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Lena Müller - my last three projects

WHAT - HOW - WHY

1. *LOOKING FOR...*

WHAT: In the front of a pavilion, visitors are invited to take a one-hour long walking tour through Prague, guided by a Smart Phone. A person behind a window in the pavilion gives information and hands out Smart Phones. A screen next to the window displays the tracks of visitors who are already walking the tour. In a showcase under the screen, there are carton boxes for photographic negatives lying in a row. A text informs the visitor about the origin of these boxes: they contain black and white negatives of the 1960s. A square room with two entrances in the back of the pavilion contains a printer and black and white prints of the old negatives on the otherwise empty walls.

The route starts from the pavilion and leads the visitors walking outside along the spots where the photographs of the 1960s were taken, and back in again. This route can be downloaded to the visitors' mobile phones. With this virtual map and the help of headphones, the visitors are able to find the next stop of their route.

At each spot the visitors hear voices offering individual reflections on the old photographs. As a response the visitors are asked to take their own photographs with their mobile phone. These pictures are printed during the walk and on arrival the visitors can display them in the pavilion, next to the old photographs.

HOW: *LOOKING FOR...* is a performative installation that took place during Prague Quadrennial 2011, worldwide exposition for design and scenography. Together with three other set designers, I developed the contribution for the Dutch pavilion. The Dutch Pavilion was situated in a big exhibition hall on the ground floor of the National Gallery in Prague, together with twenty-two other exhibiting countries. We designed a pavilion of 5,50 meters long, 3 meters wide, and 3,60 meters high, and without a ceiling. Printed letters on the front of the pavilion showed the names of the four involved designers and advertised a 60 minutes walking tour through Prague, guided by a mobile phone. The person behind a window in the pavilion informed the visitors about starting

times of the tour, the procedure of lending a mobile phone, and how to use the downloaded map. On their mobile phones, the visitors could see the interface of the platform we used, which was a free application provided by www.7scenes.com. Via satellite, someone walking the tour would see themselves as a dot on a map.

WHY: As a group, we decided not to present our individual work by showing models or photographs of our stage designs. Instead, we designed a theatrical presentation, which invited the visitor to take a personal tour through Prague during which they experienced *our* way of looking, as well as showing us something of how they too look at the world.

The starting point of the project was a collection of black and white negatives, that in 2003 I discovered in the Prague Quadrennial area in 2003. I found a dozen discarded rolls of photographic negatives in the fairground behind the exhibition area. Judging by the style of the photos, as well as the fashions and look of the people in them, the images themselves all dated from the 1960s. There were family scenes by a Christmas tree, days out by car with friends to the countryside, school-holidays, and pictures taken in the city of Prague in front of recognizable sites. The pictures immediately engaged me.

2. *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*

WHAT: My term project for the first trimester of the first year was theatre design for the Dutch version of Harold Pinter's play, *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* (1958). The production had its first night on May 12th 2011 at Het Nationale Toneel in The Hague. A box of five meters wide, three meters high and four meters deep was placed in a hall of 23 meters by 15 meters big, in front of a narrow auditorium. The box was enclosed in absolute darkness, and only lit from within. A podium raised the box one metre from the floor, though the material supporting it was invisible to the audience. The box could therefore apparently hang in space, levitating before the audience. The audience was confronted with only one contracted rectangle of light, five metres wide and three metres high; that was their view into the interior of the box.

At the back of the box there was a window and a glass door. This door and window led into another narrow room that was 1.5 metres deep. This back-room was

separately lit. Therefore to open the door was not to open the darkness that surrounds the box, but to enter another undefined zone. The window had a shutter that could close off the room beyond, or open up a view of it. Similarly the door was made of 'milk-glass' that allowed a hazy view through it. In this way, the room was looked into from two sides.

Within the box, the only furniture was a sofa and a standing fan. The walls were made of wood-effect plastic strips; the floor is covered with a blue-green carpet. There was also a skylight, though one that provided no daylight. At the front of the box was another shutter, one that closes off the entire space.

