

# Theatre as Suspended Space

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*“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.

## **Abstract**

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This paper outlines the background to theatre as a suspended space, the need for 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 the deconstruction of them. Strategic Collapse and finally, The Space of Change takes into various strategies towards Theatre as Suspended Space.

## **Introduction**

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The 1980's produced a variety of new 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 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 the production there-of, towards a spacial poetry,<sup>1</sup> 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 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 a broad variety of work, 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 - that which liberates the imagination and a discovery of its inert spiritual and creative capabilities.

## **Theatre Commodified**

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The history of modern 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 to sustain a social order enabling them to gain the economic advantage and ensure the populace be cultivated for the machinations of this order.<sup>2</sup> 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*,

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<sup>1</sup>Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, Calder & Boyers, 1935, ISBN 0-7145-4234-2

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Attali, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2

suggested that theatre induced mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in the entire nation.<sup>3</sup> The Pontiff, wrote St Augustine, “...prohibited the theatre to prevent a moral pestilence.”

During the Middle Ages the jongleur, 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.

Up to the fourteenth century, the jongleur’s lifestyle became increasingly unacceptable; the Church “...accusing [them] of paganism and magical practises.”<sup>5</sup> 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...”<sup>6</sup> In 1212, it required of priests to “...prohibit, under penalty of excommunication, assemblies for dancing and singing from entering churches or cemeteries.”<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> Theatre became a commodity. Along with the other arts, it became an essential tool to the spread of capitalism and the maintenance of power and social order. The theatre space became the physical manifestation 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 of 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 then Forget, make then Believe, and Silence them***

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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

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<sup>3</sup>Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, Calder & Boyers, 1935, ISBN 0-7145-4234-2

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Attali, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Attali, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2

<sup>6</sup>Council of Avignon, 1209

<sup>7</sup>Council of Paris, 1212

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Attali, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2

which it serves to silence, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human voices.”<sup>9</sup>

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, and continues to do so, 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, can’t do without. All the 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.”<sup>10</sup>

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. Their 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].”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps via a collapse of the manifestation of capital and the liberation of imagination and free thought is possible.

## ***Strategic Collapse***

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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,

<sup>9</sup>Jacques Attali, *Noise*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977, ISBN 0-8166-1286-2

<sup>10</sup>Adolf Hitler, *Manual of German Radio*, 1938

<sup>11</sup>John Berger, *Art and Revolution*, Granta Books, 1969, ISBN 1-3579-10-8642

foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917.” In 1914 Apollinaire 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, the fringe and experimental arts as essential to the free-flow of imagination, “...revealing new, more open and more complex possibilities.”<sup>12</sup> The 20th Century also brought with the ability transform theatre to the screen and, more recently, on to the Internet. The collapse may not be strategically orchestrated, but the challenge set by Artud is most certainly being met.

## ***The Space of Change***

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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, but this is rapidly changing.

Suspending assumption, or belief within the context of theatre and the stage we find 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. Some would call it Cyberspace, but this already contains far too many assumptions, most of which have little to do with the media-sphere, and in particular, the Internet.

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.

The concept of Internet Theatre was probably best introduced into the world by The Hamnet Players. In December 1993 they created a “participatory performance”<sup>13</sup> 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 United States of America.

The Hamnet Players have 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 Hamnet Players have produced another 5 Internet based theatrical productions, the more recent being, An IRC channel named #desire, an adaptation of a play from playwright Tennessee Williams.

<sup>12</sup>John Berger, *Art and Revolution*, Granta Books, 1969, ISBN 1-3579-10-8642

<sup>13</sup>The Hamnet Players, *About the Hamnet Players*, <http://www.sandiego.com/hamnet/>, 1996

The performance artist, Stelarc, is now stranger to the suspended space. Describing himself as an artist interested in “alternate aesthetic strategies,” Stelarc uses medical, robot and virtual reality systems to “explore, extend and enhance the body's performance parameters.”<sup>14</sup> Within his suspended space he has “developed strategies to augment its capabilities, interfacing the body with prosthetics and computer technologies.”

