



Locations of Memory: Bridging the Gap between Private and Public Memory in Location Performance and Theater

Mitu's *Hamlet*/Ur-*Hamlet*

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Entender a memória como aquilo de que somos feitos ou como aquilo que efectivamente somos faz associar o conceito de memória aos de história, subjectividade e lugar. Tal como a subjectividade, memória «significa diferentes coisas e é entendida de diferentes maneiras em diferentes lugares» (Radstone / Hodgkin, 2003: 2). Na sua antologia *Regimes of Memory*, Radstone e Hodgkin notam que os estudos contemporâneos de memória centram-se mais na memória histórica, social, cultural e popular do que na memória individual. Esta situação contrasta com os anteriores estudos de memória, onde a memória é entendida como «o refúgio do indivíduo e onde a relação entre a memória individual e a pública apareciam sobrecarregadas (*ibidem*). Radstone e Hodgkin acrescentam: «as dificuldades da memória estão, pois, associadas à questão de como a separação entre o “privado” interior e o “público” exterior da memória podem ser ultrapassados» (*ibidem*). Esta separação está relacionada com o modo como se conceptualiza o indivíduo social. Se for entendida como um relevante arquivo de história, a memória individual contará como algo mais do que um fenómeno pessoal. Esta perspectiva tem sido importante para o Teatro do Real pelo uso e pelo questionamento que faz do testemunho. Artistas de teatro e da arte da instalação têm continuado a tomar em conta que aquilo que a memória e a história produzem, nas palavras de Radstone e Hodgkin, é «também contingente aos (contestáveis) sistemas de conhecimento e poder que as produziram» (*ibidem*: 11). Os três trabalhos aqui discutidos – *The Circuit*, *The Heidelberg Project*, e *Hamlet*/Ur-*Hamlet* – estão entre os muitos trabalhos que abordam e criticam as epistemologias da memória ao misturarem livremente as suas fontes de formas maneiras provocadoras.

TEATRO DO REAL / PERFORMANCE SITE-SPECIFIC / ESTUDOS DE MEMÓRIA / ESTUDOS DE PERFORMANCE / DIALÉCTICA

Thinking of memories as what we are made of, as what we are, links memory with history, subjectivity, and place. Like subjectivity, memory “means different things and is understood in different ways at different times” (Radstone/Hodgkin, 2003: 2). In their anthology, *Regimes of Memory*, Radstone and Hodgkin note

that contemporary memory studies focuses more on historical, social, cultural, and popular memory than on individual memory. This is in contrast to earlier memory studies, where memory is understood as the “refuge of the individual and where the relation between that individual memory and the public sphere appeared fraught” (*ibid*). Radstone and Hodgkin continue, “Memory’s difficulties are linked, then with the question of how that ‘gap’ between memory’s ‘private’ inside and its public ‘outside’ might be bridged” (*ibid*). This gap is informed by whether social individuals are understood as meaningful archives of history in which individual memory counts as more than a personal phenomenon (see Lambek 2003). This view is important to theatre of the real because of its interrogation of testimony. Theatre and installation artists continue to take into account that what memory and history produce in Radstone and Hodgkin’s words is, “also contingent upon the (contestable) systems of knowledge and power that produce them” (*ibid*: 11). The three works I discuss here – *The Circuit*, *The Heidelberg Project*, and *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* – are among the many works that both employ and critique the epistemologies of memory by freely remixing their sources in provocative ways.

MEMORY AND LOCATION PERFORMANCE

Founded in 2009 the Hinterlands theatre company produced *The Circuit* in 2013. Co-directed by Richard Newman and Liza Bielby, *The Circuit* directly addresses the company’s home in Detroit, Michigan. Conceived as a performance of “outcasts of the postindustrial age,” *The Circuit* refers to the theatre circuit that vaudeville performers made before cinema and the Great Depression ended that world.¹ Detroit’s National Theatre, which opened as part of the vaudeville circuit in 1911, is the city’s only surviving theatre from that era. When vaudeville was obliterated by the film industry, the National Theatre attempted showing movies, then switched to burlesque shows, eventually declining to pornography in the 1960s. It is now a mostly unused, and beautiful, landmark building. Newman and Bielby’s interest in vaudeville stems, in part, from the history of the National Theatre, its architectural legacy representing Detroit’s survival through successive periods of promise and decline.

1 <http://thehinterlandsensemble.org/circuit/>.

