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LENS BASED DIGITAL MEDIA - PIET ZWART INSTITUTE

PROPOSAL END EXAM 2012

THE NATURAL ROOM - A RESEARCH ON STAGING SCENERY

ON THE BASIS OF A SET DESIGN FOR THE PLAY *LITTLE EYOLF* BY HENRIK IBSEN

Description of project:

The question that initiated my research is how have artists and set designers brought the natural world and the landscape into the closed space of the gallery or the theatre. And as a practical outcome, how can I achieve this as a stage designer, and what are the available tools today.

I will create a wide, open space without any visible walls, filled with fog on which images of clouds, water and trees, as well as anatomical photographs of the human brain will be projected. Figures (actors) will be visible in the space only through this layer of fog.

This space will function as a platform for several experiments. First of all, I will investigate different ways of projecting moving images on materials that represent fog on stage.

Audience:

One practical outcome will be the stage design for a Dutch theatre production of Henrik Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* (1894). The premiere will take place on 1st of May 2012 at Het Nationale Toneel in The Hague, and will continue to be shown until the 10th of June 2012 in The Hague, Amsterdam, and Gent, Belgium.

The audience will enter the theatre space through an entrance on the second floor, at the back of the auditorium. Their first impression will be an overview of the stage in front of them. The audience will never come closer to the stage than a four-

metre distance. A scrim will be placed between the audience and the stage.

The collaborative character of producing a theatre play is essential for my way of working. Therefore it shall be part of my research to analyse the results of the cooperation between different professions like stage design, sound design, light design, directing, and acting. As the aim of this theatre production is to bring natural and universal powers on stage, I shall especially be interested to see how all crafts play together to create one entity.

Throughout cultural history, the experience of nature has been seen more as a solitary than a collective one. After having participated in a theatre production, designed for large numbers of people at the same time, I also shall direct my research into the opposite direction. By using the same tools as for the theatre production, I shall then explore my own relationship with nature. The results of these experiments should only be seen or experienced by my audience in solitude: It could be an installation for only one person to enter at the time, or a book, or a DVD to take home, or an audio file to listen to while walking at the beach.

Subject matter:

The centre of my attention in this research is 'nature', and the question of what it meant in Ibsen's time and today. I shall look at the purely aesthetic uses of the term, but shall also bring in my personal experiences.

The starting point of the theatre design is to create a space that represents a state of mind, rather than a site for the illustration of a plot. Actors should be seen only as vague figures in an apparently endless and wide landscape of fog and air. With the help of projections, scrims, and artificial fog, I shall enforce the impression of a scene set outside, on location within a human mind instead of inside a theatre.

My aim is therefore to create a three dimensional space for images, by combining layers of projection within an amorphous substance like fog. Rather than the flatness of a conventional screen, I want to create the possibility of depth and perspective on a shifting and nebulous body. I want to make the audience experience the tension between the scale of the human frame and the scale of the space around them.

The hope is that the exterior space can suggest an inner landscape. (Critics have often discussed this play of Ibsen's as one characterised entirely by mood, and that for all its surface realism is one that occupies a symbolic world.) The images that appear in projection could be fragments of dreams and memories, fleeting embodiments of fears and desires. The pictures will therefore be, in keeping with Ibsen's own interests, elemental: images of water in motion, or recorded clouds cast upon the present clouds of artificial fog.

Content:

Kleine Eyolf takes place in a country house by a Norwegian fjord, and describes the struggle of a couple, Rita and Alfred Almers, after the death of their nine-year old son, 'Little Eyolf'. The parents are confronted with the "absolutely elemental action of death."¹ The settings described in the play consist of earth, sea, sky and fog, acting like agents of death descending on the couple. The "cosmic violence"² that breaks down onto their lives turns into a *mental* violence in Act II. Rita and Almers tear apart and destroy each other's identities.

The characters in the play „take in, 'absorb' the universe in themselves; and the universe - the huge landscape of sea, mountains, and stars- speaks through them, as if inhabiting them.“³

Relationship to relevant previous practice:

Already in my work as a set designer, I have explored the possibilities of using moving images. To take only a few examples: my final project at the Rietveld Academy in part involved the video projection of a live actor; in Berlin, for the opening of a new library, I made a film for a large-scale theatre piece on the theme of the book.

¹ Johnston, Brian, "All the Dead Voices: Ibsen and Modernism" in *Modernism I Skandinavisk Litteratur* (Universitet i Trondheim, Norway, 1991)

² Johnston, Brian, (Universitet i Trondheim, Norway, 1991)

³ Johnston, Brian, (Universitet i Trondheim, Norway, 1991)

The last theatre project I worked on as a designer was the Austrian writer, Elfriede Jelinek's play, *Over Dieren (About Animals)*. In this project I incorporated video as central to the set design. The set design consisted of 40 televisions, on which the faces of anonymous men could be seen. The camera zoomed onto the faces in such a way that it seemed as if the televisions themselves possessed faces. The screens created pictures in space, using two-dimensional images to create a 3D effect; the televisions were also sources of light and colour, framing the atmosphere of the performance. As a designer, here, and elsewhere in my work, I became fascinated by the ways in which recorded visual material interacts with live performance.

