

HOW DID MY PARENTS GET TO THE UNDERPASS? EXAMINATION OF A NON-THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE IN AN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

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In this paper I would like to examine my scenography project, a *non-theatrical performance* which occupied a real space: in a half-abandoned underpass, in the heart of the capital of Hungary, Budapest. I focused on the questions of site-specificity regarding this.

The notion of '*site-specific*' is widely used today in the field of performance, because it encompasses a wide range of activities: in a sense, every event, including performative ones, could be called '*site-specific*' because it utilises the physical capabilities of the place in which it is created. It is also commonly used for theatrical performances that leave the stage of the proscenium theatre and find a place for the performance outside the traditional theatre building.

I wanted to narrow down this terminology, so I was looking for a proper interpretation. Carlson wrote that the only performances that can be considered '*site-specific*' are those in which the performance is based explicitly and exclusively on the visible (physical) and non-visible (different aspects such as historical, sociological, etc.) aspects of the chosen place and *cannot be separated* from them without damaging its meaning (Carlson, 2012).

The question was: how could this apply to the interpretation of my chosen place, the underpass? In the architectural sense, this place was an empty, decaying,

poorly lit underpass under the ground, where people walked hastily, without stopping. At the first glance, it didn't seem as if it contained any remarkable non-visible story.

While researching this question, I found McLucas' conceptual trinity of "*The Host, Ghost and Witness*". This helped to answer questions that arose. The notion was created by Clifford McLucas, who was the Art Director and scenographer of the Welsh theatre company of *Brith Gof*. The concept was developed by his directing and scenography design experience of the performance *Tri Bywyd* ('*Three Lives*'). Adopting his conceptual triad, I began to examine the questions that arose in my scenography project.

The Host

The notion of "*Host*" covers the chosen *place* of performance. This is the (physical) location of the performance ('*locus or place*') that '*embodies a complex, inter-related network of knowledge and narratives*' (McLucas, 1995. May: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – PL/9.). But what kind of narratives were embodied into my chosen place?

The decaying underpass was under the ground, like a '*time-capsule*', a buried memory, in contrast to the freshly renovated urban environment at the top. The underpass formerly had a completely different function.

At the time of its inauguration in 1976, the underpass functioned as kind of a grand 'underground mall': glittering high-tech interior design spaces, small shops, and on one wall a long line of phone-boxes, all hidden under the ground. The underpass was part of a once large-scale construction that was intended to show the magnitude of the socialist dictatorship that 'resembled the Western world'. It used to be the case that people slowed down, had a look around, or even made purchases while being able to interact and communicate with each other.

Today it has lost this function: the shops have closed and people no longer stop, just hastily walked through. Nowadays certain materials/architectural elements



Figure 1. The freshly renovated urban environment on the top

(toughened glass handles, chrome hinges, glass portals, etc.) remain in their original condition of 1976, but some parts of the space are in various stages of decay: the broken shop-windows have been replaced with wooden pallet and the broken entrances of the shops have been covered with iron bars. Because of the special mixture of these two, the space functioned as a *'time capsule'*. The presence of the original relics was strongly evocative of the decaying space. Their materiality carried a history and gave insight into a once-existing world.

This place (the underpass) in a certain sense looks like a field of an archaeological digging area. The present state of the underpass shows a deteriorating urban public space, the fragments of the former past: the glass handles, chrome hinges and glass portals, material evidence testifying to a society that once existed.



Figure 2. The decaying underpass under the ground

These artefacts, the traces of the past, the ‘archaeological evidence’¹ (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.9) *“must be set in the context of the society that produced it, rather than allowed to simply stand on its own and speak for itself. And this context includes also the past in the present”* (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.xvi). This new aspiration in the field of archaeology pointed out:

(...) that archeology is more than recovery and examination of the material remains of societies and cultures. The archeological is held to be a dimension of social practice, referring to the articulation of people and things and the material processes they undergo and witness. In particular the archeological concerns the material presence of the past. (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.69)

¹ *Archaeologists do not primarily deal with texts. They deal in words – the books and articles they write; and images – the plans, drawings and photographs. But their evidence is material; their subject-matter events, environments, and the traces left behind’* (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.9).