Detroit, also known as the Motor City because it was home to the America's leading automobile manufacturers, is the birthplace of Motown Records, techno music, and the dance style known as Detroit jit. The city even has its own soft drink, Faygo. What wasted Detroit was globalization leading to the disappearance of high-paying manufacturing jobs. Poverty was followed by white flight, race riots, and abandoned, blighted neighborhoods. Today's jaw-dropping scene is of partially demolished buildings and weirdly resurgent grasslands overgrowing vast tracts of the inner city. In this way, Detroit is a second-growth city, like a second-growth forest, but one blanketing industrial remains. Part wreck, part garbage, part green, Detroit today is where the pre-industrial, the modern, and the postindustrial conjoin to create a unique location-specific environment. The city has a self-consciousness that is instrumental in plotting the politics of place saturated with memories of the Detroit-that-was in all its phases.²

In *The Evocative Object World*, Christopher Bollas analyzes architecture as arising from people's subconscious and unconscious lives. As such, architecture is evidence of psychic structures (2009: 47). Even demolished and vacated buildings play a part in the lives of cities because they remain in people's memories as frames of reference for subsequent encounters. *The Circuit*'s homage to Detroit's National Theatre with its vaudevillian juxtaposition of comedy sketches, sight-gags, stage business, satire, parody, and music is an invocation of architectural memories in the context of Detroit's decades' long performance traditions. Physical comedy routines from vaudeville like "Slowly I Turned" and versions of well-known acts like the ukulele-strumming St. Claire Sisters and the tap duo, the Nicholas Brothers, morph into more contemporary forms like 1970s Detroit jit, the mid-1990s rave scene, Insane Clown Posse with its postmodern-tribal face painting and violent lyrics, Faygo showers, and hardcore hip-hop dancing.³ The homemade, thrift-shop style of *The Circuit*'s sets and costumes conforms to the practice, characteristic of today's Detroit, of making both art and home from the detritus of this urban environment.

2 The broad range of art institutions in today's Detroit reflects this development. At one end of the spectrum is a local venue such as Trinosphere, a re-purposed former spice factory that now serves as a coffee shop, gallery, and music and performance venue. At the other end of the spectrum are museums such as MOCAD, the Museum of Contemporary Arts and the Detroit Institute of Arts with its world-class collection.

3 In Detroit, Insane Clown Posse considers itself horrorcore.

THE HEIDELBERG
PROJECT'S PILE
OF ANIMALS, TYREE
GUYTON, 2015
AND CONTINUING,
[P] CAROL MARTIN



The Circuit proposes that, like Detroit itself, vaudeville and its montage of acts lives on in the bodies of the performers and is a model for the pastiche of Detroit's survival strategies that are present even without direct, documented transmission. The structure of *The Circuit*, with its string of high-energy, arguably absurd entertainments, parallels the illogical realities that constitute Detroit both now and then: agribusiness and rewilding in an urban environment; successive cycles of migration to and then emigration from the city; the continued existence of Hamtramck, a separate town and tax zone strangely located in the center of the city; the sprawling remains of the legendary, now abandoned, Packard plant; recurring arson, thousands of abandoned houses, the looming Michigan Central train station with its 18 floors of broken windows, the birth of unique music and dance styles, and Manuel "Matty" Moroun's private ownership of the Ambassador Bridge linking Detroit and Canada.

The Circuit does not refer directly to the racialized, if not outright racist, history of American popular entertainment. Instead, in staging a form like vaudeville, itself a product of the very industrialization that wrecked Detroit, *The Circuit* implies that Detroit's culture and people (the population plummeting from one and a half million in 1970 to just over seven hundred thousand in 2010) can be understood through performances that are attuned

THE HEIDELBERG
PROJECT, A DOMESTIC
SCENE ON THE REMAINS
OF THE STUFFED ANIMAL
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to and saturated with memories of this particular place.⁴ Newman and Bielby's diverse cast gives popular performances forms their cultural due. The Detroit jit performed by Haleem Rasul, and accompanied by Bielby's beatboxing, is happening in front of our eyes even as it is being recorded by a live-feed camera. The black and white projection behind Rasul suggests a transparent symbiotic connection between present acts and those of earlier times; distinct cultures that bridge the gap between memory and history and individual and cultural identities. Similarly, Bielby's beatboxing cites the use of *tal*, the rhythmic pattern in Indian and Bangla music and dance (there is currently a large Bangladeshi population in Detroit). Hip-hop and rave in *The Circuit* attest to the persistence of a repertoire of knowledge embodied by individuals and alive in the city's collective cultural memory.

Early in the show Newman reminds us that vaudeville means "voice of the city," and links it to the flood of immigrants that poured into the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century signaling that *The Circuit* is a kind of doppelganger of Detroit itself. The performance embodies and enacts the contradictions represented by Detroit's still-standing abandoned houses: present but gone.

