Spatial Encounters:
Spectatorship in Immersive Performances

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Abstract

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This research approaches spectatorship in immersive performances by combining models of spectatorial agency and the agency of space with a practice of post-performance conversations and correspondence with audiences. Immersive performances often place spectators at the heart of the event, framing embodied experiences and social interactions as material for aesthetic explorations. Debates in aesthetic theory have sometimes condemned the focus of such events on spectatorial participation, describing it as rather manipulative and disempowering. This thesis negotiates the theoretical discourse with an empirical approach to audiences, by exploring different perspectives through spectators' accounts of their experience.

Immersive performances heighten the experience of space by creating aesthetic environments in which spectators encounter other forms of agency: those of the world(s) and those of the inanimate things surrounding spectators. This thesis investigates how immersive performances may both transform the way that spectators perceive space and trigger their critical and creative thinking about their environment. The four case studies examined in this research proposed spaces that created a flexible experience for spectators in which they could perform their difference. Two of the performances under study were produced in London, United Kingdom, where the notion of immersion in performance has recently pervaded the contemporary performance scene and theoretical

discourse. The other two performances happened at Concordia University during the 2012 student strike and engaged with this emotionally gripping political context, exemplifying how immersive performances may introduce counter-narratives in institutional spaces that trigger political and critical thoughts.

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Chapter 1 Immersive Performances: Blurred Worlds and Flexible Spaces

The label "immersive," when applied to performances,[1] seems to encompass a form providing spectators with a sensory and participatory experience that enhances affective and embodied engagement with an event. Immersion can become an umbrella term covering a vast number of experiences in performance, each of which engage differently with spectators. To a certain extent nearly all performances could be considered immersive, even representations of scripted plays in a darkened proscenium theatre. But more specifically, the term is associated with a cluster of performances or installations involving a heightened sensorial experience of a site or environment and often both encouraging and underscoring performances of exploratory and playful spectatorial behaviours. In the June 2013 issue of *Performance Research*, Adam Alston describes immersive theatre as a genre that "may be distinguished by the sensory acts that it demands of audiences, such as touching and being touched, tasting, smelling and moving – this latter often (but not always) being characterized by freedom to move within an aesthetic space" (129). He further develops that the labelling of immersive theatre in the United Kingdom often promotes a form of more risky but rewarding spectatorial experience, in which audience members adventurously explore a space in search of greater sensations and surprises, not unlike the experience of a ride in an amusement park. A salient example of this genre from the contemporary British theatre milieu can be

1. I refer to performances to describe a wide range of live events, inclusive of performance art, theatre, and other social events, as they are understood as part of a continuum in performance studies.

found in the work of Punchdrunk[2], a well-established London-based theatre company that creates maze-like immersive environments inspired by dramaturgical texts in which masked spectators[3] are appealed to explore numerous rooms inhabited by actors performing their parts in loops within transformed spaces such as hotels (*Sleep No More*) or disused buildings (*Faust*, *The Drowned Man*). Punchdrunk describes its performances as creating environments in which "[a]udiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure." Audience members of Punchdrunk's performances have different experiences that, as suggested by Alston, highly depend on their level of daring as well as on their familiarity with an enclosed interactive space in which they are expected to perform as intrepid spectators if they are to witness the performances of actors hiding behind closed doors.

Many other London-based theatre companies, such as Dreamthinkspeak or Theatre Delicatessen, also provide similar immersive experiences in which the audience navigates transformed buildings. These companies frame their performance styles as "site-responsive works," for their audience members may interact with objects, technology, and/or improvising actors (Dreamthinkspeak), or "installation performances" (Theatre Delicatessen). In March 2013, Coney, a theatre company that self-describes as

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2. Josephine Machon explores the sensorial experiences in Punchdrunk's performances in "Space and the Senses: the (Syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's Site-Sympathetic Work." (2007) and Andrew Eglinton reflects on its immersive aspect in: "Reflections on a decade of Punchdrunk theatre." (2010)

3. I choose to use the words *spectator* or *audience member* and not *participant* to describe the spectatorship of immersive performance to remain inclusive of a more distant, contemplative experience of those performances.

"interactive theatre-makers [who] weave together theatre and game design to create dynamic shows and experiences that can take place anywhere that people gather: in theatres, schools, museums, on the streets and online," produced a theatrical installation at Kensington Palace titled *House of Cards*. The installation combined two sections: one section in which spectators were cast as courtiers in the Palace exhibition program and had a mission imposed on them (to climb the royal court's social ladder) that required them to interact with improvising actors, and the other section in which the showrooms of the museum aisles displayed a scenography narrating the story of the death of Princess Anne's only child. From my observations of the London contemporary art scene, I noticed that the distinctions between installations, environments, and performances are blurred, as is the separation between performance and curatorial practices. The term "immersive" could apply to all of these hybrid practices. [4]

Other performance practices could also be described as immersive in the sense of heightening sensory explorations without necessarily prescribing to spectators' exploratory restlessness, as understood in the context of Punchdrunk's immersive performances or the role-playing in Coney's interactive installation described above. Performances in unaltered places or journeys, whether they are framed as site-specific performances, promenade theatre, guided tours, or even as audiowalk podcasts for one or many spectators, involve a sensory exploration of one or many sites. For instance, in 2007 the art and activism organisation Platform produced *And While London Burns*, a recorded narrative that they described as "a collision of thriller, opera, and guided walk"

4. Natasha Tripney reports on Kensington Palace and Coney's curatorial approach for *House of Cards* in "Palace of Whispers." (2013)

that spectators could download online and listen to on personal devices while following instructions for a walk in the City of London (London's financial district, also referred to as "the City"). I include this theatrical audiowalk in the realm of immersive performances because even if it did not necessarily involve the presence of actors, it engulfed spectators in an environment that reframed the City as a stage onto which both spectators and passersby performed as extras in a narrative, in addition to drawing attention to the sensual materiality of the urban space.[5] In the meantime, spectators of this theatrical audiowalk were removed from the sounds of the City because they listened to a recorded narrative; hence the headphones introduced an auditory distance, providing spectators with a form of contemplative immersive experience. Since the early 1990s, the work of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff, who uses binaural recordings and narratives for audiowalks, has provided similar contemplative immersive experiences of different environments in cities, buildings, forests, or rural fields. [6]