In 1995, Stelarc begun 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>16</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup>

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 Jahrman in their paper, *Micronations*<sup>18</sup>, 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.”

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 online and live were able to

<sup>14</sup>Stelarc, *Biography*, <http://www.merlin.com.au/stelarc/biog/biog.html>, 1996

<sup>15</sup>Stelarc, *Spilt Body - Voltage In/Voltage Out*, <http://www.merlin.com.au/stelarc/stimbod/stimbod.html>, 1995

<sup>16</sup>Stelarc, *Spilt Body - Voltage In/Voltage Out*, <http://www.merlin.com.au/stelarc/pingbody/index.html>, 1995

<sup>17</sup>Stelarc, *Ping Body*, <http://www.merlin.com.au/stelarc/pingbody/index.html>, 1996

<sup>18</sup>Kathy Rae Huffman and Margaret Jahrman, *Micronations*, Pop~TARTS

participate in the evolution of the opera. Although the success of the process hard to gauge, there was an attempt to redefine the traditional notion of opera and 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, 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.”<sup>19</sup>

In Austria, Kis Productions have been developing a re-interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*, *Oudeis - a world wide odyssey*.<sup>20</sup> 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 is currently producing two net-based performance installations, the web opera *Ausländer und Staatenlose*<sup>21</sup> 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. Afterwards, the piece will remain accessible via a Web site as mutating soundscape, re-generating itself 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for up to 4 months.

*The Sensorium*, scheduled for release at Ars Electronica, 1998, is perhaps the definitive theatre as suspended space, but it is also space as instrument. The audience, upon entering the *Sensorium* will immediately be integrated into the space. The mere presence will add to the evolution of the space, its visual and aural components, diminishing further the separation between audience and performer/performance.

## ***Theatre Change***

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Theatre is undoubtedly changing, as are many other traditional arts practises. 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 Piero was to discover perspective and the body's relationship to space.

The 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.

<sup>19</sup>Tod Machover, *The Brain Opera*, <http://brainop.media.mit.edu/text-site/big.html>, 1996

<sup>20</sup>Kis Productions, *Oudeis - a world wide web odyssey*, <http://iguwnext.tuwien.ac.at/~oudeis>, 1997

<sup>21</sup>Andrew Garton, *Ausländer und Staatenlose*, <http://www.peg.apc.org/~agarton/auslander>

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.”

### ***The Author and Suspended Space***

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Garton began using computers in the early 80's. By 1988 he was working with modems and raking up increasingly dearer telephone bills. The following lists projects Garton has either personally undertaken, or consulted to, all of which entail the use of computers, modems, and more recently the Internet and World Wide Web as [suspended] performance space.

- Writers @ the Cafe Byron, live to the net, via Pegasus electronic conferencing, narrated poetry and prose from the Belongil Cafe, Byron Bay, 1990;
- Fierce / InterRave, live to the net via Internet Relay Chat, performance, music and dance, Brisbane, 1993;
- Black Harlequin, a new media Web opera, 1994;
- Melbourne Online to Beijing, public access to the United Nations World Conference on Women, Melbourne, 1995;
- OMA, generative compositions, music that never sounds the same twice, available over the Web, 1996;
- Ping Body, concept development of Stelarc Internet accuated performance, Sydney, 1996;
- Lost Time Accidents, award winning generative compositions via the Web, Melbourne Fringe Festival, 1996;
- Sensorium Connect, live to national radio and the Internet, generative streaming composition commissioned by The Listening Room, ABC FM, 1997;
- Sensorium Scan, generative composition for Blue Armory online exhibition, Virginia, USA, 1997;
- Ausländer und Staatenlose, interactive online opera, 1997 (due for release, November);
- Sensorium, interactive multimedia installation (due for release September, 1998).