Predating the Hinterlands' *The Circuit* is the city-block large *Heidelberg Project*, conceived by Detroit native Tyree Guyton in

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic_history_of_Detroit (accessed 12 December 2014).

1986 and still standing. Guyton's mission is to change lives and communities through art. As the *Heidelberg Project* brochure proclaims, the project was "born of protest and shaped by years of support, opposition, and a city in crisis." The material medium of Guyton's work is discarded objects and entire houses on a distressed urban block: decorated abandoned houses, shacks, sculptures, and assemblages of found (actually selected) objects. The fact that the objects are castoffs suggests both the devastation that is Detroit and its ongoing cycles of desire, acquisition, and, in this case, repurposing.

The *Heidelberg Project*'s most dramatic art works are houses: the Stuffed Animal House, the Dotty-Wotty House, the Record House, and the Obstruction of Justice House. The Dotty-Wotty House was inspired by Guyton's Grandpa Sam, who used to say: "People are like jellybeans – all similar, yet different – all the colors together."⁵ Using the detritus and debris of everyday life, Guyton has a multicultural vision of a future constructed from the racial and environmental wreckage of Detroit's past.⁶ Brightly colored dots are painted all over the *Heidelberg Project*.

Among the multitude of found objects that Guyton has assembled into sculptures, piled into heaps, or affixed to houses, perhaps none is so suffused with memory, surrogation, and nostalgia as the Stuffed Animal House. How are we to understand these stuffed animals impaled – or crucified – on the remains of this Detroit city block? What memories do these animals invoke of Detroit's race riots, collapsed heavy industry, economic ruin, tidal waves of foreclosures and lost generations?

Soft and cuddly animals are totems of childhood. Their presence conjures a social order in which children are safe, hugging the dear plush animals who create and inhabit both real and imaginary worlds. Stuffed animals are totems for children, providing them with comfort, serving as tools for object play, and offering the opportunity to project and master desire and disappointment. Despite their seeming representation of real animals, the stuffed creatures have very little to do with actual

5 Personal conversation with author.

6 Cities like Detroit have been re-greened not only because of the establishment of community and family gardens and the movement of agri-businesses moving into the city center, but also because of the inefficiency of single-family homes and their dependence on cars using miles of roads to get to and from single-use zones for work, school, shopping, and entertainment.

animals. Yet when viewed as Guyton displays them, from the vantage point of human-driven devastation of the ecosystems that support human and animal life, they are physical beings that signify not only the specific devastation of Detroit but also the more general destruction of the planet's environment. The soggy cotton animals are completely domesticated despite never having been wild. They are nailed to houses, once the habitats of humans. In the resulting "tableau mourant" the houses with all their memories are silent and empty; the animals are dead.⁷

In March 2014, the Stuffed Animal House burned down, going up in smoke like so many other houses and structures in Detroit. On the foundation, which was all that remained, Guyton staged a scene consisting of newly acquired large and small stuffed animals positioned as what appears to be parents and children. Facing off at what appears to be a kitchen table, the mommy, daddy, and children animals hold silent conversations. Their plastic eyes appear overburdened with meaning as they collectively connote blithe incomprehension and benign all-knowingness. Sitting brightly on the heavy plinths of economic depression and fiery destruction, they represent the remains of the known world: the physical movement (away from Detroit) of big industry and of a major portion of the population, the quiet desperation of individuals living with unending economic uncertainty, and the invisible streaming digital movement of markets.

The stuffed animals can be read not only through the lens of the ruins of Detroit but also as a totemic presence. Beyond the remains of the Stuffed Animal House, the heaps of plush on the lawn of the *Heidelberg Project* evoke other heaps of real dead bodies, of massacres, and even, for some, the Holocaust. The animals seem to have an infinite sadness, impossible to dispel. They do not sleep or wake, but rather exist on the border between sleeping and waking: like hypnagogic fantasies. They are familiar even as they are strange. They speak of departed childhood innocence and of Detroit itself—once a youthful metropolis with dreams of its own. The animals are, of course, only their cotton,

7 As animal genes flow across species and large-scale migration of animals is, in fact, jeopardized by human encroachment, we enact rituals of love and abhorrence on our fluffy friends. Dwindling environmental space shared with wildlife—in the U.S., moose, bears, wolves, coyotes, foxes, deer, squirrels, and mountain lions—maintains a sense that nature is still with us and that unbounded and unfenced wildness, whether of land or of mind, is still possible.

plastic, plush polyester selves, but they also stand for both real animals and people.