The flexibility of the term *immersive* might seem vast and inclusive of many different performances practices, to the point of evacuating its categorization under a restricted set of paradigms. But this flexibility can also be an asset, as it does not discriminate between different forms of engaging with spectators into sensory and affective experiences of

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5. Joanne Tompkins categorises *And While London Burns* as site-specific theatre in "Site-Specific Theatre and Political Engagement across Time and Space: The Psychogeographic Mapping of British Petroleum in *And While London Burns*." (2011)

6. Janet Cardiff created in 1999 an audiowalk also set in the City of London: see Cardiff and Scott: *Janet Cardiff: The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* (1999) and also see Dunlop: "'Try to follow the sound of my footsteps…' Walking and the Theatricality of Imaginative Geographies in Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*" (2013).

environments in live events. I do not aim to define the very porous boundaries of immersive performance as a category,[7] but rather seek to investigate how some instances of immersive performances can enlighten the dynamics of the experience of space in performance: how spectatorial agency and the agency of space interplay within an immersive environment.

In *Fair Play, Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013), London-based theatre scholar Jen Harvie locates immersive performance within a larger field of "socially turned art and performance" (4), borrowing this expression from art theorist Claire Bishop ("The Social Turn"). Harvie connects immersive performances with immersive installation artworks, such as those created for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall,[8] in that these art practices both foster and highlight spectators' playful explorations of the environment by making their behaviours the subject of the experience (Harvie, *Fair Play* 30-32). For Harvie, these practices are derived from relational aesthetics, a term coined by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in 1995 describing art works that "may operate like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, or a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters" (Bourriaud 30) "taking as its theoretical horizon the

7. In *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performances* (2013), Josephine Machon explores a definition of the genre and traces its "inheritance" (28) from Richard Wagner's "total artwork" to Antonin Artaud, happenings, The Performance Group, Living Theatre, to what she terms "ritualized performance body art" (as portrayed by Carolee Schneeman, Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, and Franko B) (33), immersive technologies, and so on. She also reminds the reader that the word *immersive* was first "developed from computing terminology" (21).

8. Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*, an example of these Turbine Hall installations, will be further discussed along with Harvie's analysis in chapter 3.

realm of human interactions and its social context" (Bourriaud 14). In her essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," (2004) Bishop challenges Bourriaud, among others, claiming that these relational art practices contribute to the "experience economy … the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences" (54). With her book, Harvie contributes to this discussion by offering a more nuanced position in which she affirms that while some instances of "socially turned art" might give in to neoliberal socio-economic pressures by modelling social relations on consumerism spectacle within the "experience economy," others "might model ways of critically engaging with [neoliberal capitalism], eluding it, critiquing it, repudiating it, and ridiculing it, and they seek and model alternative ways of being which preserve principles of social collaboration and interdependence" (Harvie, *Fair Play* 193).

Spectatorial agency is at the heart of this debate on the "social turn." Using Jacques Rancière's argument against the binary of active and passive spectatorship in the *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008),[9] Bishop questions the empowering potential of participation in socially turned art when opposed to art consumerism, arguing that "[f]ar from being oppositional to spectacle, participation has now entirely merged with it" (*Artificial Hells* 277). Rancière's and Bishop's analyses of a defaulting notion of spectatorial empowerment through participation ought to be considered when performance makers claim that by "[b]lending classic texts, physical performance, award-winning design installation and unexpected sites, the company's infectious format rejects the passive obedience usually expected of audiences" (Punchdrunk).

9. I will further discuss Rancière's *Le spectateur émancipé* in chapter 3.

When audience members are discovering a performance space such as in Punchdrunk's or Dreamthinkspeak's immersive performances, they may play with the set or with objects, converse with the performers, perform actions, or wander freely across different spaces, all of which create the impression that spectators are exerting a certain control over this environment and over their experience, and therefore engaging actively with the performance. But so-called audience responsive immersive performances can also prove to be manipulative, prescribing behaviours rather than fostering genuine exchanges between the performance and the spectators. For instance, as I was attending Dreamthinkspeak's *In The Beginning Was The End* in March 2013, an immersive "site-responsive" performance at Somerset House produced by London's National Theatre, I witnessed a theatre usher strongly rebuking an audience member for trying to open a door that she was not supposed to open. This spectator argued that the performance seemed to demand that spectators adopt a dauntless exploratory behaviour. This incident reflected the overall experience of this performance as an only somewhat free exploration, an environment concealing its very restrictive rules while putting spectators under scrutiny with the overarching presence of theatre ushers hiding in dark corners, intervening only to constrain spectatorial behaviour (I tried to interact playfully with one of the ushers and she mimed that she was not allowed to talk to me). This Dreamthinkspeak immersive environment strongly directed the spectators' stroll towards following a pre-established path that pretended not to exist and exploring only where the performance makers had predicted and orchestrated an interaction; in addition performers sometimes forced spectators into participating in their partly scripted, partly improvisational number.

In *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011), Shannon Jackson characterizes the phenomenon of a "social turn" in performance as struggling with the ambiguity between two models: "Whereas for many the word 'social' signifies an interest in explicit forms of political change, for other contemporary artists it refers more autonomously to the aesthetic exploration of time, collectivity, and embodiment as medium and material" (14). Could aesthetic explorations in performance also represent explicit models for social and political change? Here I will address the political potential of immersion in performances through the lens of Harvie's analysis: as possibly fostering alternative models for fair interactions as much as sometimes reproducing late capitalism's models of control and surveillance, and sometimes doing a bit of both. Immersive performances may foster those alternative models by creating flexible experiences that invite spectators to engage creativity and critically in the experience. The immersive performances under study in this thesis produced flexible spaces that at once blurred the limits between the performance's world and the external world and put those worlds in tension, creating an aesthetic space in which the spectators' agency and space's agency interplay to create other ways of being together.

