Collapsing worlds: theatrical off-sites.

Aaron Goddard

Composites

Twelve wooden boxes are mounted on rubber casters, wheeled out of the way out of the exit, next to a roller shutter tall enough for a lorry to reverse into from the carpark. Space is limited at the back of the building. The air is damp. The boxes sit uniformly at waist height. Clumps have been taken out of their edges, they've become colourful and frayed, scuffed by hands packing them up. Inside, props and stage furniture for a production of Verdi's La Traviata in transit between storage and stage. Most boxes have lids fixed down with looped pins, a few have gone missing and dark fabric billows out of those.

Crew come and go. I recognise one of them who'd unloaded the set back into storage at another site in December. Entering, he leans against one of the twelve boxes, removing his gloves. We chat for a minute. He wedges open a smaller door next to the shutter, turns and exits. Opening my view out onto the car park, a smoking shelter put together out of clear Perspex and blue-painted metal.

Looking back down over one of the boxes, contents are well hidden. Black material built up in layers withholding form. Pulling at some of the excess fabric it loosens itself between the objects some unfolds softly onto the floor, rummaging, objects partially take shape. I glean understanding, feeling stitches, edges. Outside gotten in and under the surfaces. Unveiling, getting rid of the end rungs of the fabric. I find two chairs turned neatly toward each other, simplifying themselves into a corner. Scraps of candle stump have flaked off around three candelabras, caught up around their legs. The space between the chairs and the edge of the box is filled in by a pile of hardback books like bricks

Leaning in, I lift the book at the top of the stack with two hands. Weightless, because it's hollowed out. I turn it over in my hands, becoming attuned. The spine is repaired by a stretch of brown parcel tape. A set of surfaces, emptied of words.

Difficult to know what colour it used to be but now it's painted purple: wealth, royalty, magic. Gaps between brush hairs trail off lengthways and darker tones of excess purple gather in the corners of the debossing. Coarse sandpaper scratches across in the other direction, knocking back a few layers of paint, stuttering into form. Underlayers hacked into. Finger marks simulate a sense of general wear, amped up into zones of heavy distress along the books edge.

Standing in as pages, hessian fabric is tucked under the cover. Measured, cut down to size against a ruler with a blade, folded around the object and fixed into place. The fabric gauge heavy and slack traces of glue seeped easily through the holes in its weave. Used. Bearing little semblance to paper now, up close, if ever before, consistency is peeled off: baggy, like loose fitting denim.

Intercepted in transit the prop moves out of focus, reorienting the centrality of sight, of being observed on the stage. Remade into something else several times removed from narrative sequence, partial, decentralised. Cropped out of the representational registers of what is signified and relocated in the present of the peripheral. There's a sense of potential and displacement through which the object turns away from the staged composition toward other worlds: the workshop, the archive, the carpark. Indexing histories accumulated through its material; cycles of heavy use, return, repair, re-use are embedded into the object. An embodiment of labour is mapped out across handled surfaces. Where prop makers simulate ways in which time naturally inhabits objects, materials, humans alike toward decomposition. Moving raw material into collage.

My interdisciplinary research investigates the material and structural underpinnings of theatrical production in their divergent off-stage capacities in order to explore representations of class, queerness, labour and visibility of labour. The socio-cultural context of my research and practice-led outputs are informed by my working life, which has centred around working manual labour based jobs and activities in numerous forms. This is an important aspect of my lived experience that also extends from a lineage of manual labour based work within my family. Most relevant to this current research, I worked as a manual labourer at Scottish Opera from 2018-2021: the basis of my PhD project builds directly from my unique lived experiences during this period. This role consisted of cleaning, loading and unloading building materials, general assistance in the set building, wood and metal workshops and delivery driving. This research explores gaps in the representation of unseen labour through the close study of marginal spaces and practices in large-scale theatre production. In doing so, I seek to reevaluate terms of theatricality, dramaturgy, diegesis and scenography from the fragmentary perspective of labouring bodies, forefronting marginal, incomplete sources of knowledge.

My methodological process is initiated by the collection of written field notes as a ritualistic practice. These field notes are initially recorded under self-imposed timed constraints and carried out with pen and notebook in situ, positioned within selected liminal areas of theatre production, such as backstage, the scenery archive, the prop house, and the scale model archive. This writing begins as a haptic-sensorial remapping of sites which are usually unseen, it extends outward toward themes of opacity, deferral and fragmentation to connect the field of "chronopolitics to the question of sight/visuality". (Lorenz 2014, 17). Through such connections, I seek to address the socio-cultural conditions of the staged composition, the codification of its perspectival law and the relationships between dominant cultural narratives, power and fiction. My research therefore positions a generative focus on knowledge which sits outside of a normative engagement with archival material, providing provisional viewpoints that question the status of staged worlds as understood as finished, whole or complete. Using queer and working-class embodied research methods which theorise the status of prop objects as discontinuous and the collapsibility of theatrical worlds as a framework, I investigate the margins of diegetic reality.