The entire project is designed to explore new possibilities for an entire community, possibilities that use storytelling, art exhibitions, and performance art. The entire block is conceptualized as an open canvas for art, a corrective to the lack of art education in Detroit's public schools, an art education demanding that people must take responsibility for the community in which they live, learn, work, and play. The *Heidelberg Project* envisions "a community redefined, activated, engaged, and thriving through the creative stimulation of residents, their surrounding landscape, and resources." The *Heidelberg Project* has been recognized by the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) as a pioneer in creative place making.⁸

In 1903, when Henry Ford established the Ford Motor Company and secured his fortune by manufacturing an affordable automobile, Fordism, as it is now called, came to mean the mass production of affordable goods coupled with relatively high wages for workers. The goal was for every worker to be able to own a home and buy a car – thus sustaining both the middle class and the ruling classes. Ford's vision, in which the workers were also the consumers, was rabidly anti-union and Ford was fiercely anti-Semitic. It all went together. Materially happy workers forestalled unionization informed by socialist sentiments, which, in Ford's mind, was the invention of Jews. In fact, Hitler himself admired Ford's economic theory. He was the only American named in *Mein Kampf*. And Hitler modeled the Volkswagen on Ford's Model T. Both vehicles were envisioned as the people's cars – but, evidently, only a certain kind of people.

Ford's anti-Semitism provokes the question of the race of the stuffed animals in Detroit. The animals, like the colored dots on the Dotty-Wotty House and on the streets and sidewalks of the *Heidelberg Project*, are meant to signify racial diversity. The experience and aesthetic they articulate – using and transforming the detritus of culture – has its origins in the African-American experience. Black Detroiters, mostly newly arrived from the South, were hired by Ford after he became disillusioned about

Americanizing immigrants. The newly arrived socialist tainted Europeans were, Ford concluded, unreliable in terms of being loyal Americans. Soon enough, African-American loyalty also waned as they realized that Ford's anti-union "American Plan" did not enable the American Dream they had envisioned. This eventually prompted them to join the United Auto Workers, the union which challenged Ford's anti-union practices (Bates, 2009: 39).

In their different ways, the *Heidelberg Project* and the *Hinterlands* account for what Sharon Aaronson-Lehavi describes as the larger "geographical, political, and contextual space that surrounds the[ir] performance[s]" (2013: 106)." Both works articulate location. *Location performance* describes not only where a performance "takes place," but also the situatedness of performance's meanings in relation to history, culture and demographics of place. Location performance acknowledges the financial and political realities of place. It is part of the social turn in art, which also includes theatre of the real, a turn that critically reflects on the processes and potential of public engagement by constructing memory in accordance with a desired outcome.

HAMLET'S RETURN, INDIVIDUAL AND PUBLIC MEMORY

Taking possession of memory is not an easy thing to do. Elsinore, as Shakespeare called the red brick Renaissance castle on the North Sea coast of Denmark, for example, is no longer home to Hamlet's vision of paranormal activity. Were the Prince of Denmark alive today, he would find the ramparts inhabited not by ghosts but tourists who with ardent steps might imagine Hamlet, the prince, or *Hamlet* the play, or Shakespeare, the man and author. Their imaginations also will be populated by personal memory and take place in what St. Augustine in his *Confessions* refers to as a great field, a spacious palace, a vast cloister not of bricks but of countless images. In other words, imagination is not bound to place even as place activates it.

"Who's there?" has a different answer at today's Elsinore than it had in Shakespeare's imagination. Nowhere is this more evident than in Theater Mitu's *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* (2015) directed by Rubén Polendo. It is a work that includes popular culture iterations of *Hamlet* along with personal and collective associations with the

play.⁹ The work's seventeen installations, dioramas, and small stages are a mashup of remediation and remix that include: multiple film clips of *Hamlet* ranging from 1921-2010, a graphic novel version of *Hamlet*, references to *The Bell Jar*, a film clip of Maria Abramović's *The Artist is Present* shown on a small screen, portions of *American Bandstand*, the *Jack Benny Show*, *Night of the Living Dead*, the 1951 *How to Teach Your Parakeet to Talk*, home movies, radio broadcasts, and the lyrics of NSync's *Bye Bye Bye*¹⁰. The installations are more about the recurrence of *Hamlet*'s themes than about *Hamlet* per se: betrayal, haunting, revenge, desire, and confusion about appearance and reality. The continuing relationship of these themes is an ever-recurring form of cultural memory and conundrum iterated in different ways.