My scenography was based on using this feature of the underpass. I researched how could I find a meaningful story which was based on this evidence. The socialist dictatorship when these objects were made is very distant from us, and the stories of this time were just tales for people who were born after the revolution of 1989, when this regime of dictatorship was terminated. My questions led me to find *personal* stories which could become ‘Ghosts’ of this underpass. I hoped that these would enable people to explore and bring closer certain layers of meaning of the underpass through their personalities of the stories.

The Ghost

According to McLucas, the story (or stories) of the performance hold the “*Ghost*”. A congruent or incongruent relationship may arise between the ‘*Host*’ and the ‘*Ghost*’, and this ‘may occur at any one of a number of levels including theme or content, or the format interface of existing and newly created architectures’ (McLucas, 1995. May: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – PL/9.).

To this statement, McLucas adds, there is no complete congruence between ‘*Host*’ and ‘*Ghost*’. In other words, there will always be a kind of distance², a ‘gap’ between the two, even if this is based on some very similar and sensitive relationship. McLucas suspects that one of the reasons for this is perhaps because this relationship is (depending on the given theatrical semiotic situation – *my comment*) ‘*dynamically changing rather than permanent and static*’ (McLucas, 1995. May: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – PL/9.).

Based on this, I examined, how aspects, ‘layers’ of the place could relate to the story which is ‘ghosted’ in them. The socialist dictatorship was flourishing in the 70s when the underpass was built, but behind the greatness were individual human destinies forced onto a pre-determined path, which drew a completely

² (...) In fact it is arguable that congruence is never possible (and that an illusion of it is only achieved by a kind of flower arranging of “seemliness”) and that incongruence is always the result of such a coming together. (...) (McLucas, 1995. May: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – PL/9.).



Figure 3. Original toughened glass handle in the underpass

different picture of the era. To reveal this hidden content, I interviewed my parents about their life during this time, and after this, another world was uncovered through the personal family interview. Despite the fact I made the interview with them separately, both of them told the same story. They talked about completely different things to what we heard in the propaganda of the socialist dictatorship. They talked about deprivation, lack of housing, moving permanently and lots of continuous and hard work. I decided to put *their personal stories* into the underpass. I realized my goal was to change the abandoned place to a live one and get closer to the spectators by allowing them to experience my parents' personal stories.

As you see, the visible fragments, the decaying objects, the 'layers' of the architectural past, *'the Host'* is connected to *'the Ghosts'* the 'layers' of two individual stories. These stories are lost to the present because they came from people who were still young when they lived in the 'golden age' of the underpass,



Figure 4. 'Praesenscop Augmented Reality Boxes' in the underground

which has already been lost. The answer lies in the relationship between the archaeological approach and the *performative event* because both of them generate socio-cultural narratives. The *'archaeological imagination constitutes a kind of dramaturgy'* (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.68).

Witness

The third element of this trinity of concept is the spectator (*"Witness"*).

My project was planned in an urban space, where the place of the performance was used both by everyday passers-by and the spectators. So, in this case, it was not clear who the spectators really were.

The title of this performative event was *'I Don't Live Different Than You'* and it was described as a 'short city adventure tour'. The participants were invited by a virtual tour guide – through a text on headphones – from the building of the 'FUGA' (Contemporary Architecture Centre) to the underpass. The spectators

were walking through a brand new square while listening to the introductory text, and in about five minutes arrived to the entrance of the underpass. Until the spectators arrived in the underpass, it was not possible to distinguish them from passers-by.

