

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF NON-THEATRE SITES ON AUDIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Through a detailed performance analysis of Kindle Theatre's *Eat Your Heart Out* (2009), Punchdrunk's *Faust* (2006) and my own practice directing Tin Box Theatre's *Stop the Clocks* (2011), this thesis investigates the phenomenological impact of performances which take place in non-theatre sites. I explore phenomenology with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his *Phenomenology of Perception*, in relation to existing notions of theatre phenomenology examined by Bert O. States and Stanton B. Garner. Using site-specific discourse to frame my analysis, I emphasise that the phenomenological experience of an audience is key within site-specific work, and of significance to existing conversations about the genre. I argue for the importance of phenomenology in such work specifically since it offers a live, multi-sensory experience to audiences in a world of increasing digitisation.

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Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life: it exists to make one feel things

-Victor Shklovsky

(1965, p.12)

During Look Left Look Right's *You Once Said Yes* (2011), a series of one-on-one encounters with fifteen different performers across Edinburgh, I walked alone down Grassmarket listening to an MP3 recording. A voice described the street to me in great detail, the smells I would experience as I walked past the cheese shop, the hog roast shop, calling on me to notice things I had never previously considered despite my many trips down Grassmarket. This performance allowed me to experience Edinburgh in a new way, engaging all my senses, as each character shared their story with me and took me on the next part of my journey. How can such performances change the way we experience the world? What is it about performances which take place outside the traditional theatre auditorium which produce a phenomenological experience for audiences?

I will explore these questions through an analysis of Kindle Theatre's *Eat Your Heart Out* (2009) in Stan's Café Theatre Company's A.E. Harris warehouse and Punchdrunk's *Faust* (2006) in an abandoned archive building, relating this to my own practice directing Tin Box Theatre's *Stop the Clocks* (2011) in Newman Brothers Coffin Fittings Factory. My research in this area stemmed from an interest in site-specific theatre, a discourse which I will use along with explorations of phenomenology to frame this analysis. Although site-specific theatre is predominantly recognised as a mode of performance which is created for and centres on one particular site (Wrights and Sites, 2001), it is useful to analyse these performances within site-specific discourse, in light of Patrice

Pavis's statement that "the term [site-specific] refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world" (1998, p.337-8). Rather than focussing on how the original function of the site is revealed within the performance, which is frequently the current emphasis of site-specific discourse, I will demonstrate that of equal importance to emerging conversations about site-specific work is the phenomenological experience of audiences (i.e. matters they perceive with their bodily senses), within such non-theatre sites.

CHAPTER ONE: KINDLE THEATRE'S *EAT YOUR HEART OUT*

Eat Your Heart Out tells the story of a devastated world plagued by famine, where the last three cooks on Earth are set the task of creating a banquet for their Queen. Kindle Theatre transformed the interior of the A.E. Harris warehouse into an apocalyptic junkyard containing overturned cars, fridges, tyres and washing machines piled high against the walls, with a pathway between them along which the audience could move. Designed by local artists, the set consisted of rubbish collected from Birmingham which resonated with the locality of the site, as inhabitants of (or visitors to) Birmingham wandered through the city's discarded possessions. *Eat Your Heart Out*'s junkyard was complemented by the setting of its warehouse, located down a backstreet in an industrial area of the city; its vast cavernous space, bleak external walls and metal gates providing the perfect backdrop for the desolate environment of Kindle Theatre's apocalyptic world.

Figure 1. Apocalyptic Junkyard in *Eat Your Heart Out* (2009), A.E. Harris Warehouse, Birmingham. Set designed and installed by Tony Appleby and Claire Wearn. Photograph by Steven Davies, Claire Wearn and Alicja Rogalska



