



Drawing and Visualisation Research

DRAWN BEHIND THE FOURTH WALL: THE DRAWING PRODUCES A MOBILE, EMBODIED SPECTATORIAL PRESENCE

Sue Field

National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), Australia.
Sue.field@nida.edu.au

This paper examines the *presence of the spectator* viewing a drawing, particularly in the context of a mobile, embodied spectatorial presence and gaze; the presence of the drawing artist in the process or 'moment of drawing' is largely irrelevant. The drawing generates a spectatorial encounter which evokes both presence and absence, including that of the drawer. My drawing practice seeks to discover a hybrid genre that is both a drawing and a 'theatre without actors', constructed through the image of the empty stage. The spectator's encounter with the drawing becomes a form of post-dramatic theatre. For this paper, I will examine my drawn work titled: *The Chairs*, which was my first completed work undertaken for this research. The paper will also identify the outcomes from this work and how they underpin my current investigations.

Published in *TRACEY* | journal

Presence

July 2016

[www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/
sota/tracey/
tracey@lboro.ac.uk](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/sota/tracey/)

This paper examines the *presence of the spectator* viewing a drawing, particularly in the context of a mobile, embodied spectatorial presence and gaze; the presence of the drawing artist in the process or ‘moment of drawing’ is largely irrelevant. The drawing generates a spectatorial encounter that evokes both presence and absence including that of the drawer. My current practice-based research investigates, as an art practice, unexplored intersections between the applied art of scenography¹, post-dramatic theatre and ‘expanded drawing’. The primary aim is to interrogate, develop and contextualise the potential of a personal drawing practice associated with the immersive, spectator-centric space of post-dramatic theatre, (Lehmann, 2006. p.6); in other words, to produce an embodied sensory experience, which incorporates elements of post-dramatic theatre, partly through content and partly through its methods of engagement. In this way, the spectatorial presence is prioritised over and above narrative meaning, plot structure and the presence or absence of the performer. My drawing practice seeks to discover a hybrid genre that is both a drawing and a ‘theatre without actors’, constructed through the image of the empty stage. The spectator’s encounter with the drawing becomes a form of post-dramatic theatre. In this paper I will examine my drawn work titled, *The Chairs*, which was my first completed work undertaken for this research. I will also identify the outcomes from this work and how they underpin my current investigations.

THE CHAIRS

I began *The Chairs* intending to investigate performative drawing - that is, the drawing as an artefact embodying a performative space which remains ‘active’ after the action and ‘doing’ of drawing. The question proposed was: how does this active space demand that the spectator participate in the *spectre* of performance embodied in the drawing? However, it was the process of creating *The Chairs* which prompted a new direction in my drawing practice. Notions of presence and absence emerged which have now become the philosophical framework supporting the scholarly investigation into my practice. Consequently, my research currently seeks to discover and develop innovative ways of engaging the mobile, embodied spectatorial presence and gaze within a post-dramatic theatrical space which evokes an absent presence.

¹ Scenography is originally a European term for theatre design but has become increasingly used in academic discourse.

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

The Oxford English Dictionary defines presence as *'the fact or condition of being present; the state of being with or in the same place as a person or thing'*.² My research applies this definition to the presence of the spectator in a post-dramatic space rather than to the presence of the drawing artist 'doing' the drawing. There are also no 'actors' as such but their absence becomes an absent presence. In this sense, absence becomes presence. Here absence is not a vague, diffuse entity, but a palpable tension that the performers have only just left the post-dramatic space or perhaps are about to enter from behind the curtain or door. Currently, my drawings have a panoramic format (up to nine metres long), forcing the spectator to become the 'performer' walking along the drawing to seek out meaning. Figure 1.



FIGURE 1: THE CHAIRS.

This is at odds with conventional Western theatre where the body of the spectator is static. Only the performers and objects move, not the audience. My drawings, however, compel the spectator to experience the empty stage as an embodied sensory experience, similar to that generated by post-dramatic theatre.

² "presence, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web. 3 August 2015.

DEFINING POST-DRAMATIC THEATRE

The term post-dramatic theatre was coined by the German theatre academic Hans-Thies Lehmann in his 1999 book, *Post-dramatisches Theater*. The English translation was published in 2006. According to Lehmann, this ‘new theatre’ (Lehmann, 2006. p.68) is a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving (Lehmann, 2006. p.6). Lehmann further suggests that in this new theatre the spectators become co-writers of the text and active witnesses ‘*who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning*’ (Lehmann, 2006. p.6). In a similar vein, Rachel Fensham argues that post-dramatic theatre has created a new kind of spectator who participates in the process and meaning of the event, or situation (Fensham, 2012. NPF).