There the participants were ‘welcomed’ by three imaginary objects, three transformed old cardboard shoe-boxes endowed with meaning in the theatrical context. I used the technology of *Augmented Reality* (AR) in my scenography design in a playful way. AR technology is capable of revealing objects which are not present in the physical sense of the word. I did not use the real technology of AR, because I wanted to just play with this well-known technique, and used the AR interface – the old redesigned cardboard boxes – as a ‘magical object’. The ‘*Praesenscop Augmented Reality Boxes*’ were filled with individual stories.

The photos on the transparent plexiglass in the shoe-boxes – like a popular *diaporama* technique in the 70s – could be manually moved by the spectators, while they were listening to the personal stories. The dramaturgically staged narrative revealed the moments of life stories of a family – a young husband and his wife. They were talking about the same situations from their two points of view. I asked two young actors to tell the text: their young voices brought the stories to the present. Their stories provided an individual description of the darker side of the socialist dictatorship.

During the performance, the passers-by paid attention to the spectators.

The spectators could see the passers-by, through the transparent ‘*Praesenscop Augmented Reality Boxes*’ and they were also watched by the everyday passers-by, who went through the underpass during the performative event. “*Performance generates two orders of narratives: the narratives of the watchers and the watched*” (Pearson, 1992: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – GL/18: 3.), as Pearson wrote in his manuscript. That means, in this case, that spectators could move the plexiglass in the cardboard boxes, based on their inner rhythm, and they could connect their own previous individual memories and history. The underpass meant something different to every spectator, and the scenography

installation left that opportunity open. There was thus no possibility that the performative event would mean the same thing for any two people.

The spectators listened to the stories of the two protagonists through headphones. They looked at the pictures in the cardboard boxes, and dozens of people walking through the underpass with *their own* stories.

The *individual story* or *stories* that were created moving through the place cannot be repeated again and because of this, the underpass is always in a state of change. The place, the underpass was a 'non-place' in the sense of Augé³, because it was just a gateway before the performative event. That means, it was always in the moving of people, the passers-by who used this path every day. *'The traveller's space may thus be the archetype of non-place'* (Augé, 1995, p.86). Nevertheless, it gave a temporary meaning in the frame of the performance. Present and past, individual and day-to-day were connected in the ephemeral time-frame of the performance.

The performance which was created was able to connect the socio-historical and socio-cultural threads and memories of a particular place in a *'real-time presentation and representation'* (Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 55). McLucas called this notion *'a strange hybrid of architecture and event'*, and he created a name for this new, hybrid form, calling it *'architectureeventspace'* (McLucas, 1998. November: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – GL/2: 13.)⁴.

The site of the 'performative event' is referred to as *'heterotopia'* by Shanks, as a kind of a unique field of force that, through *liminality*, can connect cultural traces of memory 'out of place' or in a 'transitional space'. *'Liminality'* means

³ '(...) clearly the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. Although the two sets of relations overlap to a large extent, and in any case officially (individuals travel, make purchases, relax), they are still not confused with one another; for non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality' (Augé 1995, p.94).

⁴ This idea is closely related to Bernard Tschumi's theoretical viewpoint of 'architecture and space'. In his view, the architectural space and the event that occurs in it, are in a relationship. *'(...) architecture is both about space and the events that take place in that space'*.

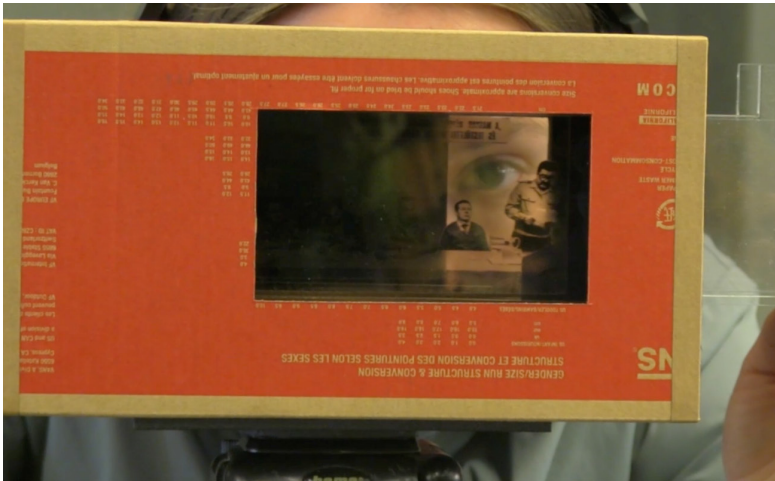


Figure 5. Photos on the plexiglass. One of the three *'Praesenscop Augmented Reality Boxes'*