The installations are around the perimeter of the theatre space that is dominated by a large central two-level Plexiglas cube: the upper for the actors, the lower level for the Othermen, a grunge punk band. Spectators are free to roam the installations for 8-10 minutes and then summoned to the cube by the band's blasting lyrics. Led by Aysan Celik, the actors crawl into the top portion of the transparent cube where they play fragments of *Hamlet* intercut with and interrupted by other versions of *Hamlet* projected on television monitors. Cramped with Celik and the chorus of bearded, bald male actors in jodhpur-like pants, genital-framing harnesses, sleeveless undershirts and ruffs and mediatized

- 9 First performed at the new black box theatre at the new campus of New York University on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. There are similarities between Elsinore and Abu Dhabi. Once a prosperous town living off the taxation of foreign trade ships, Elsinore suffered decline in the 1980s due to the collapse of the shipbuilding industry. Its renaissance has been as a tourist hub developed by public artworks, cultural venues and festivals including the Hamletscenen, a Shakespeare festival at Hamlet's castle and the multimedia Click Festival. Abu Dhabi also has a nautical past of great historical importance and a renaissance of its own. The creation of cultural venues to attract tourist includes an outpost of the Louvre, the Guggenheim museum and the two theatres on the campus of New York University Abu Dhabi.
- 10 The film bibliography for *Hamlet*/*Ur-Hamlet* includes: *Hamlet* (2000). Dir. Campbell Scott and Eric Simonson. By William Shakespeare and Eric Simonson. Perf. Campbell Scott, Blair Brown, Roscoe Lee Browne. Hallmark Entertainment, 2000; *Hamlet*. Dir. Gregory Doran. Perf. David Tennant. Royal Shakespeare Company, 2009. Film; *Hamlet*. Dir. Grigori Kozintsev. Perf. Innokenty Smoktunovsky, Mikhail Nazvanov. Lenfilm, 1964; *Hamlet*. Dir. John Gielgud and Bill Colleran. Perf. Richard Burton. Theatrofilm, 1964; *Hamlet*. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Kenneth Branagh. Columbia Pictures, 1996; *Hamlet*. Dir. Laurence Olivier. Perf. Laurence Olivier. Universal Pictures, 1948; *Hamlet* (2003). Dir. Michael Mundel. By William Shakespeare. Perf. William Houston, Jilly Bond, Richard Brimblecombe. Lamancha Productions, 200; *Hamlet*. Dir. Svend Gade and Heinz Schall. Perf. Asta Nielsen. Asta Films, 1921; *Hamlet at Elsinore*. Dir. Philip Saville. By William Shakespeare. Perf. Christopher Plummer, Robert Shaw, Alec Clunes. British Broadcasting Corporation, 1964; *Hamlet*. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Prod. Bruce Davey and Dyson Lovell. By Franco Zeffirelli, Christopher De Vore, and William Shakespeare. Perf. Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Ian Holm, Alan Bates. Warner Bros., Studio Canal, Universal Pictures, n.d.; *Hamlet*. Dir. Gregory Doran. By William Shakespeare. Perf. David Tennant, Patrick Stewart, Penny Downie. BBC Wales, 2010; *Hamlet*. Dir. Michael Almereyda. Perf. Ethan Hawke, Kyle MacLachlan, Bill Murray, Julia Stiles, Diane Venora, Liev Schreiber, Karl Geary, Steve Zahn, Sam Shepard. Miramax Films, 2000; and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Dir. Rodney Bennet. Perf. Derek Jacobi. BBC, 1980.

versions of *Hamlet*, turns the cube into the place where history is radically respun without chronological order.

Mitu's *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* goes beyond Heiner Müller's 1977 *Hamlet-Machine* and its indictments of Hamlet's failure to rebel against oppression (see Kalb, 1998). The production elaborates *Hamlet-Machine*'s dense fusion of the play with contemporary references by figuring individuals as archives of continually revised personal and social memories and as repositories for a crash of ideas. Unlike *Hamlet-Machine*, where Hamlet is a very German character "torn apart by the contradictions of existence," Hamlet in *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* is a global guy, a kind of you-me-everyone-we-know person (15).¹¹

Celik's "Hamletophilia" is stricken with performative mimicry, trepidation, metaphor, longing, and memories that are replayed but not understood. The Ophelia part of her Hamletophilia is present in two installations. In the performer-less installation "Mirth" (co-created with Ellen Reid), Ophelia makes an appearance as an intimate memory, a memory before which we are forced to kneel on cushions (like Claudius praying?) in order to hear four different texts through four different sets of headphones and watch a home movie from Celik's childhood. The beauty of the film which has the cadence of memories of an idyllic summer is accompanied by readings of *The Bell Jar*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, actor-generated text about fruit trees, and a daughter's struggle with a mother's depression. Whereas Hamlet is haunted by the memory of his father, Celik seems to be proposing that the absence of the fully realized narratives of female characters its own kind of haunting. The installation is a kind of magical resurrection, an invocation of an inner life unattributed to any individual or protagonist. It has a distinct autobiographical tone without actually being autobiographical except that the film, done almost with too much care, is of Celik's own mother, a beautiful woman in the prime of her life. It is as if we are invited to embrace her while she is being held just beyond reach. A distorted version of Aaron Copeland's *Appalachian Spring*, a piece of music that resonates with an idyllic version of the American frontier, floats in the air like smoke from an autumn fire of dried leaves. The installation articulates a

11 See the New York Times instahamlet submissions in response to when they asked students to submit Instagram versions of *Hamlet* <http://www.nytimes.com/video/theater/100000002611529/instahamlet.html>.