KEY PLAYERS

The two key players in the field of post-dramatic theatre are the contemporary British theatre companies, Punchdrunk and Theatre of Forced Entertainment. Both have created a new kind of spectator who is a participant in the shared space of post-dramatic theatre. The spectators are forced to become witnesses and voyeurs where ‘*suddenly, one observes oneself watching, while simultaneously being part of the performance*’ (Vorwort, 2004. p.15). The spectator is urged to move within the performance space to take on the role of performer while the actor steps back to become a bystander as in the work of Punchdrunk, *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2014). The spectators are also free to enter, leave and return to the performance space as they please, as in *Quizoola!*, first devised in 1996 and restaged in 2015 by the Theatre of Forced Entertainment as a durational performance (running for twenty-four exhausting hours). This freedom to move in and out and through the performance space, to intermingle with the actors and/or simply to come and go at will conflicts with traditional theatre where the spectators ‘*are condemned to silent observation*’ (Lehmann, 2006. p.3) in the darkened auditorium and in front of an imaginary fourth wall.

THE FOURTH WALL

Traditional theatre demands that the spectator’s presence does not exist, as Denis Diderot, proposed in 1758 in *De la Poésie Dramatique*:

‘Whether you are writing or whether you’re acting, think no more of the spectator than if he did not exist. Imagine at the edge of the stage a huge wall which

separates you from the orchestra; act as if the curtain never rose' (Lessing, 1986. p.340).

Post-dramatic theatre is a multiplication of frames, not just the single frame of the traditional proscenium stage which deliberately separates the performer from the spectator by an invisible fourth wall. Lehmann writes of a liberated world that is not *'walled off'* by a fictional totality (Lehmann, 2004. p.105). It is the multiplication of frames of post-dramatic theatre that transforms the performance area into an immersive, spectator-centric space. Maaïke Bleeker describes the presence of the post-dramatic spectator as a *'here and now-ness'*. She argues:

'The spectators lose their safe places in the auditorium. They lose those places – marked by absence – from whence they might merely observe a dramatic world unfolding 'over there'. Instead, spectators are addressed more directly and made aware of the fact that the theatrical event is taking place here and now' (Bleeker, 2008. p.65).

Bleeker's concept of *'here and now-ness'* is also manifest in many contemporary works defined as *expanded drawing*: where the spectator becomes acutely aware of their own presence within the *'expanded drawn'* space. It is these works my research is examining as precedents to my drawing practice.

DEFINING EXPANDED DRAWING

The emergent field of expanded drawing challenges preconceived notions of the discipline, enlarging the concept far beyond a two dimensional piece of paper. Now drawing can include media other than the traditional materials, such as film, video, montage, digital computer technology and on-site installations and sculpture. The three key players which my research is currently investigating are the artists Itay Ohaly, Gosia Wlodarczak and the scenographer/artist, William Kentridge.³ All produce expanded drawings that not only deconstruct tradition but also employ post-dramatic scenographic strategies to create and exhibit their works. They all produce expanded drawings that are inherently theatrical. Spectators encounter the drawing and the process of drawing as they would with post-

³ It is interesting to note here that Ohaly and Wlodarczak are in the recently published book, *Liquid Spaces: Scenography, Installations and Spatial Experiences*, 2015. The chapter they are included in is titled *Scenography*.

dramatic theatre. There is no fourth wall. They are free to come and go from the performance space and to attach meaning or none at all. Expanded drawing demands the movement of bodies, particularly the presence of the spectator, within a space. It is these strategies which govern the spectatorial movements, presence and gaze that I have employed in the creation of my own drawn work, *The Chairs*.

THE CHAIRS

The Chairs was completed in February 2015. A script always prompts my drawn works but, as in post-dramatic theatre, the text is simply an inspirational trigger and not necessarily the driving force behind the work. *The Chairs* was generated by the dramatic script *Les Chaises*, an absurdist tragic farce written in French by Eugène Ionesco and first performed in Paris in 1952. This strange, surreal play is set in the future, four hundred thousand years after the city of lights, Paris, has been obliterated. All that remains are an old man and woman, the remnants of a past dystopia, and the memory of a song, *Paris sera toujours Paris*, 1939.



FIGURE 2: THE CHAIRS, TWO PANELS OF TWELVE.

