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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 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 sharktooth scrim will be placed between the audience and the stage.

The collaborative character of producing a theatre play is essential for my research. The different professions like space design, sound design, light design, and actors, create together an entity that represents nature.

The experience of nature, throughout the cultural history has been more seen as solitary than a collective one. Another practical outcome could be an installation that only one person at the time could enter.

Subject matter:

The starting point of the project is to create a space that represents a state of mind, rather than as a site for the illustration of a plot. In the set design I want to create a space without any visible walls. 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. Exploring the use of scale in life performance. I want to make the audience experience the tension between the scale of the human frame and the scale of the space around them. Projections of still or moving images on stage can be used to accentuate the difference in size.

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:

The design I will develop is for the Dutch version of Henrik Ibsen's play *Little Eyolf* (1894). The play takes place in a country house by a Norwegian fjord, and describes the struggle of a couple, Rita and Alfred Allmers, after the death their nine year old son, 'Little Eyolf'. Eyolf has been crippled after a fall from a table when he was a baby. The fall occurred because the parents left him unattended while they (very likely) had sex in another room. The guilt of the injury inflicted on the child has alienated them from each other, and their relationship has become sexless and cold. Alfred Allmers has thrown himself into the writing of a philosophical text on *Human Responsibility* – though the audience infer that this 'great work' is unfinishable by him. In any case, as the play starts, he announces that he has abandoned writing it, following, it turns out, a close experience with death while out walking in the mountains. Instead he has decided that his life's work will be looking after Little Eyolf, a resolve that comes to nothing as the boy drowns that very morning.

The married couple's relationship is further troubled by the husband's intimacy with his half-sister, Asta. Both brother and sister look back with intense nostalgic yearning to the closeness they shared as children. The romantic overtones to their sibling relationship are brought up even more fully by the fact that Asta has discovered that, due to her mother's sexual infidelity, they are not brother and sister at all. Asta herself is pursued by the happy-go-lucky road-builder, Borgheim; however, she spends the play rebuffing his increasingly despondent advances. She cannot choose to be alone with Alfred, and he can only choose her in the unconsummated relationship of brother and sister – a relationship that he forces upon his jealous and possessive wife. (Though it is entirely likely that her jealousy and possessiveness emerged from his emotional aloofness.)

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.

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:

Firstly there was research regarding the best available materials: fog screens, 3D projection on fog, fog machines, hazers, sharktooth scrim, infinity cyc.

I undertook research of the architecture and landscape of the play: garden, fjord, jetty, forests, water, sky. This involved taking photographs at the harbour of Rotterdam, and finding floating jetties, shapes of ships and bows, locks:

image

I tried out drawings of possible sets: slope, jetty, lock:

image

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, use cardboard cut' trees:

image

After this first step of research, I decided to use the image below as a starting point:

image

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

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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Jelinek, Elfriede, *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns. Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel). Über Tiere: Drei Theaterstücke* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2009)

Secondary Material:

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On the use of nature in Ibsen's play:

http://www.ibsenvoyages.com/ibsen-course/week12/little_eyolf.html