Although the focus of this research is not specifically oriented towards portraying British or London immersive performance practices and tradition, it seems important to stress that the United Kingdom has developed a particularly fruitful field in immersive performances in the past 15 years. As Alston argues: "What may today be identified as 'immersive' theatre is clearly not localized to the United Kingdom, but it is the UK that, nonetheless, has been at the forefront of its evolution. Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), Camden's Theatre and Camden Roundhouse, to name only three noteworthy London

theatres, have, in their various ways, been championing the immersive theatre style" (129). I spent four months in London in the spring of 2013 researching immersive performances and this thesis will study two of the performances I attended there, one produced at the BAC. During this research, I also met and discussed with other audience members in oral or written forms, as I wanted to report on a plurality of experiences.[10]

The first two chapters of this thesis will set a theoretical framework for analysing the case studies in the fourth and fifth chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the agency of space, while chapter 3 explores different theoretical frameworks of agency in spectatorship. Chapter 4 studies the cases *Ring* and *Trial*, two immersive performances that seem to overturn the idea that spectators' participation in immersive performances is necessarily physically active or empowering. Chapter 5 compares the political potential and spatial agency of two events that occurred on Concordia University's campus during the 2012 student strike, a protest action in an elevator lobby, the "Blanket Fortress," and an immersive performance that I created and performed in a windowed stairwell, *Paths to Knowledge*.

Finally, all the names of the spectators participating in my research have been changed for purposes of anonymity. One British participant insisted on staying anonymous during the research in London, and I decided to apply this principle to all the research participants.

10. Those encounters are part of a larger rationale for engaging with audiences in conversations that will be discussed in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 Encountering Otherness: World's/Worlds' Agency(ies)

> Imbued with the idea that the public thinks first of all with its senses and that to address oneself first to its understanding as the ordinary psychological theatre does is absurd, the Theatre of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets.
>
> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (85)

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) wrote these words in 1938 and yet the idea of a theatre that would stimulate the senses to engage audiences into taking action upon their social realities is still very vibrant. Artaud sought to develop a language for theatre that would address theatre's physicality and create an organic, mystical experience that would unite spectators' minds and bodies while troubling their perceptions of their social and political environment. He also wanted to draw from the crude, vital energy of masses gathering in the streets and inject this explosive potential into theatre auditoriums. To achieve this, Artaud's work advocates for abolishing "the stage and the auditorium and replac[ing] them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of the action" (96). Spectators would, he hoped, become immersed in the spectacle's "visual and sonorous outbursts" (86), an experience he compares to believing in the dimension of dreams, therefore creating a parallel reality in which spectators are engaged and united in their experience. For Artaud, this parallel reality is not an illusion but is in communion with life: it is an underlying, explosive dimension of life.

Theatre practitioners have long since explored the political potential of blurring the distinctions between life and theatre, abolishing the physical distance between spectators and the performance, and engaging the senses along with the mind in aesthetic experiences. From experiments such as Augusto Boal's "invisible theatre" (1931-2009) (which suggests that unaware bystanders are more inclined to reflect upon class and social conditions because a performance is witnessed as real life) to The Performance Group's multifocal environmental theatre (1967-1980) (which was designed to foster audiences' embodied spatial explorations and to hand over authority to the spectatorial experience), performance practices have developed into a vast array of immersive forms that each engage with spectators differently and that each propose a unique relationship with the "real world." Jacques Rancière locates the political potential of art in conflicting "régimes de sensorialité" (66), claiming that "[r]econfigurer le paysage du perceptible et du pensable, c'est modifier le territoire du possible et la distribution des capacités et des incapacités" (55). Like Artaud suggested decades before, immersive performances may entail the potential for connecting aesthetics and politics together by engaging the senses and the embodied mind into perceiving differently, and therefore into taking action upon the world of a performance considered in tension with the social world.

Elinor Fuchs wrote an influential essay presenting theatre plays as small planets. She originally used this essay as a teaching tool in her dramaturgy classes. "A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space" (2004: 6). Fuchs encourages readers to inhabit the world of a play in order to embrace the indeterminacy of dramatic texts. Her metaphor of readers visiting planets created by, but somehow slipping away from, human

imagination introduces the idea that dramatic texts offer a passage to parallel worlds that exist independently from human will, with their own specific desires and intentions: "Ask, what has this world demanded of me? Does it ask me for pity and fear? Does it ask me to reason? To physically participate in the action on stage? Does it ask me to interact with other spectators? To leave the theatre and take political action?" (Fuchs 9). Performance can hence be considered a vehicle for those parallel worlds that seek to relate to the "real" world and its inhabitants, the spectators (who are new to the performance's world) and also the performers (as spectators of their own emancipated work). Similarly, the "real" world, the world that is supposed to be external from the fiction of the performance, also has agency and is negotiating its presence within the performance.

As Artaud suspected, a dimension in which parallel worlds meld with the "real" world might hold the potential for transforming spectators' perceptions and providing alternative models of social and political structures. Parallel worlds do more than mirror the "real" world; they actively trigger changes in society. Immersive performances may hence offer frameworks that foster this dimension of blurred and intermingling worlds and cultivate the potentialities for altering those worlds through friction and collision in spatial encounters. An exploration of the ways in which the body engages perceptually and socially with space might illuminate the ways that spectators establish connections between the "real" world and parallel worlds when experiencing immersive performances.