My research has adopted this unusual script because it exemplifies Ionesco's conviction that the spectator's presence is the only space that ultimately matters (Saiu, 2007. NPF). Absence becomes presence in *Les Chaises*: an absent presence in which the spectator is invited to play an ontological game of complicity in an inner space which is irremediably broken into pieces without a centre, just margins and marginality (Saiu, 2007. NPF). It is in this play that Ionesco deliberately compels the spectator to watch empty chairs occupied by a nonexistent or absent audience as a means of becoming more aware of their own condition as a spectator among other spectators; thus creating a shared experience of witnessing among, and always together with, others (Saiu, 2007. NPF). Ionesco's preoccupation with spectatorial perception and presence in *Les Chaises* echoes the ideology

of my research and provides an illuminating stimulus for the drawing as the primary method of my research.

ABSENT PRESENCE IN THE CHAIRS

The Chairs is a panoramic drawn work, approximately 9000mm x 600mm in size, and is largely executed in black pen and ink on printed script and sheet music. Figure 3.



FIGURE 3: THE CHAIRS

It is made up of twelve panels or drawing sections which can be reordered or interchanged at whim. Here, as in post-dramatic theatre, chronological narrative and linear meaning are irrelevant. There is no beginning or end, an eternally looping, revolving entity, which is a manifestation of the artist/researcher's autobiographical interior monologue or 'stream of consciousness'. Erika Fischer-Lichte comments in relation to post-dramatic theatre can also apply to The Chairs:

'The spectators are free to associate everything with anything and to extract their own semiosis without restriction and at will, or even to refuse to attribute any meaning at all and simply experience the objects presented to them in their concrete being' (Fischer-Lichte, 1997. p.57-58).

The drawing is multi-perspectival and focuses on absent presence. There are no human figurative elements, other than the running man exit sign. Figure 4.

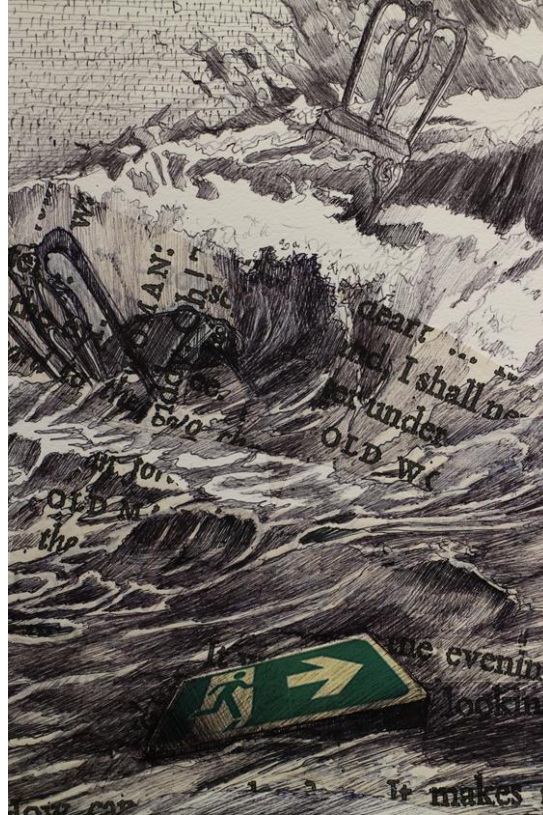


FIGURE 4: THE RUNNING MAN EXIT SIGN.

The objects embody presence and absence; for instance, the lone door-jamb slightly ajar, neither open nor closed, the neglected telephone receiver lying forgotten off the hook, the broken, discarded umbrella and the profusion of seemingly abandoned chairs. Figures 5&6.



FIGURE 5: THE TELEPHONE OFF THE HOOK.



FIGURE 6: THE DISCARDED UMBRELLA.

There is an ambivalent sense that someone, the performer, has just left the 'room'. The ambiguity of the objects, as Jacques Rancière argues, compels the spectator 'to exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter, who observes phenomena and searches for their causes' (Rancière, 2007. p.4). The objects in *The Chairs*, as in post-dramatic theatre, has signs that can provoke meaning or perhaps none at all? Figure 7.



FIGURE 7: THE CHAIRS, TWO PANELS OF TWELVE.

As Bleeker again argues: 'freed from his or her fixed position and no longer forced to see in one way rather than the other, the spectator is granted the freedom to see and give meaning at will – or not to attribute any meaning at all – to the experience there to be apprehended' (Bleeker, 2008. p.65). The objects within the drawn *mise-en-scène* become, as on stage, emblematic, the carriers of myth. These signs 'stage the act of viewing' (Caroline van Eck, 2011. p.14) or more implicitly the act of mobile, embodied gazing. The

objects are reflexive, post-dramatic strategies or meta-theatrical tropes⁴ which emphasise what Bleeker earlier referred to as ‘*here and now-ness*’ (Bleeker, 2008. p.65) where the spectator becomes acutely aware of their own presence among others within the post-dramatic performance space. Figure 8.