HAMLET/UR-HAMLET,
DIR. RUBÉN POLENDO,
THEATRE MITU (AYSAN
CELIK, JUSTIN NESTOR
AND MICHAEL LITTIG;
SCENE IN THE PLEXIGLAS
CUBE), 2015,
[P] DENIS BUTKUS

mother/daughter relationship that is not in Shakespeare's play. At the vanishing point is an enormous sense of loss and longing as if the memory is also ours, embedded in the recesses of our minds.

In the installation, "Backlit" (co-created with Scott Spahr), a shirtless Celik stands in a corner with a film loop of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from the 1948 film of *Hamlet* starring Laurence Olivier silently projected on her back. Celik delivers three texts while she is sequestered in the corner: Ophelia's monologue in *Hamlet-machine*, "What a piece of work is man" from *Hamlet*, and part of an interview with the feminist comedian Amy Poehler. For Celik, the Poehler's text brought "into relief the realness and immediacy of misogyny and sexism in the world that we know, through this familiar, current and warm voice. It also let some of the steam out of an intense installation, and let the audience in a bit more" (Celik, 2015). She also uses a portion of Poehler's comment on the television program, *The Approval Matrix*:

Well this feeling that you're having right now which is like, "I'm supposed to be all things" is a feeling that women have every day and have their whole lives. So you're just starting to experience it now like "how can I be cool and tough

but also sweet and, you know. So we have to deal with all those juxtapositions every day but I'm glad you're finally experiencing it... as a white male.
... but I think it's tough man, I like guys who go to therapy and are not afraid of a good massage, but I also would love someone, to be with someone whose like, waist isn't smaller than mine, and who just kind of acts like my Israeli bodyguard.

(Celik, 2015)

Celik and Spahr's interpolation of female experience upends Ophelia's isolation and domination. In both the Plexiglas cube and in "Backlit", Celik's "actor secret" is that she is actually Ophelia playing Hamlet, underscoring both the gender fluidity of her frames of reference and her performance. She is Hamlet born Athena-like from Ophelia's head. In the installation, "A Wedding/A Funeral" Spahr made a white box lined with 1500 wild flowers. Over the course of the run of the show, the flowers fade Ophelia like and become tinged with brown giving off an earthy odor of decay.

Teatre Mitu's *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* is about the persistence of Hamlet as a determining and troubled cultural imaginary, one open to amplification and investigation. Hence the collaborative construction of installations that proceed from personal associations with the Hamlet story. Part of the deep structure of the work concerns mediatization as an ambiguous form of digitized social memory that evokes epistemologies that include the bodily experience of the performers. Books, photographs, film, television, and sound recordings etc. are all the products of the technologies of mass culture that exist apart from embodiment and yet become part of lived experience.

Michael Littig's installation in which he dances the same choreography over and over again to NSync's *Bye Bye Bye* is a physical score he learned as a teenager growing up in the Boy Band culture of Orlando, Florida. His squared-off and mechanical movements are informed by break dancing as a coded form that males of a certain generation felt compelled to master. For Littig the subject is love, not crazy-in-your-room-dancing-out-of-control love but love as a cultural regime of teenage conformity with its own disconnections. This installation's connection to *Hamlet* is through the sense of being in a cage that makes one appear insane, behave insanelly, or become insane.



HAMLET/UR-HAMLET,
DIR. RUBÉN POLENDO,
THEATRE MITU (JUSTIN
NESTOR; INSTALLATION
OF NESTOR REACHING
FOR DANISH COMIC
BOOK), 2015,
[P] ALEX HAWTHORN

