.  
A way of taking care of myself. [Calle, n.p.]

Curated by the conceptual artist Daniel Buren, Calle's installation could easily be interpreted as a mediated representation of a multi-site performance. Playing with notions of voyeurism and identification by both reconstructing and fragmenting an intimate event, Calle and Buren constructed a *mise en scène* that externalized a turning point in a relationship, by the decision to open up a text to multiple interpretations. The simultaneity of interpretations emphasized the urgency of understanding the message and at the same time distanced the viewer from its emotional content.

The scenographic and performance quality of "take care of yourself" resided in the tension between Calle's absence and the on-screen presence of 107 women taking her part, the piece buzzing with the same text being read, sung, screamed, and otherwise enacted over and over again. If in keeping with our fantasy of reversal we imagine that this installation had landed in Prague, then the French Pavilion in Venice would have been silent and empty, for there was no French exhibit at the PQ. Or perhaps it would have displayed an empty air-freight container as a strong starting point for any discussion of the politics of display.

If taken to Prague, Swiss artist Yves Netzhammer's melancholic animated figures, lost in a 3D virtual world, could have been interpreted as a visualization of a consequent and brutal abstraction of both space and performer, a non-space nonetheless imprisoning a figure within its windowless borders. On the other hand, if Swiss scenographer Muriel Gerstner's theoretically-informed black container were placed into the Venice Giardini it certainly would have caused less controversy than it did in Prague. Gerstner's spatialization of the artistic process—a translation from text to image—was framed hermetically, but was rich in psychoanalytic allusions and, surprisingly enough, bore a structural resemblance to Sophie Calle's extroverted treatment of a similarly theoretical point of departure, namely the processes of interpretation and translation.

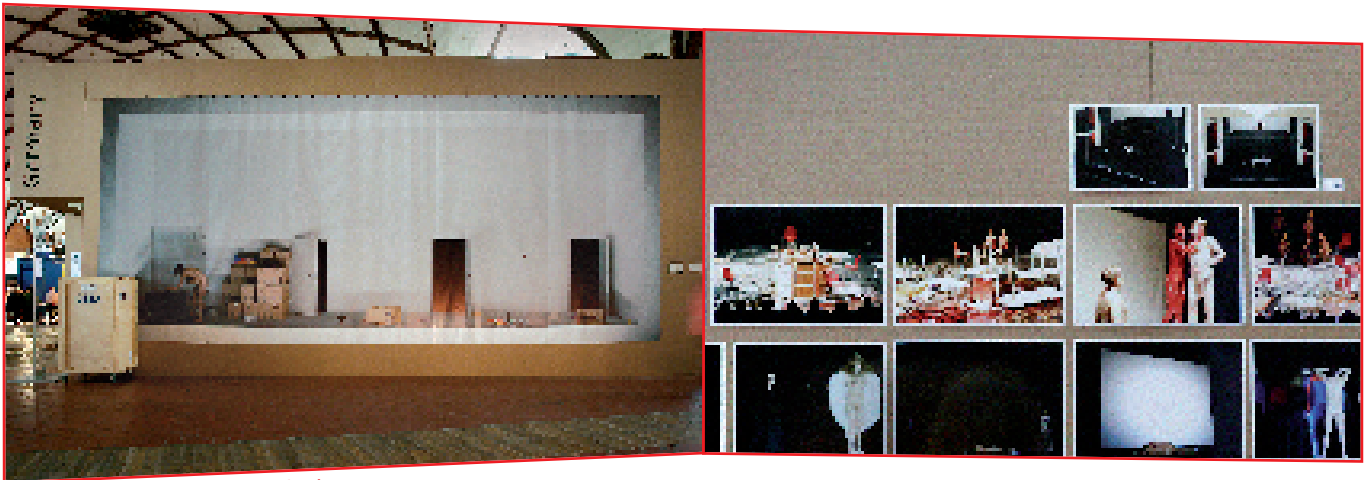
To conclude this transfer game with a visit to the German pavilion in the Giardini and the German National exhibit in Prague is also to put it to the ultimate test. Since artist Hans Haacke demolished the floor of the pavilion in 1993—a reaction to this 1937 building's early history as a National Socialist prestige object—German artists at the Biennale have continued to develop work from an understanding of display as critical practice. In 2007, Isa Genzken presented "Oil," a "glamorously delirious expedition through the highs and