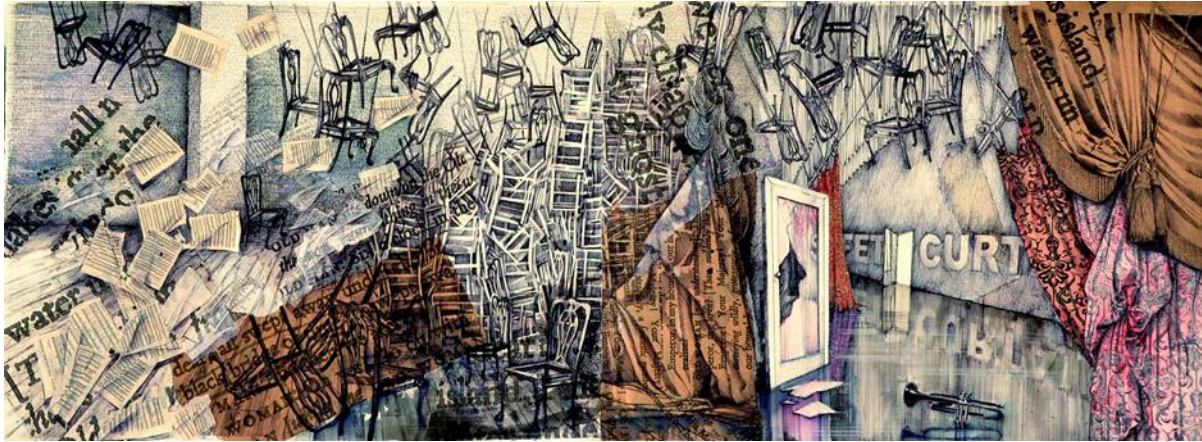


FIGURE 8: THE CHAIRS, TWO PANELS OF TWELVE.

EXHIBITING THE CHAIRS

The Chairs was exhibited at The National Institute of Dramatic Art, NIDA, Sydney, Australia in a black box performance space, intentionally mirroring the context of the drawn work which is an ‘empty stage’. My research examined different possibilities of exhibiting the work but finally settled on the panoramic performativity of the medieval woven wool tapestry, as in the French *Tapisseries de l’Apocalypse* (1377-1382). When first completed, this extraordinary tapestry was approximately 144m x 6.1m and was probably intended to be displayed publically, supported by six wooden structures possibly arranged so as to position the spectator near to the centre of the display, imitating a jousting field.⁵ Again, because of the monumental scale of the tapestry, the medieval spectator would have been compelled to move to view the tapestry. The tapestry then ceases to be a backdrop for action but is the impetus for action itself. The following are the drawings for the design of the layout for the exhibition, The Chairs, including the presence of the spectator, moving through the space. Figure 9. The panoramic scale of this work demanded that the spectator constantly backtrack, stand back or move in closely to absorb the detail of the work.

⁴ Meta-theatre is ‘theatre that is aware of itself’.

⁵ It is uncertain how Louis I, Duke of Anjou used the tapestry; it was probably intended to be displayed outside, supported by six wooden structures, possibly arranged so as to position the viewer near to the centre of the display, imitating a jousting field. (Mesqui, Jean (2001). *Château d’Angers*. Paris: Centre des monuments nationaux.) p50