The Model Room

An idea of a room, lacking the details to be fully realised. A corner of a bigger space, partitioned off, feels like it could be collapsed, re-used, re-purposed somewhere else for something else if needed. Constructed out of lightweight materials, Venetian blinds hang down across two glass walls from the floor to their upper limit at around two and a half metres. They balance against each other forming an L, their two other ends fixed into proper walls made from real bricks. Above: fluorescent tubes hang in aluminium, square openings cut out of corrugated roofing every so often, a red-oxide I-beam looms in front.

Navy carpet feels thin underfoot, does little to insulate heat or sound. Running underneath the door, extending out into the larger space where a communal kitchen is shared by costume makers. Wiry threads of blue synthetic fibre built up round the casters of a small electrical space heater hinder its mobility. I drag it across the floor, my lower back pulling awkwardly toward a fold up desk positioned at the centre of the space. Then unspooling the plastic cable from the dock on the side of the heater onto the back of my hand. Going back to the plug socket I steadily loosen each rung of the cable from around my knuckles. The smell of hot plastic dissipates shortly after I plug it in, followed by a dry heat blown on my face.

I listen to the sound of air being drawn out the space mechanically through an extraction vent. The outer shell is formed simply, square, sheet metal housing with oily patina, like camouflage splatters, well-handled and patterned. Taut wire grid vent cover. A continuous rhythm operates. Air pulled through at measured intervals. I set a timer on my phone. Long inhales last for five minutes followed by a break for another five. Metronomic. Each time the room comes back to quiet. The dull weight of the extraction is realised quickly in its absence. Lighter space opens up. Sounds operating at lower frequencies. The underlying capillaries of the building hum under foot and above head, fibre optic cable, plumbing, nearby machines on standby, the fridge, sounds of a kettle boiling floats above and over the partitions, light bulbs filaments occasionally tweak. The extraction clicks off.

Two plan chests are stacked behind the open door. Blue biro lists sites of performance on paper labels slotted into brass envelopes of each drawer, centred. Fourteen in total:

~~gl~~asgow
~~ed~~inburgh
~~in~~verness
~~ab~~erdeen
~~uk~~
~~in~~ternational
bradford alhambra
~~do~~me brighton
~~do~~minion london
~~em~~pire liverpool
~~ki~~ngs glasgow
~~tr~~on glasgow

The top drawer drags open reluctantly, angled rubbing friction. Handles yellowed, patchy gloss varnish. Inside, drawings wrapped in a thick plastic sheet. Straightening up, the package catches the drawer's edge. I lower my head into the drawer, the smell of solvent lags off clouded plastic. Well handled creases on the surface have cracked into white trails. Pressing plastic closely against paper, text becomes faintly readable.

Sites of performance are mapped in exactitude. Fine lines divide fire escapes, the auditorium, dressing rooms. Their dimensions fixed, rooted deep in ground. Referred back to, moved through repeatedly. Scenes circulate, they pass. Their structures unstable, agile, they travel. They re-play.

I hear activity from a different room in the building, the sound is faint. A configuration of eight notes, in sequence, equally spaced, gradually ascending, gradually descending, the same, now returning back down, to where it started, brief pause, starting again, the sequence shifted along one note. I reposition myself, facing the wall. Conscious of the partitions between me and the source of sound in the other room. Much colder away from the heater. Another five off. Scales continue. Negative spaces between muffled notes reveal rigour. Consistent, not rushed; the cycles feel controlled, they ascend and descend intentionally. Breath flows through the instrument in bursts, intermittently blocked and reopened. Five off, five on, extraction kicks back in, the musician no longer audible.

The sites in which this writing is recorded and responds to can be considered as off-sites or background environments, for which I refer to Paul Vanninis definition of the background as:

> *"...the sites that fall outside of common awareness, the atmospheres we take for granted, the places in which habitual dispositions regularly unfold. The background is the backdrop against which particular things show up and take on significance: a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities and tendencies (...) Backgrounds are thus post phenomenological lifeworlds that come to being as an outcome of practices of habitation." (Vannini 2015, 26)*

My field note writing seeks to collect precise details, atmospheres, materials, 'orientations and disorientations' (Stewart 2010, 119) of such background environments. My writing extends to close studies of decontextualised moments of scenery, staging apparatus, prop objects, scale models, architectural drawings, notation books, annotated performance registers and labour processes which are understood as interstitial materials of world-building. In these environments, the "detritus of production" (Hodgdon 2016, 5) is encountered in medias res, as active, unfinished, found objects in the present tense, before and after performance. As materials become dislocated from dramaturgical contexts as narrative structuring devices and tools of fiction, their status as 'known' is questioned. The aim of which is to create new intersectionality for under-represented viewpoints and contexts for large-scale theatre production.