For this chapter, my aim is to create a framework in which to analyse the case studies under examination in the following chapters, through enquiring how human agency and

the world's /worlds' agencies may activate each other. Using phenomenology, spatial theory, and Donald Winnicott's concept of a potential space, I will investigate ways in which phenomenological explorations of space can be connected to Henri Lefebvre's definition of an embodied social experience of space through play as a mode of encounter and communication and a model for a fair distribution of control.

2.1 The Phenomenological Body

The enactive approach in cognitive science explores the notion that humans perceive their environment through active explorations rather than by simply processing data collected by the senses. In *Action in Perception* (2004), Alva Noë argues that perception is dependent upon sensorimotor knowledge and skills and that movement is central to perceiving the surrounding space. For instance, Noë compares vision to touch in ways of exploring space: "You move your eyes around the scene the way you move your hands around the bottle. As in touch, the content of visual experience is not given all at once. We gain content by looking around just as we gain tactile content by moving our hands. You enact your perceptual content, through the activity of skilful looking" (73). According to the enactive approach, the senses, kinaesthesia, and proprioception are interrelated and aim to connect the self with its environment instead of seeking to represent the world to consciousness. For Noë, the environment does not need to be represented because it is constantly highly accessible: the body is embedded in the world and the world is always present (106; 218-19).

Perceiving is hereby considered an encounter connecting the embodied mind with the world. The world should also be recognized as an agent in this encounter: one does not simply "gain content" as Noë suggests, appropriating the world as a passive object of knowledge or sensations; rather there is an exchange in this encounter, a form of communication. The mere idea that we have to enact in order to perceive presupposes that we are reacting to something; movement cannot simply be produced by an internal drive towards unwilled and unchanging things. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) understood perception as communication. In the chapter "The Thing and the Natural World" from *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty reflects on how bodily movements are directed towards perceiving the world and encountering things in some sort of embodied dialogue, or "completion by us of some extraneous intention" (373). He underscores this paradox: we are in the world and we bring the world into existence in our consciousness by perceiving and conceiving it, and yet the world is outside of us, escaping our subjectivity and any attempt to frame its appearances into meanings. He later refers to the experience of things as "something transcendent standing in the wake of one's subjectivity, some kind of natural entity of which a glimpse is afforded through a personal history" (Merleau-Ponty 379). This transcendence of things from our subjective and perceptual grasp might reveal that the encounter is about engaging with another form of consciousness, one that is alien to a semiotic processing of significance in visual, oral, and written languages: "if we suspend our ordinary preoccupations and pay a metaphysical and disinterested attention to [the thing, it] is then hostile and alien, no longer an interlocutor, but a resolutely silent Other, a Self which evades us no less than does intimacy with an outside consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty

376). The transcendence of things might simply indicate that these are not inert, unwilled objects that only come into existence after human intervention, when human consciousness attributes meaning to them, but rather that they are expressing intentions that are intrinsically separate from human subjectivity.

2.2 The Social Body and the Production of Space(s)

Not only are humans *in* the world, they also shape the world they live in. According to a United Nations report, in 2011 fifty-two percent of the world population lived in urban areas (4), which are shaped by political and economical forces. Human agency and imagination both shape and colonize the social and natural environments and politics are embodied and perceived as much as they are abstract constructs. Is the language of the world described by Merleau-Ponty compatible with the languages of social and political spaces? In this section, I will explore how sociologists have developed different systems to describe how space is socially perceived and produced by complex dynamics of appropriation and control.

Contemporary urban studies are concerned with the difficulty of reconciling conceptualized urban spaces with situated spatial practices. In *Space, the City and Social Theory* (2005), Fran Tonkiss discusses the gap between the macro and the micro spaces of the city: "between the city as a kind of machine for organizing social life and the ways in which subjects make space for themselves in the city" (149). She describes a split between the need to structure urban space (notably for developers and city councils, but also for sociologists) and the actual subjective experience of space, which often

deconstructs the authority of those structures. Political and economic forces impose development plans on cities according to ideologies sustaining the established power (which, in a globalized neoliberal world, generally promote real estate capital and insidious surveillance systems), whereas spatial practices are a means to escape or disturb this colonization of space. The subjective experience of the city is heterogeneous, unruly, and elusive, escaping any homogenous, transparent order: "Maps of social and economic division, after all, do not say it all about the territory of everyday life" (Tonkiss 150).

This understanding of the experience of the city in macro and micro scales draws from Michel de Certeau's (1925-1986) allegory of experiencing the vision of God at the top of New York City's World Trade Center. In his introduction to "Pratiques d'espace," the third section of *L'invention du quotidien* (1980), de Certeau establishes a parallel between fantasies of control and the fiction of an abstract city when experienced as a whole in bird's-eye view from the observation deck of the twin towers. For de Certeau, the desire to embrace the city at a single glance is similar to the desire to regulate the city and make it an abstract object of knowledge. The spatial practices of city dwellers are invisible to a macro vision of the city viewed from above and this scopic fantasy is blind to the micro realities of the practices on the street, or the vision from below. De Certeau uses this allegory of vision to illustrate how apparently insignificant everyday practices may empower individuals and become tactics to escape from the panoptic vision of control. His main argument in this collection of essays is that city dwellers are not passive consumers alienated by a capitalist urban environment, but rather that their creative everyday practices may transgress the dictates of control and surveillance in small but effective ways. Resistance, for de Certeau, takes place in the smallest details of

everyday life, such as ignoring restrictions of walking on a private lawn on daily journeys to work.