Isa Genzken – Oil

lows of our post-apocalyptic present" [Karcher, n.p.]. The installation included life-sized astronaut effigies wearing white or orange NASA space suits, hanging upside down from the ceiling, and small hybrid creatures—miniature monsters grimacing grotesquely, as well as misshapen silver dolls covered by space blankets and wielding knives. "Petrodollars, that's what everything today's about" says Genzken [Karcher] about her global "theatre of ghosts" [see Derrida *passim*]. Mirrors reflected her post-apocalyptic scenario and the visitor within it, wandering aimlessly among the creatures while being drawn irresistibly to the show piece of "Oil": a Venetian carnival mask of golden brocade studded with faux diamonds adorning a silvery skull with bulging bloodshot eyes and bloody teeth. Genzken's overtly theatrical scenario of beauty and horror, her futuristic *memento mori*, invoked a yet-to-be-written dramatic text with its protagonists acting globally, yet anonymously. It is a scenography to be fulfilled by the visitor's reflection in the mirrors, a reflection which stands frozen for a moment in this equally grotesque and seductive choreography of B-grade luxury, capitalism, and death.

In strong contrast to Genzken's hybrid installation, the German National Exhibit in Prague, set within a classical "white cube" configuration, showed performance videos and still photographs placed around a large table along with photographs and biographical information on three renowned German scenographers. The scenographers chosen, Rosalie, Heiner Goebbels, and Johannes Schütz, are "Grenzgänger" (border crossers) *par excellence*; artists expanding and furthering the limits of stage scenography toward urban intervention, media space, and music. The curatorial statement, however, which claimed that by expanding traditional borders and by creating "new spaces for the classic," their work might lead us back towards the "roots of theatre," remained strangely distant and unfulfilled. Its mode of representation in the form of selective documentation devoid of architectural, artistic, or scenographic metaphor remained unconvincing and conservative. A classical, representational island amidst the wealth of international talent on the floors of the Industrial Palace, this exhibit, if transferred into the



Germany – New Spaces for the Classic

German pavilion at the Giardini, would have been open to a strong critique of its politics of display. Both the actual selection criteria—three equally established scenographers of roughly the same generation working predominantly in state theatres—and the even more authoritative hanging of high quality prints, seemed to proclaim a perfection that defied both non-linear artistic working processes and complex political influences on German contemporary theatre active within a both national and international context.

The works by Rosalie, Johannes Schütz and Heiner Goebbels were displayed in Prague in a non-referential, apparently neutral mode of representation. Rather than understanding display as critical practice by formally emphasizing the process of spatial translation and visualization and enabling a dissection of the contemporary conditions of artistic, social, and cultural practice, the polished presentation of disturbing and engaging photographs, however strong, sadly lacked the curatorial *raison d'être* necessary for enabling a discourse beyond the individual exhibits.

The dilemma of how to represent scenographic past events while concurrently creating a critical space of display became painfully apparent, not only in the example of the German national exhibit discussed here, but in a majority of the national exhibits. It is, unfortunately, the often innovative, confrontational and risk-taking artistic practice of the scenographers represented that is buried in the outdated assumption of the “white box” and/or the box overly adorned with artifacts.

The transfer game between Venice and Prague ends here, at the German national pavilion in Prague, with an appeal for the curator’s central role as *agent provocateur* who functions simultaneously as a curator, a scenographer, and a conceptual exhibition designer.

**Venice, Arsenale**

The relentlessness of political artworks of all genres, assembled by Venice Biennale director Robert Storr in the

corridors of the Arsenale 2007, has been the subject of much criticism; and his motto, “Think with the senses, feel with the mind,” was met overall with a benign but unexcited reception. Admittedly, the motto’s implied dichotomy between sensory and rational reception may well be regarded as antiquated. Storr’s sub-title however, “Art in the present tense,” shows what he was really after:

“...the criterion for selection has been resonance or mood as much as subject matter or aesthetic methodology. Among these vibrating points of reference are the immediacy of sensation in relation to questioning the nature and meaning of that sensation, intimate affect in relation to engagement in public life, belonging and dislocation, the fragility of society and culture in the face of conflict, the sustaining qualities of art in the face of death.” [Storr, n.p.]

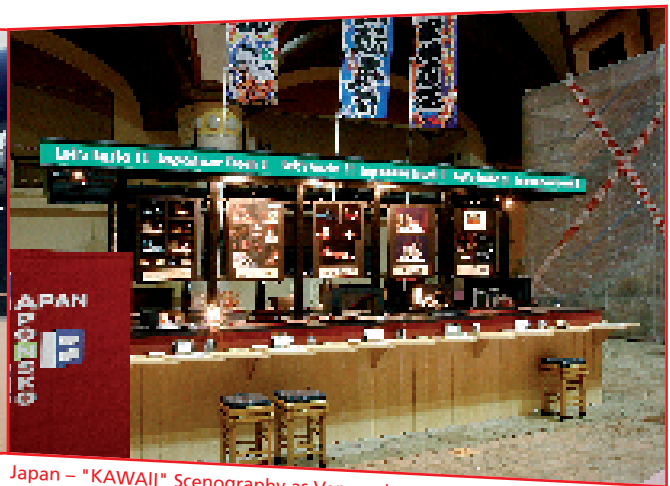
When the German philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defines the term *Inszenierung* as the “production of presence” or as the “production of heightened presence” [Gumbrecht, 74], he strikes a chord with Storr’s insistence on the “Nowness” of art. Many pieces on display in the Arsenale struck the viewer as “slow” pieces, that is, as pieces created over time or retracing a timeline. Take the American artist Emily Prince’s oversized, fragmented map with meticulously hand-drawn portraits of the 3556



Emily Prince – American Servicemen and Women who Have Died in Iraq and Afghanistan (But Not Including the Wounded, Nor the Iraqis Nor the Afghanis)



Republic of Korea – In the Middle of Long Journey Searching for Koreanness



Japan – "KAWAII" Scenography as Vernacular Pop

American men and women who had been killed in Iraq up to that date; or the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov's surreal account of his research on the copyright dispute between Bulgaria and the USSR over the AK-47 assault rifle, documented in video and large-scale drawings. These are thorough pieces executed with care, and they communicated a clear social and political message, created from within society out of a sense of both "belonging and dislocation."

Storr's selection and representation of 56 art works for the Arsenale left an overwhelming impression of both "presence" and "present tense," of both *Inszenierung* and a kind of ticking clock. The dense, physical hanging of the exhibits and their almost unequivocally critical political statements (concerning military conflict, armament buildup, terrorism, refugee and migrant issues), created a tight mesh of critique, concern, and empathy by visual artists. Here, content, context, and representation informed each other, and Storr's concept could be seen as situated well within the current theoretical and practical debate on exhibitions as cultural practice—as dispositive models of dialogue and the museum [Tackert, 186].

## II Prague, National Exhibit section

"Each age has its scenography" and its own "theatre of ghosts." [Derrida, 119]

Exhibiting international scenography poses conceptual, contextual, and curatorial challenges that go well beyond exhibiting visual art, since the classical exhibit itself is a representation of a past event. It refers to something absent, namely the performance event, through the representational objects (models, costumes, texts, props, electronic recordings) that are present. In an overwhelming array of representational objects, however, each individual object, both by the convention of a national group show and by the desire of the individual viewer, is required to carry a twofold symbolic (representational) meaning—for the absent performance and for its country of origin. Derrida's statement, even though taken out of its political context

(a critique of Marxism), might serve as a navigating tool to assist in looking at and looking behind the representation of "what has been."

If a visitor to PQ 07 had searched for the "scenography of our age," of our decade, in the national exhibits in Prague, if one had searched for the "theatre of ghosts," then he or she would have discovered exhibits oscillating between the presence and the absence of the scenographer rather than the presence or absence of the performance. Such a "theatre of ghosts," in a dynamic space beyond the actual exhibit, unfolded in several of the national exhibits, most notably in those of Korea, Switzerland, and Japan.