The Economy Of Repetitive Movements

The cabin door swings open, driver ladders down three steps, whipping the door closed.

He moves automatically, doesn't look up, unties the back shutter and releases, pushing up the roller glides skywards. Inside, the stage set disassembled into modules, neatly strapped up in layers along the left wall inside the trailer.

Entering the theatre from the back door, there are two routes, both get you to the stage quickly. They're similar distances but ones less direct by a few steps. Walking through, I set up at the point where the two routes cross. My back to the wall, bricks are painted thick black behind, layers chipped off revealing years of navy blue before years of a dark shade of green. Out of sight I hear ratchet straps cracking, loosening parts of the set, gripped, sliding off the back of the lorry.

Sections are carried through, entering my vision over my right shoulder. The material is heavy, big wooden panels. The left route is unused. It takes two carrying each time, steps accumulate over the course of a day into a long stretch, any extra grinds the body down unnecessarily. The weight of the first wooden panel lays across a clutched red hand, intersecting at the second row of knuckles. Palm facing away from the body, held low beneath an extended elbow. Latex gloves stick out beneath the panels bottom edge. The upper weight lies angled against the shoulder of the hidden carrier as they move through. Body position mirrored by a second at the back end, doubling up with blue hands. The system is set, repeating each time a new panel is brought through, red at the front, blue at the back. There's an understanding in pacing and in rhythm.

The front face of the panel is withheld. Intricate studwork. Fabric stapled around the wooden fringe. Black metal hinges are spaced and measured gaps are left open for corresponding parts to combine. Coloured markings struck diagonally in pairs.

Tracing down the edge of the stages left flank, the front carrier signals to turn across the open stage. The panel swings, pivoting from the back. Breaking my sightlines downstage into the auditorium. Catching the panels front face for a second, the image disorientates turning in sequence, perceived slant-wise. Jade curtain hangs behind central window pane arched into half-moon. White blemishes flash on painted glass surface imitating light. Curves inset into palladian

brickwork follow strict symmetry creating chalky depth. Foregrounded wrought iron fence guards with black arrow tips. The composition twists then collapses. The front carrier lowers his side to the ground. Roughly in place, a boot tight on the panels floored edge, the other end is slowly dropped to the floor. Without sound the image flattens, meeting the black painted wood of the stage floor.

I use writing as a means of cropping out and decelerating. This text explores the ways in which dramaturgical materials can be unlearnt and relearnt when studied at close proximity. Giving heightened attention to an objects surfaces can bring histories of popular use, adaptation, promise and repair into question. The close reading of stage props through writing can render them unfamiliar, allowing for new material readings to be brought to the fore in haptic and analytic detail. Seen from another perspective or another point in time, the stability of the worlds and the cycles of production in which they are embedded can be rethought. This is a process of recontextualization which takes place as an embodied practice. Attempting to locate the legibility of text and the visibility of images within the socio-political present of the usually unseen.

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Dwelling Notes

Eva la Cour and Miki Ambrózy

A conversation between artist-researchers Eva la Cour and Miki Ambŕozy on moving images as artistic research, long-term engagement with place, and the method of live editing.

Miki Ambrózy: I'd like to begin simply. Your work as an artistic researcher is embedded within the long-term relationship you have with Svalbard. A central concern of your inquiry has been to find out how to witness things simply yet critically, in the moment of their becoming. These moments will naturally accumulate, leading to an archive of hard drives. Your research, as articulated in your book, uses an analogy: the production of a film. Could you briefly explain the biographical origins of this triangle: Svalbard, sustained dwelling in a place, and moving images?

Eva la Cour: Yes, though it prompts no simple answer. I arrived in Svalbard shortly after graduating from the Art Academy. In 2007, The Academy of Contemporary Art in Tromsø opened with a distinct focus on histories pertaining to the North of Norway; specific political and cultural struggles, local knowledge, Sami culture, and land relations. This approach distinguished it from other art academies in Norway and allowed it to establish connections outside of Norway rather than simply mirroring the long-established and powerful art academy in Oslo. As part of this decisive profile and attempt to offer something different, the new academy in Tromsø sought to establish student relations abroad and thus invited third-year students from Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, respectively, for one- or two-month visits.

During my time in Tromsø, I worked with video for the first time and created the piece *The Imaginary Nature of*