De Certeau compares walking to improvised speech acts ("énonciations piétonnières"; 148) and finds in this practice the potential for individuals to subjectively appropriate the city and thereby resist the official narratives and behaviours promoted by city councils or other authorities. For de Certeau, walking is a creative practice of linking fragments of the city together in a cunning game of leaping over temporary borrowings, similar to games of syntax in language such as synecdoche and asyndeta. During their procession, walkers perform their subjectivity by juxtaposing fragments of the city together or by taking one fragment as representative of a whole narrative. But walking is also for him the embodied experience of a spatial form of communication. In one passage of "Pratiques d'espace," de Certeau describes the experience of walking in the city as going along a series of *locations* ("rented spaces"), haunted places that do not belong to anyone in particular but are passed over and shared by multiple people:

> Marcher, c'est manquer de lieu. C'est le procès indéfini d'être absent et en quête d'un lieu propre. L'errance que multiplie et rassemble la ville en fait une immense experience sociale de la privation de lieu (…). L'identité fournie par ce lieu est d'autant plus symbolique (nommée) que, malgré l'inégalité des titres et des profits entre citadins, il y a là seulement un pullulement de passants, un réseau de demeures empruntées par une circulation, un piétinement à travers les semblants du propre, un univers de locations hantées par un non-lieu ou par les lieux rêvés. (155-56)

Walking in the city is hence to dwell in *locations*, which create connections between the people who have passed through them and who have dreamed them, without anyone claiming ownership over these places. It is to recognize not only the fluidity of space, but also its essence as public property. For de Certeau, walking resists the hegemonic capitalist project of the privatisation of space, because it is an ephemeral practice of borrowing and sharing narratives and experiences by creatively connecting together the elusive traces of former dwellers. De Certeau found in the situated practice of walking a way to overturn the logic of control and property in the capitalist state, but his theory remains vague on the effects of this improvised resistance, other than providing an isolated sense of mischief or a fading sense of solidarity.

In *La production de l'espace* (1974), Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) expresses concern with the idea that each society attempts to establish its authority by producing its own representation of space and believed that the first step in instigating a change in society is to understand the processes of the production of space. He discussed that while capitalism attempts to homogenise space by excluding differences, it never entirely succeeds because of the complexity of the dynamics producing space. He splits the production of space into three processes (48-50): firstly a dominant authority establishes "representations of space," or a system of signs, which are secondly appropriated or hijacked by users and turned into creative productions in the "representational spaces"; thirdly, users activate space in the "practice of space," but do not necessarily appropriate it (they may reproduce the system of domination in their spatial practice or, as was also suggested by de Certeau's concept of walking, appropriate space).

Lefebvre develops a system in which this conceptual triad of the production of space is activated by another triad, which I understand as the experiential triad of the production of space and which he describes more precisely as localised moments of embodiment of social space: "Pour comprendre l'espace social en trois moments, qu'on se rapporte au corps" (Lefebvre 50). For him, social space is first and foremost lived, conceived, and perceived by social bodies. He explains that each process of the production triad can appear within each moment of the experiential triad, but that more generally the practice of space is perceived (phenomenological), the representation of space is conceived (abstract), and the representational space is lived (subjective).

Lefebvre does not distinguish the conceptualization of space from its embodiment, as he incorporates both into the dynamics of a single phenomenon: the production of space. Abstractions are embodied phenomena because the mind and the self inhabit a body. Abstract representations of space are informed by embodied, sensorimotor knowledge in order to conceive, perceive, or live the representations of space. Public squares and demonstrations may provide a good example from which to explore how the production of space can work as a double triad of production processes and experience. For instance, architects and urban planners use their embodied knowledge and skills[11] to design public

11. I discussed this point with a friend, Patrick Ma, who works as an intern architect for the firm Lapointe Magne et Associés in Montréal. He reported on his struggle to communicate to clients and other collaborators the conceptualization of the site he was designing (the Olympic Stadium pool installations in Montréal). He said that the 3D computer program he works with helps him develop a skillful spatial experience of the site in his imagination. When conceptualizing a site, he is able to virtually explore the space only in his mind: "walking, zooming in or out, flying through walls, floating as a ghost within or over the project, inspecting in each and every corner and their materiality, as if I was having an embodied

squares that will provoke certain user behaviours or experiences, such as using corridors or paths in the landscape to channel the flow of pedestrians or using monumental architectural features to give the impression of grandeur and power. Thereby architects and planners (conjunctly with the authorities who hired them) conceive and create a set of representations of space and users perceive those symbolic representations through their embodied practice. Certain spatial practices reinforce the dominant representation of space, such as when a pedestrian's small silhouette stresses the monumentality of the building behind him/her. Other spatial practices provide an alternative, a representational space or a space disrupting the dominant system of signs, such as when protesters block and occupy a public space. Organised protesters might conceive the representational space (orchestrating how to disrupt the space), while improvising protesters "live" the representational space, performing against the dominant representations of space as they are processing. The lived representational space in demonstrations is a reactive and creative moment of spontaneous performance, such as when student protesters left their signs in the empty flowerpots of the Place Jacques Cartier in Montréal in March 2012, creating an impromptu protest garden (fig. 1).

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experience of the building. With my eyes wide open, I overlay these projections onto reality, as another layer of space. The physical space becomes a scale of reference for length and depth, as a muted background for my projected imagination." His technology-augmented experience of spatial conceptualization helped in the development of new skills for exploring space in his imagination, but communicating his experience to others who have not developed the same skill is difficult.

Fig. 1: Place Jacques Cartier after the 22 March 2012 student protest; photo credit: Mario Jean/Madoc; reproduced with permission from Mario Jean.

Lefebvre also develops the idea of an "absolute space" between reality and fiction, the space of a lived and embodied abstraction inclusive of all of space's contradictions and differences: "Fictif et réel, il se glisse toujours dans l'entre-deux, l'interstice inassignable entre l'espace du corps et les corps dans l'espace (l'interdit)" (290). The absolute space, for Lefebvre, is an embodied utopian experience outside of the self in a forbidden space, a space in-between. In *Architecture from the Outside* (2001), Elizabeth Grosz defines in-between spaces as places for becoming through experiencing the "outside": "The in-between, formed by juxtapositions and experiments, formed by realignments or new arrangements, threatens to open itself up as new, to facilitate transformations in the identities that constitutes it" (94). Similarly to the explosive parallel reality imagined by Artaud, Lefebvre's absolute space and Gorsz's in-between spaces are places that create new possibilities through close encounters with others and otherness, the outside of self.