I recently finished a set design for Dea Loher's *Land Zonder Woorden* at Het Nationale Toneel. This is a one-woman play, offering a monologue based on the experience of the writer in Afghanistan. In it she struggles with the question how can she give the violence that she experienced in the war a presence in her work. I used a plastic sheet to separate the audience from the actor; she became partly 'screened' from the viewers, who could not see her properly through the sheet, especially as that sheet itself became the canvas on which she paints an abstract and wordless picture.

I found the separation of actor from audience interesting, and in my end-exam project want to try again to do so, but this time with different tools.

Working Methodology:

I've started this research by studying the genre of Romantic landscape painting as it emerged in works of J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, and Caspar David Friedrich. These artists used dramatic effects of light, atmosphere, and colour to portray a dynamic natural world.

For the set design, there was research regarding the best available materials: fog screens, 3D projection on fog, fog machines, hazers, and sharktooth scrims. I undertook research of the architecture and landscape of the play like garden, fjord, jetty, forests, water, and sky. This involved taking photographs at the harbour of Rotterdam, and finding floating jetties, shapes of ships and locks. I also tried out drawings of possible sets like slopes, jetties and locks.

Using Cinema 4D, I built models of the three different theatre spaces that the performance will take place in. Furthermore, I tried to create fog, build a slope, build planes for projections, and to use cardboard cut' trees.

At the theatre, there shall be a trial set up to test different fog machines, positions of beamers and light circumstances.

The last steps will be choosing content for the moving images, filming, and editing.

I shall document and comment the rehearsal period and the actual performance at the theatre. Based on my experiences with this collaboration, I shall look for an adequate and personal form of response to it.

Relevant histories:

Looking into forms of projection in theatre, I came across Phantasmagoria. This technique was invented in the late 18th century and used a modified magic lantern to project frightening images such as skeletons, demons, and ghosts onto walls, smoke, or semi-transparent screens. Associated with the rise of Gothic, it used early projecting devices to create a fabricated realm of sensation and fright, feeding the imagination through shock.

I am intrigued by the example of one artist who has already worked with fog or steam: that is, Olafur Eliasson, particularly in his three projects: *Yellow Fog*, *Din Blinde Passager*, and *The Weather Project*.

Also useful as points of departure are Anthony Gormley's *Blind Light* and James Turrell's *The Wolfsburg Project*.

Photographers that inspire me for the making of the visual material for the projections include: Gregory Crewdson, David Maisel, Bill Henson, Adam Fuss (*My Ghost*). As well as images of natural phenomena, I will use anatomical pictures of the brain and body, drawing upon the photography of medical research: X-rays, the brain, female pelvis, Charcot's photographs of women suffering from hysteria, brain-scan images. (For Charcot, I will make use of Georges Didi-Huberman's *The Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004).

I am especially interested in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, in so far as it shares the subject matter of a couple coming to terms with the death of a child, and also as it places their bereavement in a highly symbolic landscape.

David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* is similarly inspiring, for three reasons: firstly, it shares the anxiety felt in Ibsen's play about the birth of a child who is then felt to be monstrous or strange; secondly, as Lynch so pervasively uses imagery of steam and fog to portray the world of Victorian London; and lastly, as it too offers a route into a dream-like landscape, a world inside the head.

Potential problems:

- 1) I'm not yet an experienced video artist
- 2) I will have two tasks: set design and video design
- 3) Fog is an unpredictable medium to work with, thus presenting as many challenges as opportunities
- 4) The outcome is unknown, because it has to be open: to work with this medium is to throw the production open to the element of chance. In this way, the project is especially exciting to me, in so far as it enables me to develop skills that I already have, and to stretch them in directions that are new to me. For this reason, among others, I believe that this end-project will parallel all the work that I have done for this MA at Piet Zwart – in both building on my strengths and challenging me to produce new kinds of work.

Summary/conclusion:

In short, I am excited at the prospect of working on this end-exam project. I feel that I will learn many things, and produce a piece of work that is a summation of all I have done in the last two years, and an indication of where my work might go in the future.

Research background, expand on history:

I will explore the work of the artists mentioned, and also examine something of the history of Henrik Ibsen's reception.

Workplan/timeframe:

My provisional schedule is as follows:

October to November 2011:	Developing the design
December 2011:	Test set up with fog machines and projectors
January 2012:	Present definite design to theatre
January to March 2012:	Filming video material
	Editing
March to April 2012:	Rehearsals
May 2012:	Theatre premiere
May to June 2012:	Prepare installation for exhibition
July 2012:	Exhibition

Bibliography (works to be consulted):

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Secondary Material:

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