Korea's entirely digital display, seen on a number of high-definition monitors not yet available to consumers, was striking in many ways. Its technical perfection and consequent execution as a "container" exhibiting digital stills from several contemporary Korean productions was initially seductive in its perfection. Its motto, "In the middle of a long journey searching for Koreanness," however, revealed the central concern of Korean scenographers of today, namely a tendency to employ Western aesthetic language and form while dealing with Korean themes. The digital slides, looped endlessly and captured within a technological house (the monitor), resisted communication with the viewer. An atmosphere of isolation was perfectly constructed and represented by the Korean mode of display. The tension between a global scenographic language (of abstraction, of architectural composition on stage) and a formal traditional Asian performance language striving to develop a unique national identity, vibrated in the cool interior of the black box. This exhibit articulated "nowness" through a highly perfected form of representation, while at the same time this very perfection kept the viewer at bay. The distance between viewer and exhibit marked its point of departure: the search for identity. In the Korean exhibit the viewer was witness to the most demanding task for any scenographer: the search for an individual design language within both a national and a global aesthetic, technological, and political context.



Switzerland – Going to Mean Houses



Muriel Gerstner – The B's Complex – The Helper's Cabin

"Kawaii," Japanese for "cute" or "adorable," seemed an unlikely title for the Japanese national exhibit which took the form of a sushi bar. Sitting down on one of the high stools, however, and perusing the menu laid out in front of each seat, the viewer's expectations were dispelled. It was not a selection of Japanese finger-food—now globally available and trendy—that was available for consumption at "Kawaii," but the scenographer himself who could be ordered and consumed. This was fast food "scenography" in an age of global consumerism and merchandizing: the participating Japanese scenographers chose a confrontational image disguised behind a "Kawaii" representation.

"Kawaii," or "Scenography as Vernacular Pop," was actually scenography (the sushi stall) about scenography in a hyperconsumerist society. To the viewers seated on the four sides of the stall, it was both a critique and an invitation for discourse. It questioned the relationship between theatre and society while raising awareness of a politics of display that fostered consumerist attitudes. Here, the artists and their products formed what seemed an easily digestible pleasure whose remnants (the place mats with the scenographers' names and biographies) could be discarded or perhaps recycled.

Directly opposite the PQ's lecture hall—a small black cube containing seating for some 100 people at the far end of the left wing of the exhibition hall; a space which served as a public forum for discourse—was situated another 6x6x3m (20' x 20' x 9') black cube which, in contrast to most other exhibits, lacked any external identification. Just outside the entrance to this space was a small black booklet entitled *Muriel Gerstner presents: Number Nine Barnsbury Road, Soho*, and on the last page of this catalogue one could finally read: "Muriel Gerstner and the Swiss Federal Office of Culture." As the text in the booklet explained, "This project... seeks to convey a visual image of language as a permanent building site and archaeological dig: a kind of commentary on our theatre work... I see our task largely as a question of translating: from language into image and music, and back again, in a never-ending process." [Gerstner 2007a, 27]

The understated national-ness of the Swiss exhibit relieved Gerstner's "wicked house" [see Hegel in Gerstner 2007a, 25] from the double burden of representation: the (substitutional) representation of a past event and the representation of national aesthetic. Rather, this house, like its Japanese counterpart, was conceptualized as scenography about scenography, complete with its own narrative, accompanying booklet, a library with a reading chair, and the "scale model of the castle of a Romanian duke who, we suspect, is involved in these rather strange events" [Gerstner 2007b, n.p]. The scenographer invites visitors into a sequence of small rooms lined with remnants of past events (a broken shower basin, a display of white broken crockery). This is a house resounding with the absence of its inhabitants, apparently, as one learns from the booklet, male twins dressed in identical girl's dresses who might or might not have been writing in adjoining studies. An overall sense of the hermetic, dark, and introverted emphasized by Kafkaesque exchanges between "M., stage designer" and "K., house keeper and master of a strange house," permeated the installation.

The final room is a library, complete with bookshelf containing writings by Freud, Shakespeare, Lacan and other "Über-Väter" experts in the emotional, cultural, intellectual, and sexual wanderings of individuals and society, also contains a chair facing a scenographic model under glass. The object within the glass, an object of desire, unattainable and constantly turning, evades close observation.

A highly abstracted and sophisticated structure, this is a discursive space that held a singular pressing field of questions: How to arrive at the representation of a text in the form of a three-dimensional set model?; how to find a language by which to describe it?; and, perhaps the most central question, how to represent scenography? Gerstner's "wicked house" artistically transformed the scenographer's search for images into a journey of voyeurism (to be in somebody else's house), discovery (the jewel in the box), and theoretical inspiration, analysis and reflection (the chair).