a state of transition where the original structures are overridden and the state of change may result in the developing of new forms. The *'liminality of the performative event'* enables those historical threads to connect and interweave that are capable of creating new, structural relationships (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p.55).

This 'ephemeral event'

(...) (m)eaningfully constituted, 'on purpose', extremely generative of signs (every aspect is capable of semanticization), performance may resist (linear) 'readability', particularly if it makes no 'direct appeal' (operative awareness of the presence of watchers) to the outside. Its richness of meaning(s) is only partly controllable: performance is more or less suggestive/cognitive according to the expectation/experience/background of the watcher. (Pearson, 1992: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – GL/18: 1.)

In this case, the 'urban landscape' was transformed by the spectators (and the everyday passers-by) in the timeframe of the performative event.

This *site-specific performance* is created in a complex, temporary space on the borderlands of the arts of *'performance, architecture, land art, installation, and multimedia'* (McLucas, 1998. November: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – GL/2: 4.). McLucas emphasizes that the concept of *'site-specific'* does not only mean that the venue of the performance is simply outside the theatre building, *'(...) but (...) goes further and engages with that site and integrates place and event to create a hybrid of architectural installation and performance. (...)'* (McLucas, 1995. May: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – PL/9.). Removed from the restrictions of the traditional theatre space, where the relationship between the performance and the viewer is automatically defined (even physically), site-specific performances are related to multidimensional reality.

In this space the constraining presence of defining new relations takes shape: *'between viewers as individuals and the audience as a mass; between viewers as individuals and the performers, between the mass and performers; between performers and performers'* (McLucas, 1998. November: Brith Gof Archive – part of a manuscript – GL/2: 21.). The audience arrives in the site-specific performance space not with the supposed expectation that they would have in a traditional theatre, so their presence must move in a dynamic relationship with the other two members of the conceptual trinity, the *Host* and the *Ghost*. McLucas sees the audience as the *'amplifiers'* or *'resonators'* of the piece (ibid: 21). This trinity is created within the limited time-frame of the performative event. The three reinforce each other's effects.

The project I have just described has created a possibility for me to find a place for a performative event in a public urban space. This essay sets out this *space-exploring*, and it was just a small slice of the initiatives created over the last twenty years in classrooms and gyms of former school buildings, movie theatres, industrial buildings, or on sites that have lost their original function. Leaving

the traditional theatre building, the fixed relation of stage and auditorium ceased to be: in the new sites, spaces changed into three or four dimensions. Every attempt – with its solutions to spatial modification – aimed to bring spectators and the events of stage closer together: moving across the boundary into each other's spaces, making the two poles palpable and more sensitive to each other. The requirement of change created *fundamental changes* in the traditional theatre system. Leaving the two-dimensional space and thinking in three or four dimensions, the previously immobile relationship lost some stability. The new situations have generated a presence demanding the definition of new relationships.

This study focused on the questions of place, space, and site, and the issues of how could I find and reveal the 'layers' of the place – the "layers of meaning" – that could serve as the basis for the planned performance. The '*Ghosts*' of the planned performance and the chosen layers of meaning of the place may be interrelated, but it could (also) be a very distant relationship, and the 'specific' place requires a special attitude from the scenography designer, one which may be different from a designing for a traditional proscenium stage.

The city is constantly in motion. Shortly after documenting and filming the plan of the performative event, one of the underground stores was rented again by a small matchbox dealer who had been there in the 70s in the underpass. A new story is being formed between the walls...

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