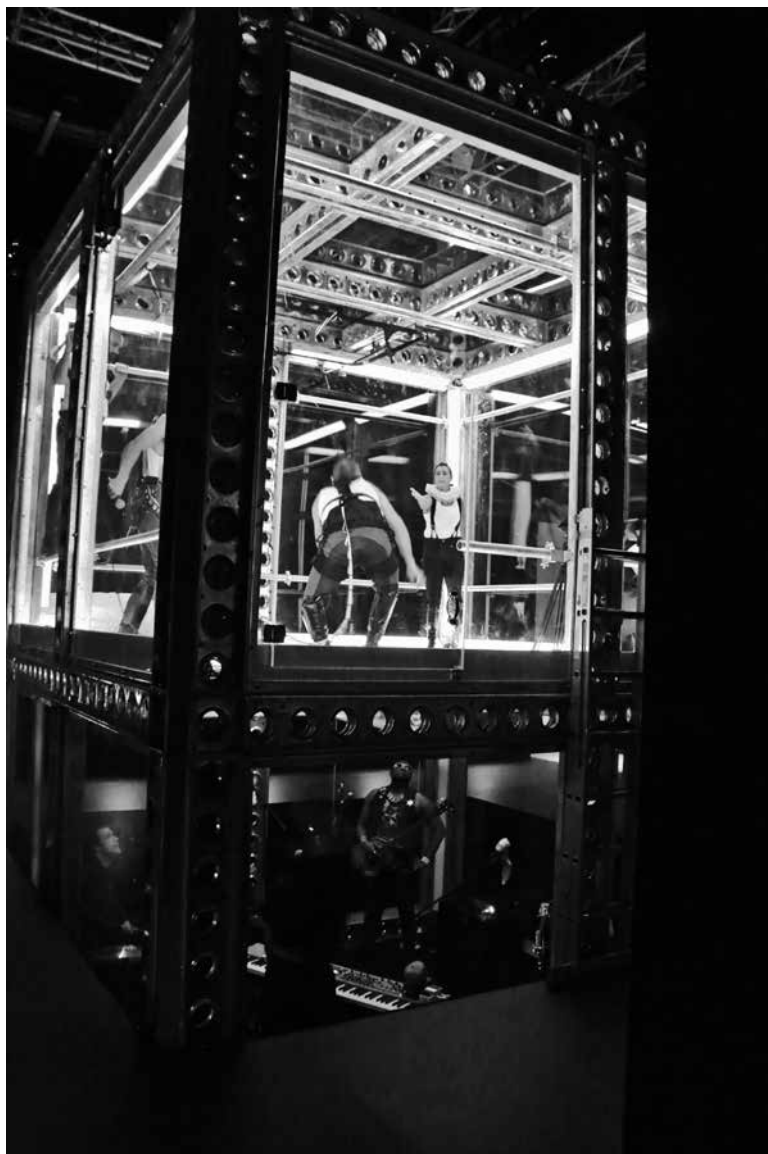
Theatre Mitu's production participates in a copious contemporary global theatrical language and in the process of devised theatre, a form where the performance is generated from the collaborative work of a group of people rather than from a play script. The installation where actor Justin Nestor, restrained by a bungee cord, desperately reaches for a Danish comic book version of *Hamlet* over and over also uses repetition but to a different end. Nestor's actor goal is simply to turn the page of the comic book. The extreme effort of trying to achieve his goal was analogous

to Nestor's difficulty with connecting to *Hamlet*. The personal portion of this struggle is that Nestor is dyslexic so literally reading the text is full of effort.

Working with technology as a collaborator in the production of meaning rather than solely as a communicator of meaning is evident in the use of the computer programs *QLab*, *Max MSP*, and *Isadora*. The tech for *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* is so complicated that the stage manager had to be cued when to say "go" by the computer. All the actors have ear pieces that tell them where to go and when. They are programmed in a closed system that also drives the lights, the sound, and the videos. There are frequent countdowns for impending changes such as when the actors were to go to the center Plexiglas cube for the central scenes. Entrapment by time stamps, the small spaces of the installations, and the central cube functions as a system of containment against which the entire production tries but never succeeds in breaking out of.

The actors' ear pieces also function as the vehicle for verbatim delivery. Testimony from the Joseph Otero trial, for example, is fed into Littig's ear as he performs it. The discontinuity between Otero's flat vocal affect and the horror of the murders he committed is further amplified by the actor's replicating crooner Frankie Avalon's smooth and undulating body style projected on flat screens for him and other actors to imitate. Taking murder out of the theatre and presenting it as a real life occurrence points to a convoluted sense of the limits of representation so important to contemporary theatre. Hamlet's desire for murderous revenge is not just a plot point but a troubled disease of society at large. The time is now, the place is here, including the imaginary world of theatre itself. A recording of *How to Teach Your Parakeet to Talk* is played on a loop as are portions of the *Jack Benny Show*. The parakeet recording is to teach parakeets to talk while their owners are away. The *Jack Benny Show* images are of female spectators fawning over male celebrities. Both refer to social life as a meticulously taught undertaking saturated with implications for domesticity and gender.