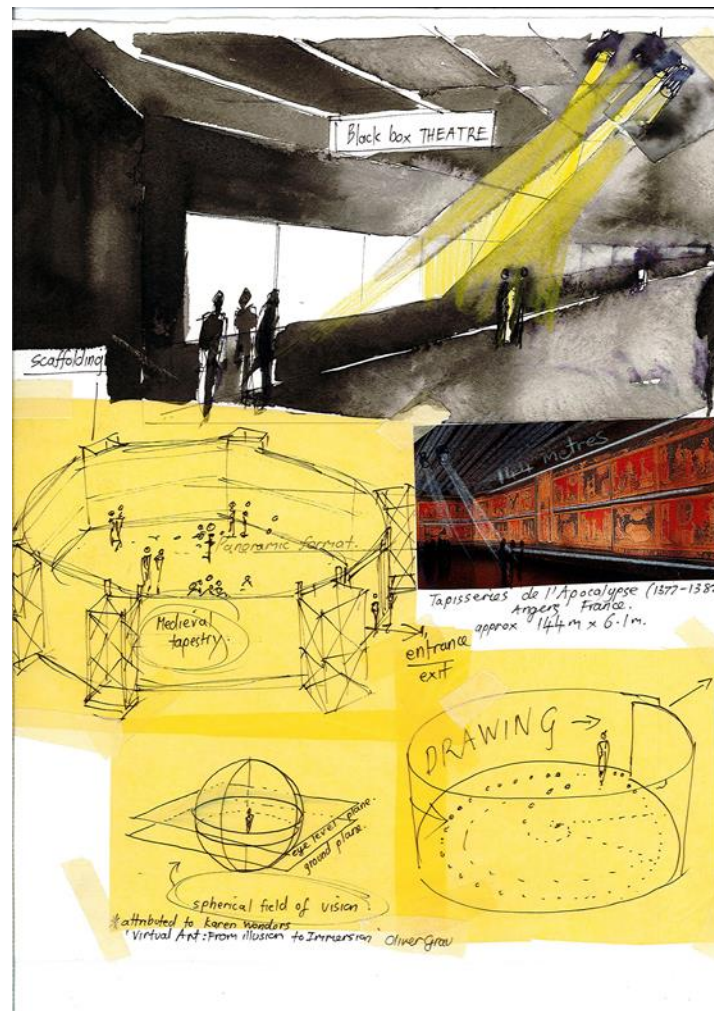


FIGURE 9: LAYOUT FOR THE EXHIBITION, THE CHAIRS

SOUNDSCAPE OF THE CHAIRS

The Chairs was also exhibited with a soundscape which was a combination of two very different acoustic compositions. First, there was the hypnotic sound of lapping waves, underscored by the dulcet and mellow tones of the French cabaret singer, Maurice Chevalier, crooning *Paris sera toujours Paris*. However, this ambience was continuously interrupted by the persistent, intrusive noise of an abrasive telephone ring and high-pitched doorbell. The aim here was to prevent the spectator becoming lulled into a state of nostalgia by both the objects and the soundscape. The soundscape was a device in which the spectator was abruptly distanced from subconscious emotional involvement through what Bertolt Brecht defined as the 'effect of alienation'. The spectator's attention was constantly drawn to meta-theatrical conventions, which in turn rendered them aware of their own presence gazing at the drawing.

EXHIBITION OUTCOME

More questions than answers emerged from the process of producing and exhibiting *The Chairs* but, despite the challenges, I have embarked on my next drawn work, armed with a new set of strategies. These provide a framework in which to further experiment, develop and design a hybrid genre which is both a drawing and a form of post-dramatic theatre. I will also film the spectator's viewing of the final drawn work as a record of their movements or more specifically as evidence of how the work evokes a mobile, embodied spectatorial presence within the post-dramatic 'shared space' (Lehmann, 2006. p.122).

CONCLUSION

The primary focus of this paper has been the presence of the spectators viewing the drawing. However, the presence of the 'absent' drawer is revealed to the spectator because the drawings are intrinsically autobiographical. They are a form of stream-of-consciousness whereby every object has a deep personal connection with the drawing artist. The spectators, as in post-dramatic theatre, are free to generate their own meaning or none at all from the drawings. The aim of my research is to create a mobile spectatorial experience through an embodied sensory encounter with the drawing whereby a '*heightened awareness for one's own presence develops*' (Lehmann, 2006. p.122). I want to investigate the nature of this experience and the ways in which it can be enhanced through creative engagement, thereby developing and deepening my practice to provide insights into the spectatorial presence and experience.

REFERENCES

- BLEEKER, M. 2008. *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- CAROLINE VAN ECK, S. B. 2011. *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.
- FENSHAM, R. 2012. Postdramatic Spectatorship: Participate or Else *Critical Stages*, December 2012.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, E. 1997. *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press.
- LEHMANN, H. T. 2004. Shakespeare's Grin: Remarks on World Theatre with Forced Entertainment. In: JUDITH HELMER, F. M. (ed.) *Not Even a Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag Berlin
- LEHMANN, H. T. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*, New York, Routledge.
- LESSING, G. E. 1986. *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*, Stuttgart, Olms.

RANCIÈRE, J. 2007. The Emancipated Spectator. *Artforum International*, 45.

SAIU, O. 2007. Metaphors of Spectorial Space in Beckett's and Ionesco's Theatre. *Double Dialogues (Refereed electronic journal)*. Canterbury, Vic, Double Dialogues.

VORWORT, L. R. F. 2004. Plenty of Leads to Follow: Forward. In: JUDITH HELMER, F. M. (ed.) *Not even a game anymore: The theatre of Forced Entertainment*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag.