IFTR - Theatre, nation and identity: between Migration and Stasis
Architecture working group

Performing Fiction and unsettling reality

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It's the end of summer in 2010, and we're looking for a kid: "cute" kid with hair in a pony tail. I follow a crowd through an unfamiliar neighbourhood until we find her, wandering the streets of Antwerp, a bit lost but happily searching between alleyways and parked cars for her friend with a missing hand. The crowd gets more tightly packed the closer we get to the port of Scheld, a somewhat rundown suburb since the soiled footprint of industry moved away from the city centre. Today tens of thousands of people are sprawled across the road and alongside the docks, normally reserved for delivery trucks and service vehicles. We are witness to the *The Deep-sea Diver, His Hand and the Little Girl-Giant*, a spectacle by prolific French street theatre company Royal de Luxe.

The little girl of the title is almost 6m tall, an incongruous sight amongst the dense apartment blocks and industrial buildings. She stands after a long walk, eyes blinking and head wobbling, absorbed in the task of cleaning herself under a make-shift shower. It is a breathtaking feat to see such a huge puppet manipulated by a group of relatively miniature humans with the aid of machines and antiquated pulleys. This is spectacle like no other, pulling together the collective action of hundreds of people, pushed along by the will of thousands enacts the story of the toll-collecting giant whose hand has been cut off by a passing ship, through searching for his niece who had set out to look for him, was also able to find his hand. It's an experience that performance design researcher Joslin McKinney ultimately reads as 'kinesthetic empathy' since 'our senses are stimulated, allowing our body to respond accordingly' (McKinney, 2013 P.65).

But there is surely more to this scenographic event than a shared empath towards the puppet and its animators, the giant is altering our sense of scale, transforming the way we experience the city through our own relationship to space. Literary critic Susan Steward traces the gigantic through mythology, which 'is articulated in our relation to landscape' (Stewart 1984, P.71), and through which we enter the 'analogical mode of thought' (1984: 74). Perhaps then, logical or rational thought is scared away by the giants,

We, the public – self-declared and amassed for some kind of action – are part of an elaborate fiction that unites us in a moment of complicity within a city that is frequently divided by economics, race and cultural identifiers. But through embracing the mythology of the giant Antigoon from the Sheldt river who lost his hand, we are resisting the dominance of cars and economic activity, momentarily enacting a multitude of possible futures. The event is aiding the re-shaping the city, shifting the meaning of the

port, acknowledging the economic and social transition of its residents, a factor that is strategically understood by the commissioning city of Antwerp and the creators Royal de Luxe.

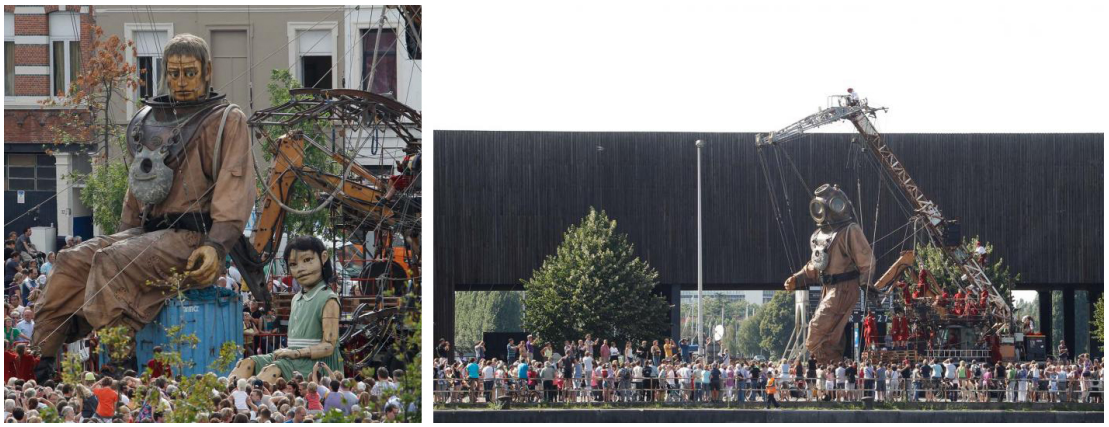

Fig. 1 - *The Deep-sea Diver, His Hand and the Little Girl-Giant,* Antwerp 2010.
Retrieved from Royal de Luxe company website (https://www.royal-de-luxe.com)

Almost a decade later, this event remains a defining moment in my sense of belonging in the city of Antwerp. For one afternoon I was the public that defined its own social order, enacting a shift in real world values (albeit temporarily).

Taking my experience of Royal de Luxe's 2010 epic performance as a springboard, this paper elaborates the role public performance can play in urban transformation through the complex strategies of 'fiction' that suggest alternatives to the symbolic order and the unsettling of power dynamics. Applying these concepts to my own performance practice, I reflect on two projects – *The Floating Theatre* on Auckland's harbor and *Baby, where are the fine things you promised me?* enacted in a portable house – which, through miniatursiation rather than gigantism, potentially mobilises the public through a transformation of shared make-believe. Firstly, I consider the city itself as a potential site for fiction.

'Right to the City' and Fiction

The development of performances and artistic interventions in public space over the past two decades coincides with the economic shift in liberal democratic cities from production to service-based economies. While this is not the only factor, it has contributed a renewed interest in how social spaces are created and maintained. In the wake of the intense financial quantification that all space has undergone, due partly to the neoliberal policies of successive governments in the later part of the 20th century, the performing arts have had an important role to play in the transformation of urban public spaces like that of the port of Antwerp.

When French philosopher Henri Lefebvre demanded a 'right to the city' in the fervor of the 1968 demonstrations (Lefebvre, 1968), it hailed the burgeoning of the liberal democratic individual; demanding civil rights and access to resources that remained under the paternal control of governments. In the five decades since then, neoliberalism has developed to loosen a large grip of

power from the state, passing it to private corporate interests. The 'right to the city' has meant improved access to resources for some, but not all, in an environment of growing inequality. Public space is today frequently governed jointly by private business and public state or civic interests, which inevitably lead to ideological preference for activities that encourage commercial activity: often referred to as the 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

The temporary event has become a widely adopted mainstay of civic life, upholding a certain 'right to the city' by creating something out of the ordinary that temporarily changes the symbolic order, and validating Russian philosopher Mikhail Bahktin's observation of the carnivalesque as being 'time out of time' spaces (Bahktin 1984). Urban studies researchers such as Greg Richards refer to the 'eventful city' as attracting commerce and adding value to the city (Hannigan & Richards, 2017, P43), highlighting how economic and social benefits become bound up together. However, human geographer David Harvey points out that if we think of the city as a manifestation of ourselves, our values, ethics, aesthetics and desires, then 'the right to the city' should mean the right to 'change ourselves by changing the city' (Harvey 2008, p 272). If we assume literary theorist J.L. Austin's now widely critiqued idea that the 'performative' act doesn't describe just something but rather it does something in the world (Austin 1975), then are all artworks potentially reality-forming? And therefore potentially political?

To delve further into this question, I turn toward political theorist Chantal Mouffe's (2013) 'theory of hegemony', as well as to philosopher Jacques Rancière's (2004) *Politics of Aesthetics.* Art has symbolic value, since signs and language represent things both real and imagined; what Mouffe calls a 'symbolic order'. She discusses the 'theory of hegemony' as a way of understanding how the symbolic order of politics, which also uses symbolic meaning, may establish or maintain 'hegemonic' control. Mouffe suggests that politics and art are inseparable, since there is 'an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art' (2013, P91). In the aesthetic dimension, Rancière suggests that 'politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say *material* arrangements of signs and images'. Within the aesthetic dimension, says Rancière, fiction serves to 'alter perception and understanding and to expose the invisible' (2004, p39).

The city is by definition social and through necessity political, it situates relationships grounded in reality and influenced by fiction. The symbolic and the rational are in constant negotiation for recognition.

The symbolic dimension of Royal de Luxe's giant girl in the city of Antwerp is a transformation of the human body through an exaggerating scale. Recalling Susan Stewart's consideration of the gigantic, in mythic stories of creation it 'becomes an explanation for the environment, a figure on the interface between the natural and the human' (1984, P.71). The giants coming to the port of Antwerp are a symbolic reboot from the mythic creation of the natural landscape, however these giants are reshaping the built environment, transforming industry through urban renewal or gentrification. The fiction, involving the story of the giant with no hand being reunited with the altruistic girl, is a strategy of reconciliation, an implication that these forces of change are beyond human control, mobilising the public to the will of the giants. The political order of social change and the aesthetic order of the body

represented as gigantic are brought effortlessly together in a fiction that unites the public in an eventful shared make-believe.

Fiction as a political tool

The rise of fiction in political rhetoric has received renewed critique, particularly in the form of 'alternative facts' from the likes of the US Presidential Trump administration (d'Ancona 2017, P.12). Fictions are employed as strategies toward emotional complicity, regardless of factual evidence. In 2016 the Oxford Dictionary selected 'Post-Truth' as its word of the year, as noted by journalists like Matthew d'Ancona who, in *Post Truth: The War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, interprets the rise of post-truth rhetoric as an erosion of irrefutable fact. D'Ancona points the finger at French and American postmodern philosophy for introducing the subjectivity of truth, since 'if everything is a 'social construct', then who is to say what is false' (d'Ancona 2017)? Yet d'Ancona seems to be missing the point made by 'the postmoderns'; that truth interpreted through context is surely more robust than ever. Perhaps 'alternative facts' are less an attack on truth than a play *for* fiction. As hermeneutics philosopher John T. Caputo puts it, 'An interpretation is not a wall between us and reality, but a window in the wall.' (Caputo 2013, P195)

Political rhetoric that deliberately obscures the truth is one strategy that fiction enables, but there are plenty more. Public Relations frequently fictionalise the symbolic dimension of an event, either by omitting details that might have a perceived negative effect, or by constructing a narrative of empathy or care. In literature, we see fiction as an entry to 'possible worlds' as described by literary theorist Lubomir Doležel (1998), effectively presenting incomplete or open-ended narratives that have diverse yet equally valid outcomes. In economics, fiction becomes a tool to create value through representations of supply and demand. Each of these strategies are potentially reality-producing when enacted through the performative word or action, altering the conditions in which we live.

Employing fiction for a shared public event, is also a conscious consideration in my own performance work. Two recent projects – *The Floating Theatre* and *Baby, where are the fine things you promised me?* – present an interesting reflection on the terms of fiction, and, like the Antwerp performance, use scale and mobility to analogize the city. Both attempt to assemble the public at a time of social change and economic migration within the city, on a miniature scale rather than the epic spectacle of Royal de Luxe.

Floating, sleeping, dreaming

The Floating Theatre is designed and trialed on the waterfront of my home city, Auckland, New Zealand in 2017. The newly transformed Wynyard quarter is an elaborate make-over from what used to be heavy industry and city works depots on reclaimed land, extending out from the original land-line by half a kilometre. Vigorous public and private city planning over the past 20 years has begun the process of erasing the toxic residue of industry, re-sculpting waterfront piers into cafes and restaurants, corporate offices, a marina and a convention centre, and creating limited access points to the sea itself. This developers' dream is part of the financial rationalisation of space being felt throughout almost every

liberal democratic city in the world, as the real-estate industry grows exponentially hand-in-hand with the finance economy. Public events are an important part of this transformation, mobilising the public to use spaces that were previously inaccessible or inhospitable.

The Floating Theatre is a project that re-inserts the theatre as dream space just out of reach from the land grab. Literally floating, with the aid of a barge, the structure is towed in from the harbour, past the tidal waterways and estuaries into the heart of the city. But unlike the new 40 million dollar corporate Auckland Theatre Company, an institutional yet introspective architecture that sits just meters from the waterfront without acknowledging the water, *The Floating Theatre* remains a precarious and fragile presence, bobbing on the water like a paper boat at the edge of a waterfall, never laying claim to a sense of ownership. Rather, it profits from the mobility of the water to penetrate the city like a puppet in search of its missing parts. Blank and featureless, this is a floating dream space, secure in its tenuous position and dodging preconception. As philosopher Michael Foucault reminds us of heterotopian spaces, 'in civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates' (Foucault 1984, P.9).

The structure is evocative of the magnificent *Teatro del Mondo* by architect Aldo Rossi, which floated into the 1979 Venice Biennale was an imaginative transplant into the heart of the city. Rossi's imaginative temporary building was a miniature version of the monumental Venetian architecture, in turn drawing historical reference to the floating theatres and carnival platforms of 18th century Venice, in what Rossi refers to as 'analogous' architecture (Rossi 1981). *The Floating Theatre* in Auckland, is unmistakably domestic in scale (just 4m tall), and rather than mimicking the pouting high-rise structures on the skyline, it pays tribute to a vernacular architecture of a colonial past.

Only at nightfall does the architecture of *The Floating Theatre* reveal function, animated with a live performance for an audience of just 30 people, the space lights up from the inside out like a Chinese lantern bobbing amidst the opulent yachts that mark our 'city of sails'. The interior extroverts itself, not in a rational quantifiable way, but in a mercurial, restless abstraction, possessed by shadows and moving light. The city is complicit to the spectacle, blinking light and colour like a theatrical backdrop.

Fig. 2 – *The Floating Theatre,* Auckland 2017.

As an embodied fiction, played out as an impoverished version of the spectacular, *The Floating Theatre* presents a tiny stage where actors pass through hinged doors in the stage floor to make endless exits and entrances, and the meagre red curtain is presented with all the pride of an 18th century opera. The

public are sold a promise, brought onto the water and untethered from the land-locked certainty of commodity, they are implicated in a floating world. The Floating Theatre seeks the shores of Rossi's 'analogous city', which ultimately 'concerns the collective imagination... a synthesis of a series of values' (as cited in Hays 2008, P.117).

The second project, *Baby, where are the fine things you promised me?*, takes place in the inner city Auckland, in and around Queen Street, a colonial name for a commercial district where flagship stores compete for window space. Nowhere is the growing economic inequality in New Zealand more blatantly visible than here, between high-rise apartments and luxury brand stores like Gucci and Prada, a growing economic underclass sit or lie on pavements and in doorways. In February 2018 the new Labour-led coalition government released a report into housing, which revealed that 80% of people seeking emergency housing shelters were being turned away due to overcrowding (Cheng 2018). The 'housing crisis' as it is referred to in the media, which implies that lack of houses rather than financial security is the problem, includes the working underclass of people living in their cars, in garages, on floors and couch-surfing. The homeless are mobile by necessity.

As a miniaturized Victorian cottage, the architecture for my durational performance, *Baby, where are the fine things you promised me?* is a faithful replica of my own rented home for a number of years, when living precariously in the future pathway of a city motorway in Wellington. The house is an iconic colonial fantasy in more ways than one: many tens of thousands of cottages of very similar design were constructed out of native timber throughout New Zealand around the very beginning of the 20th century as a utopian solution to European overcrowding. State of the art (steam driven) machinery had enabled industrial production of doors, windows and timber panels for first time in history, and with the aid of cheap loans, virgin forests and dubiously acquired land rights, demand was high. These cottages were designed via catalogue, incorporating a standard four rooms connected by a central hallway, and typically situated on a quarter acre block of land, enough space to grow vegetables and fruit for a family. The colonial dream was ultimately a built on exploitation of resources & labour, but it was also an egalitarian conceit, reeling against the accumulation of land resources within the British empire. A century on, and affordable home ownership has been usurped by an exponentially growing real estate economy, subverting the symbol of home into a symbol of capital investment.

Baby, where are the fine things you promised me? is an installation of just 1 to 8 scale, which is about the size and height of a simple cafe table - barely big enough to sit inside - I relocated my wooden cottage to the central city high-rise area and proceeded to live inside it. Playing a tiny piano, sharing tea or conversation with guests, these are the performed rituals of domestic life now lost from inner city life. Once again referring to Susan Stewart's *On Longing*, the miniature 'represents closure, interiority, the domestic' (1984, P.70), simultaneously making those around it gigantic. In order to speak with me, the public had to lie down on the ground, an act of performance in itself since it changes the relationship to the street and to the public, a dramatic inversion of hierarchies.

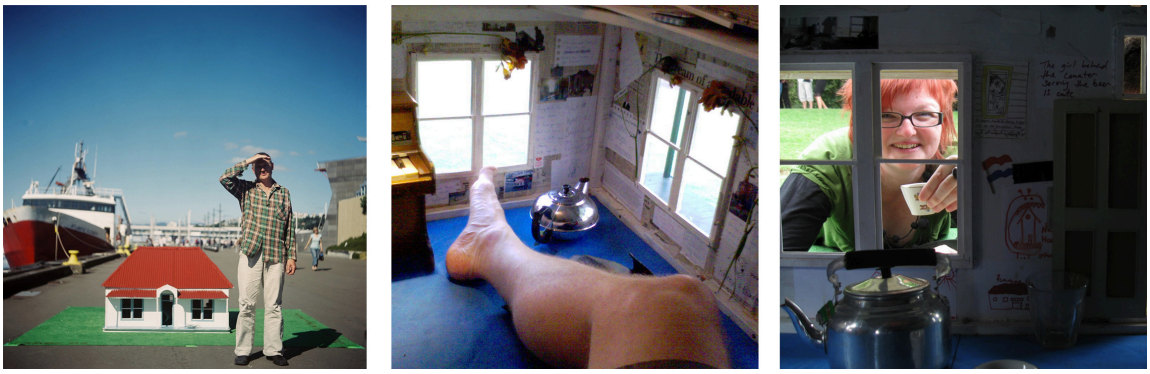

Fig. 3 – *Baby, where are the fine things you promised me?,* various locations, New Zealand.

The symbolic home, domestic ritual and intimacy, are forced by miniaturisation to find new meaning in the public realm of the city street, just as the political dimension of inequality is played out by transient populations and poverty stricken people sleeping in the sheltered entranceways to luxury stores. The gigantic human inside the miniature house is a distortion that physically moves the public onto the ground, onto all fours, touching the domestic promise made by previous generations and not passed on. Baby, where are the fine things you promised me? Like the giant puppets of Royal de Luxe resting on miniature cobblestones, analogy is the only reading when fiction is longer no longer hemmed in by reason.

Fictional architectures

These fictional architectures are part of an ongoing research toward strategies of fiction to influence reality. Politicians, bureaucrats and PR campaigners have been studying the transformative modes of fiction for many years, from the theatre, literature and all aspects of cultural life. Currently there is something to be learned in return from the blatant use of fiction in the realm of politics, not as a way to communicate, but as a way to shift the symbolic order of space with respect to our cities, our public spaces and our experience of being the public. By scrutinising and interpreting the event, in the context of a complex understanding of truth, specific strategies emerge such as mythology, empathy, possible worlds and resistance. Through presenting performance works and installations in public space we can critique and even test the breadth and depth of our future cities.

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