Lastly, Theatre Mitu's staging of *Hamlet/Ur-Hamlet* mirrors the spreading of *Hamlet* around the world. The space models the dispersion of the play from its English origin to global stages where it is radically adapted and reinvented. The physical staging articulates a portion of the work's meaning: the fluidity of



HAMLET/UR-HAMLET,
DIR. RUBÉN POLENDO,
THEATRE MITU (AYSAN
CELIK; SCENE IN THE
PLEXIGLAS CUBE), 2015,
[P] CANDIDA NICHOLS

contemporary experience, identity, and location creates dense and fluid associational memories that spectators move through and moves through them. Mediatization not only influences us, it determines us in that its seeming liveness is interwoven with our lives in ways that are difficult to disentangle. Analogous to the dispersed aesthetics of multiple installations is the distribution of the role of Hamlet among many actors: Hamlethoratio, Hamletophelia, Hamletclown, Hamletclaudius, Hamletechnician, Hamletclown. Similarly, the soundscape is uniquely tied to specific

installations but the different sound environments bleed into one another blurring their distinction.

PERFORMING THE DIALECTIC

Some concluding thoughts, observations and questions. Is social memory the sum-total of individual memories in the same way that material objects are particular configurations of atoms and molecules? That is, one way to conceive of collective memory is in terms of its constituting parts as not existing separately from the scale on which it organizes individuals. Collective memory exists in archives, records, images, and things. Individuals participate in collective memory, whether they want to or not. From this perspective, individual memory is an illusion: the “me” that remembers is actually the “us” that constitutes society. At the same time, individual memory is personally embodied only in the matrix of a biological, psychological, and social individual.

The three performances I’ve discussed here can be understood from both these perspectives. What operates in *The Circuit*, the *Heidelberg Project*, and Theatre Mitu’s *Hamlet*/*Ur-Hamlet* is a breach between private and collective memory/ies. This rupture unveils the struggle of individuality against the scale and mechanisms of constructed collective memory.

The “gap” between memory’s individual occurrence and its public and social performances is foundational to theatre where individual memories are restructured as social facts. Theatre of the real has made much of this public restructuring as has theatre of witness and verbatim interview-based dramas and performances.

Once memory is understood as social, it begins to persist in the archive. If all humans were to vanish, the archive would remain awaiting some intelligence to access it. Indeed, we have historical evidence of this. When archeologists open the tombs of a long-since disappeared culture, for example, the artifacts within are read and their meanings are understood as indicative of the social world of the vanished society.

These theories are most useful when understood as different aspects of the domain of memory. Individual memories are bound by time. When an individual dies, her memory dies with her. Collective memory exists apart from any individual and yet is the sum total of many individuals.

The Circuit articulates a well-known collective memory of Detroit as bound up in the National Theatre as both a building with period



ONE OF DETROIT'S
ABANDONED AND
OVERGROWN HOUSES,
[P] CAROL MARTIN

architecture and an archive for the history of performance genres enacted in the city. The *Heidelberg Project* is founded in a particular neighborhood that never intended to be theatricalized. As configured by the *Project*, Detroit is “preserved” in its houses and objects. These “found objects” each have a particular memory and testimony; unlike stage props, they carry with them the experience of those who once owned and used them in daily life. As location performance, the *Heidelberg Project*

Project cannot take place anywhere else because its situatedness is what makes it what it is: its location is intrinsic to its content. Theatre Mitu, on the other hand, enacts a postmodernist praxis of indeterminacy in relation to self-devising and reflexivity. Theatre Mitu's approach to *Hamlet* is a remix, a set of quotations and references. *Hamlet*/*Ur-Hamlet* is not about performing Shakespeare's play, but about performing a web of associations that are both personal and social and united by reference to the play *and* its many iterations. The work does not pose a political problem or question but rather stages an unknowingness. The devised work asserts that *Hamlet* – both play and the character – is now anything one desires it/he to be without having to engage discourses of authenticity, history, staging, or conventional acting. The “black

box” space which is consciously designed for continual reconfiguration, is ready *Hamlet*/*Ur-Hamlet* on one occasion, some other work of art on another occasion. Theatre Mitu's work, by concept and intention, is meant for performance in many different places. By contrast, the Detroit pieces are made for and from Detroit.

Memory is differently conceptualized and historicized during different periods of history. Places and objects present the possibility of bridging the links and gaps between the memory of the individual and



THE HEIDELBERG
PROJECT'S DOTTY-WOTTY
HOUSE, TYREE GUYTON,
2015 AND CONTINUING,
PHOTO CAROL MARTIN

collective memory. From this perspective, individual memory is not a sovereign repository but a transitory residence and active participant in the larger social memory that outlives us all.

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