Lefebvre's absolute space reminds me of Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) concept of heterotopia. Both French philosophers attempted to define how utopia could take place in the "real" world and provoke a rupture in the system of the dominant order (which they both describe as a homogeneous system of control or, in Lefebvre's words, "abstract space"). In *Des espaces autres* (1984), Foucault defines the concept of heterotopias as a site juxtaposing multiple spaces and temporalities that are at once contested and represented, spaces of crisis, transition, and myth. Heterotopias, in contrast with utopias, are alternative spaces resisting the dominant order in a "real" location, whereas he defines utopias as alternative spaces resisting in abstraction only. Both Foucault and Lefebvre imagined that such spaces of resistance would be inclusive of radical differences and would thereby hold a potential to disrupt and transform the homogeneous, transparent space of control and order. For Foucault, those layered and contradictory spaces are localisable, whether they exist as permanent forms (e.g., theatres, cemeteries, libraries), occur in temporary forms (e.g., cults, carnivals), or are produced by practices (e.g., sexual practices in motels). But Lefebvre's absolute space seems more ambivalent than Foucault's heterotopia: the former is a utopia of embodiment. It contains all of space's layers and takes place where utopia is experienced, within the self or within the blurred frontiers of an encounter in the interstitial space where beings are connecting despite their differences. It is at once the gap that is filled and the gap that separates people during an encounter. The "real" and the imaginary meet in a paradoxical embodied space enclosing all potentialities.

Lefebvre discusses space as an instrument of individual and collective agency as well as one of globalized domination and control. His aim is to create a theory that allows for

conflicted elements to coexist while revealing the existence of a code for the production of space. Paradoxically addressing the insubordination of spaces by organizing their production into a complex system, Lefebvre exposes how the experience of space does not discriminate between the subjective and the collective and between the conceptual and the embodied. But Lefebvre also seeks to find the locus of utopia, which he hints is at the heart of human relationships and selfhood. I understand Lefebvre's absolute space as a space of communion and encounter, paradoxically inclusive of, and blurring, differences. It is the space where change happens, a space of shifting realities where parallel worlds connect with the "real" world.

2.3 Playing in the Potential Space: Towards a Fair Model of Distributing Control

According to the enactive approach, humans engage with space in a skilful physical exploration similar to the way we discover objects and surfaces by playing with and touching them, moving them around or moving our bodies around them. We grasp and manipulate objects in order to engage with the world around us, but somehow objects escape our control and the world seems inhabited by other agencies, or what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the transcendence of things. We encounter these entities in moments of physical interplay, during which we respond to the agency of things, grasping things only to realize that they let us catch them. What if the world and things communicate by playing with us in space? Playing is a discovery, a way for the child to win over what is at once intriguing and frightening: an exploration of otherness. De Certeau understood walking as a spatial game through which to encounter the Other: "Déjà en ce lieu

palimpseste, la subjectivité s'articule sur l'absence qui la structure comme existence et la fait 'être là,' *Dasein*. Mais on l'a vu, cet être-là ne s'exerce qu'en pratiques de l'espace, c'est à dire en *manières de passer à l'autre*" (163; emphasis in original). For de Certeau, urban spaces are palimpsests filled with traces of the elusive presence of former tenants, whom we encounter in the playfulness of walking. These multiple forms of agencies inhabiting space might attempt to connect with humans by playing, as a mode of self-expression and discovery.

According to psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1896-1971), playing is only possible in an intermediate space between self and others, a "potential space," in which one may achieve personal development. Play produces a space for encounters in "the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable" (Winnicott 64). Playing is a way to safely explore the elusiveness of control, an estrangement experienced when discovering alien agencies paralleled to the baby's discovery of "not-me": the moment of separation of self from the external world and particularly of the self from the mother.

This moment of separation is a "danger area," during which the baby needs to feel the reliability of the presence of his/her mother in order to be able to play autonomously. For Winnicott, "the baby's separating-out of the world of objects from the self is achieved only through the absence of a space between, the potential space being filled in …" (145) or through what he also terms the "unresolvable paradox": to be at once joined and separated in the potential space. The mother's reliability, even during her absence, fills the space with her symbolic presence, giving the child the confidence to play, as much as

playing also helps to fill the void of her absence. Winnicott explains, "the separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to cultural life" (147). Hence Winnicott thinks that this potential space, where connection is achievable despite separation because of a bond of trust, does not disappear once the adult age is reached but rather is fundamental to creative playing: "Here where there is trust and reliability is a potential space, one that can become an infinite area of separation, which the baby, child adolescent, adult may creatively fill with playing, which in time becomes the enjoyment of the cultural heritage" (146).

Playing is a way to untangle the magical experience of relating self with others and with the world. As with the baby's experience of discovering the limits of his/her own agency by grasping objects and dropping them (realizing that although s/he can relate to the objects, they are not part of him/her), we encounter the external world in a similar way, by exerting agency, releasing it, and connecting with alien agencies. More importantly, this interplay of agencies in the potential space blurs the distinctions between self and others: "It could be said that with human beings there can be no separation, only a threat of separation" (Winnicott 145). Playing can only occur within a trusting relationship, as a way to fight the threat of separation, the "danger area."

I argue here that performers who establish a bond of trust with their spectators enable a potential space in which both can play and take risks. They create a zone where worlds meet, a fragile ecosystem of interplaying agencies and precarious magical encounters, in which the boundaries between self, others, and the world are at once reaffirmed and blurred. As in Lefebvre's absolute space, Winnicott's potential space is a locus of utopia,

a paradoxical space where the self is at once tethered to and disconnected from others, collapsing distances without abolishing differences and creating a new world of possibilities.