Working within this site, rather than a traditional auditorium, gave Kindle Theatre the freedom to incorporate the audience in the environment of the performance, challenging conventions of the spectator's "pre-eminently visual experience" (Wiles, 2003, p.12). This was achieved as the performance existed in a site which was not constructed to support the act of passive watching, unlike the theatre auditorium which is "reinforced by stage lighting, air-conditioning, protective arm-rests and an architectural emphasis on sightlines" (Wiles, 2003, p.12). Such a non-auditorium performance environment can directly engage the audience in a sensory experience, defined by Mike Pearson, academic and director of site-specific company Brith Gof, as "*phenomenological*", where "the emphasis is on bodily contact, corporeality, embodiment" (2010, p.29). In *Eat Your Heart Out*, Kindle Theatre created a sensory experience for the audience as they moved through the site, able to feel the crunch of leaves underfoot and the cold air of the warehouse alongside the visual impact of the junkyard surrounding them. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* emphasised that human perception is rooted in bodily experience, stating that by "remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall rediscover ourself [sic], since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is...the subject of perception" (2004, p.239). As Mark Fortier notes, "phenomenology is not concerned with the world as it exists in itself but with how the world appears (as phenomena) to the humans who encounter it" (2002, p.38) and it is the theatre's recreation of lived experience through performance which can introduce this encounter to an audience.

It is undeniable that within all theatre performances the audience are subject to a phenomenological experience which utilises at least two senses. Bert O. States investigates this in his *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*, analysing phenomenology in relation to a range of theatre styles including realism, which he claims

achieves the “imprisonment of the eye” (1985, p.69), as “the stage picture leads us by the [visual and aural] senses into its world” (1985, p.51). In his book *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Stanton Garner also explores these ideas, looking at phenomenology within contemporary drama from 1950 – 1993. His analysis of Sam Shepherd’s *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), is particularly interesting as it highlights that theatre in the auditorium can also utilise the audience’s sense of smell. He describes a moment in which a character made toast on stage, the smell of which “fill[ed] the spectator’s appetites, calling to attention their bodily sentience as they [sat] across from the heating toasters” (1994, p.99). I consider, however, that site-specific work, which is predominantly promenade in form and takes place in sites not originally constructed for performance, has the potential to create a profoundly phenomenological experience where the “visual need not take precedence” over other senses (Pearson 2010, p.141). Thus working within the extensive A.E. Harris warehouse, Kindle Theatre had the freedom to call on different physical senses in the performance. For example, *Eat Your Heart Out* culminated in a banquet where the audience were served a two-course meal, a heightened phenomenological experience incorporating all five of the audience’s senses, most significantly taste. Although it is not unheard of for audiences to consume food as part of a performance in a theatre auditorium, Kindle theatre’s creation of this environment in combination with the multisensory performance served to re-create the lived experience of eating a meal, as audience members sat side by side with others at long tables within the performance. The normality of eating a meal in this extraordinary context drew out their perceptual engagement with the world of the performance event.

Viewing work such as *Eat Your Heart Out* as a ‘performance event’, a term most often used to describe site-specific theatre, “emphasises the significance of the spatial

encounter and is conceived as a whole experience for the spectator” (Wilkie, 2002, p.153). Explorations of space are central within such performances, and using the term ‘event’ helps to nurture the audience’s expectations of experiencing and interacting with the performance in a shared space and time, much like other public events. The “spatial encounter” implicit in *Eat Your Heart Out* as a promenade performance, where the audience moves physically through the space, is vital in framing the journey of the performance. Garner explores this notion, stating that “theatrical space is phenomenal space, governed by the body and its spatial concerns” (1994, p.92). In light of this, it is arguable that non-theatre sites can become theatrical with the physical presence of the audience, transforming site from a place (location) to a space (performance). Cathy Turner observes this distinction in her comment that “space is created by the ways in which place is *moved through*” (2004, p.373). The path which the audience takes through the performance then serves, along with the architecture created by the performers, to re-invent the space. As Turner suggests, “each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting. Thus space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings - a palimpsest” (2004, p.373). The A.E. Harris warehouse can thus be viewed as a palimpsest, as a previously un-theatrical place which, as a site owned by artists, is repeatedly transformed into a site for performance; performers and audiences alike continue to write-and re-write over it.

Utilising the open warehouse of the A.E. Harris, Kindle Theatre were thus able to manipulate the framework of the space

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