HOW: While researching into the visual style of the play, I was working on improving my technical range as a designer by learning the 3D-modelling software package, *Cinema 4D*. Before this project, I had always built models by hand. While I have once again constructed a model version of the set, I have simultaneously created the design in digital form. *Cinema 4D* enables me to build a virtual environment, and to quickly and easily compare the effect of using different surfaces and materials, and different colours. It also allows me to simulate the point of view available to the spectators, sharing their perspective from any position in the auditorium. This was always going to be a huge benefit with this project, as the use of the constrained space of the box brought with it problems regarding the ability of the audience to see the action on stage.

WHY: My starting point for the current project was photographer Jeff Wall's image, 'A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in 1947' (1990). The room is both a claustrophobic family sitting-room and a theatrical space; the everyday home has become the site of a performance, but one whose meanings suggest menace and a spellbound unease. As such it seemed ideal for Pinter's combination of the domestic and the threatening.

In conversations with the director of the production, we realised early on that we wanted to evoke in our own version of Pinter's play, this same sense of cosiness and constriction, of the homelike and the hazardous. The room should be both a comfortable place, a womb, and a dark environment, a tomb. The six actors would be forced to play

in as small a space as possible, forced to confront the limits of the room, just as they were bound into the constraints of Pinter's threatening games.

3. LAND OHNE WORTE (COUNTRY WITHOUT WORDS)

WHAT: During the last trimester of the first year, I worked on theatre design for the German writer Dea Loher's play, *Land Ohne Worte (Country Without Words)*, a monologue of a female writer who travels to Kabul and ends up with a writer's block. The character discusses an artist's desire to relate to the world around her through a comparison of her own work as a writer with the work of several famous painters. The play was performed in a 23-meter by 15-meter multifunctional hall. The floor of the hall was covered in second hand white 'baletvloer' (a special surface for the stage especially used in dance performances). The set consisted of two pieces of sheet, each 15 meters wide and 3,50 meters high, placed on top of each other. Each sheet had a metal pipe on top and bottom. There was a horizontal double line of pipe at 350cm high. An extrusion in the floor with a metal grid collected the paint. This construction was placed diagonally into the big theatre hall, separating the space for the audience from the space for the actress. The audience was invited to take a chair from a pile and choose a position in front of the sheet. A door in the bottom right corner of the sheet made it possible for the actress to move from one side of the sheet to the other.

HOW: As the initial idea for the design was to let the actress paint during the performance, I planned rehearsals with the actress in the painting workshop of the theatre. I documented our experiments by filming and photographing the actress while she was painting. The transparent plastic material we used to paint on is fireproof and extremely strong and flexible. We made tests with different kinds of paint: high quality latex, buttermilk, chalk of champagne, birdsand, and Fluwol VV, a wallpaint that contains little latex. The experiments in the painting workshop helped me choose the paints to use and make judgements on the material and size of the sheet, as well as the distance between the actress and the audience.

During regular meetings with the director and the actress the idea emerged to place one big plastic screen in the middle of the room, which was as high and as wide as

the room itself. The actress painted on this screen, which separated her from the audience. The actress worked with a microphone and sound transmitter.

WHY: By entering the space of the audience one should get the impression of an exhibition space in a museum, and of the artist's studio at the same time.

During rehearsals, questions emerged about why the sheet should be on the diagonal. My answer was that it creates a feeling for three dimensional space and gives a depth to the design. By putting the sheet in this position, the set contrasted with my previous design for Pinter's *Birthday Party*. There I forced the audience to look in one direction, creating a two dimensional effect. The audience should forget that they sit in a bigger space. Here I wanted the spectators to be aware of the space around them. It was important that the audience be given the chance to move their chair around. The audience should see the actress not only from the front but also as an isometric figure.

The dramatic development of the text made it obvious that the actress should be able to move several times from behind the sheet to the side of the audience. With a door there, her isolation would be self-chosen. The plastic sheet could be seen the wall of the actresses studio as well as a surface to paint on.