I argue that playing in a potential space could foster models of trusting relationships and provide alternative worlds in which control is evenly distributed. Cities are divided by territorial conflicts and histories of exclusion and conquest. Under neoliberal governments, public spaces are increasingly controlled and promoted as capital for investment or advertisement, which stresses the importance of reinforcing the shared quality of urban space. As Jen Harvie suggested in *Fairplay, Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, performances engaging in close relationships with their audience, such as immersive performances, might provide "subtle, partial and effective responses to neoliberal capitalism's support for self-interested individualism [and] models of fairness and constructive social engagement that give me hope for fair play" (25). Immersive performances may achieve this by using play as a mode for encountering others and otherness in a potential space and engaging in dynamics of fair and trusting interactions.

2.4 Encountering Otherness: What Does the World Want? What Do Things Want?

What do the world, the other agencies of things, and de Certeau's former tenants of space want in attempting to encounter us humans? I am borrowing this question from W. J. T. Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), in which he breaks with the idea that pictures have power (as vehicles of meaning) and suggests instead that they wish to enter in relation with and transgress their separation from living beings. For Mitchell, in order

to engage in an exchange with images, scholars in cultural studies need to think of them in kinship with us or as totems: a relative of the tribe. Mitchell points toward a model of interaction with images that is freed from mastering or control through not objectifying images as fetishes or empowering them as idols, but instead engaging in a playful relationship with them: "as a game between friends and relatives, not as a hierarchy in which the image must be adored or reviled, worshiped or smashed" (Mitchell 106).

I want to use Mitchell's model of totems as a rhetorical tool for opening the possibility of a transgression of boundaries through playing with the worlds of immersive performances. By considering what the world and things might want, as well as what performances' parallel worlds might want, we, performance researchers, might think of those agencies as in kinship with humans. We might thereby cross the boundaries that enclose our human experience and, as in Winnicott's precarious magical encounters with objects, we might learn while playing with those agencies, therefore becoming more attentive to the way that those "real" and parallel worlds launch surprises, destabilizing and thwarting attempts to remain in control. Similarly, as Donna Haraway suggests, we may become more aware of the ways that the world plays tricks on us in the production of knowledge: "Acknowledging the agency of the world in knowledge makes room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world's independent sense of humor. Such a sense of humor is not comfortable for humanists and others committed to the world as resource. There are, however richly evocative figures to promote feminist visualisations of the world as witty agent" (Haraway 593). The world of Haraway's feminist visualisations is an irreducible otherness that will not be subjected, but that can be encountered as an ally or a totem that wishes well.

2.5 Encountering Parallel Worlds

I have described in this chapter how, through playful explorations, the world and other agencies may encounter humans. Humans produce and colonize the spaces they live in, but somehow those spaces escape from their control and reinvent their world, surprising and disrupting authoritarian conceptions and practices of space. Immersive performances might also wish to meet with the world and its inhabitants. Laura Levin describes site-specific theatre practices, which can be considered a form of immersive performances, as: "an ecological network, a meeting place for humans, nonhumans, and actors of disparate social experiences. If the artist offers a frame to structure a performance, it ultimately allows multiple worlds to communicate in their own material language" (24). As in Winnicott's potential space, some immersive performances may create a space favourable for encountering otherness in fair play, in which to relieve control and experience a precarious but magical estrangement: a paradoxical, interstitial space.

Chapter 3 Encountering Others: Partial Connections

The discussion in contemporary art over relational aesthetics, participatory arts, and the so-called social turn, previously mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, seeks to redefine an ethics of responsibility to distribute control in different ways than those adopted by various models of spectatorial participation in performance. Scholars are interrogating the potential for spectators to participate in the after-life of the performance, whether by feeding the archival process or by directly impacting society through sharing their experience. As Helen Freshwater mentions at the beginning of her book *Theatre & Audiences,* most of the theory on theatre audiences has articulated concerns and anxieties about how theatre may or may not exert a political impact upon audiences, especially concerns about evaluating how this impact operates as either a manipulation or an empowerment of the spectator. She mentions that scholars often make strong assertions about the effects of theatre experiences without ever really gathering evidence to support these claims. The discussions about theatre audiences are often exclusionary of the voice of their very own subjects: the "'ordinary' theatre goer - with no professional stake in the theatre" (Freshwater 4) is rarely asked about his/her experience and theory often relies solely upon critics' reviews and artists' intention statements. According to Freshwater, what remains to be done is to engage with audiences in a trustworthy dialogue that "give[s] participants the space to reflect upon the limitations of creative or political agency" (76).

My research in Montréal and London explored a practice of encountering other spectators and engaging in conversations with them. Before reflecting on such encounters

with audiences, it seems worthwhile to investigate conceptual framings of agency in spectatorship and a potential ambivalence between moments of distance and intimacy in the exchange between performers and audiences. This exchange seems to rely on a complex bond that keeps getting interrupted by moments of self-consciousness creating a boundary in the experience. During those moments, the spectator seems to reconnect with his/her private reality and engages in a more distant and contemplative form of receptivity. During moments of intimacy, the spectator experiences the performance as a period of intense connection with the group formed by the audience and the performers. The interplay between those two moments remains unpredictable and highly dependent upon each individual, each group of spectators, each representation, etc. In the previous chapter, I suggested that immersive performances hold the potential to foster models for relieving control during playful encounters between the external world and the worlds of the performance, the performers, and the spectators. In this chapter, I will focus on spectatorial agency and the exchanges happening between spectators and performers during and after a performance.

In the first section of this chapter, I will contrast Jacques Rancière's model of spectatorship as a creative and active contemplation with Jen Harvie's analysis of Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* as a spectatorial experience during which agency is compromised to create complicity. The notion of complicity introduces a desire to seek a connection between the performers and the audience – the theme explored in the two following sections, which principally focus on heightened attention and conversations as a model for engagement.

3.1. Agency: The Sterile Dichotomy between Participation and Contemplation

The debate over the spectator's agency in aesthetic theory has opened into a large discussion about patterns of empowerment and manipulation of audiences. Some experiences of participatory, interactive, site-responsive, or open-sourced performances have produced power struggles, in which both sides (the artists and the audience members) battled to keep or take control of/over their own experience and those of others. Rather than producing an artistic experience free from hierarchy, situations of shared authority may engender frustration or even fear for certain participants, who may feel constrained to participate in close-ended systems or even feel abused by someone else's overarching control over the situation. In *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte mentions several cases of spectatorial resistance to participation, from mental to physical withdrawal, but she also provides a particular example of the female performers in The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* (1968-69), who felt abused by male spectators for whom the invitation to participate in the performance became an encouragement to fulfil their sexual desires (62). A complete absence of control over the framework of the performance may allow abuse and forced participation in the creation of performances cannot lead to a model for spectatorial agency, no matter how noble the effort to decenter artistic authority.

This understanding of spectatorial agency as empowerment of the spectator's authority can find its roots in 1930s efforts to stop the manipulation of masses and enforce the citizenry of audience members. Berthold Brecht (1898-1956) and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), in very different attempts, both sought to empower audiences by disrupting

mimesis; Brecht by developing the "distancing principle" and Artaud by blurring the limits between life and art. During this decade associated with the rise of Nazism and war propaganda, alienation and illusion were closely intertwined in political life. Hence, for both Brecht and Artaud, the disruption of the illusions in the theatre auditorium would teach audience members how to also break with illusions in social life, such as freedom in a capitalist world, leading to a political awakening of the population. This idea of illusion as alienating can also be traced back to Guy Debord's (1931-1994) *La société des spectacles* (1967), which outlined that mass media consumption and the display of commercial images in everyday life are associated with the pervasiveness of spectacle, a form of illusion that alienates social life.

In *Le spectateur émancipé* (2008), Jacques Rancière connects the fear of mass alienation, inherited from Brecht's, Artaud's, and Debord's theories, with the contemporary drive to make the spectator "do something," challenging what Rancière considers to be the false opposition between active and passive spectatorship. Performance practices birthed in the 1960s often rejected mimesis as an alienating illusion and associated spectatorial agency with decentered authorship in order not to submit the spectators to passive consumption and mass manipulations. Nevertheless, for Rancière, there is no such thing as passive spectatorship; rather, spectatorship is a condition of distance in relation to an object, an activity of translation, a capacity for associations and dissociations:

> Le pouvoir commun aux spectateurs ne tient pas à leur qualité de membres d'un corps collectif ou à quelque forme spécifique d'interactivité. C'est le pouvoir qu'a

> chacun ou chacune de traduire à sa manière ce qu'il ou elle perçoit, de le lier à l'aventure intellectuelle singulière qui les rend semblables à tout autre pour autant que cette aventure ne ressemble à aucune autre. (Rancière 23)

Hence, for Rancière, the experience of spectatorship is individualized and cannot be generalized to an entire audience: the only thing that is shared collectively is the power to make different interpretations. Shared authority in artistic production, when understood as a complex system of independent agencies and capacities, deconstructs the idea of empowerment applied to audiences at large as much as it deconstructs the association of illusion with mass alienation. Rancière rather advocates for spectatorship as a form of active contemplation, in which the artwork is disconnected from the artist's intention and also from destination in the reception process. In other words, the artwork is independent of meaning and the spectator's emancipation resides in the acknowledgement of his/her capacity to generate idiosyncratic perceptions of his/her experience of art. For Rancière, spectators' perceptions are highly connected to a conception of looking as being active, which is not foreign to the enactive approach in contemporary cognitive science research (see chapter 2.1.). Rancière further explains that this activity needs to be situated in a position of (critical) distance to enable the emancipation of the spectator in order to maintain the independence of meaning in the artwork:

> La "distance" esthétique a en effet été assimilée par une certaine sociologie à la contemplation de la beauté, laquelle cacherait les fondements sociaux de la production artistique et de sa reception et contrarierait ainsi la conscience critique

> de la réalité et des moyens d'agir. Mais cette critique manque ce qui constitue le principe de cette distance et de son efficacité: la suspension de toute relation determinable entre l'intention d'un artiste, une forme sensible présentée dans un lieu d'art, le regard d'un spectateur et un état de communauté. (Rancière 63)

Rancière distinguishes his principle of aesthetic distance from Brecht's distancing principle in the way by which distance is produced: instead of relying on theatre production techniques to create a critical distance in the spectator's reception, Rancière makes distance a model of spectatorship to aim for, completely dependent upon each single spectator's capacity and will. Nevertheless, this conceptualization of spectatorship as a critical, creative, and active contemplation of a distanced object, closely linked to the visual activity, seems to reject other forms of engagement, those in which the encounter with the art experience is more immediate (and often involves many senses at once).

In a situation in which the spectator is immersed in an installation, his/her embodied engagement with the experience complicates the processes of a distanced contemplation and the notion of agency. In her article (2009) about Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project* (2003) in London's Tate Modern Turbine Hall, Jen Harvie explores the dynamics between the installation's manipulation of the audience's bodies and the performativity of individual agencies. Harvie suggests that there exists a dialectical relationship between simultaneously oppressive and liberatory effects in the experience of the installation, drawing from Michel de Certeau's concept of walking as performative agency in *L'invention du quotidien* (1980) and from materialist analysis, in which the material conditions of an artwork prescribe behaviour. According to Harvie, those two apparently contradictory effects of liberation and oppression are made possible in the *Weather*

Project by a combination of wilful complicity and performative agency on the part of the spectator.

Eliasson's installation in the Turbine Hall was an indoor simulation of an eternal sunset, created by a circle of hundreds of yellow lamps glowing through a mist and filling the room with an orange light, transforming spectators in dark silhouettes who could observe themselves in a mirror covering the entire ceiling. Spectators lingered freely in the installation's space, exploring and dwelling, waving at each other and playing with their bodies laying on the floor, rolling or making angels, while looking at their reflections on the mirrored ceiling. They lent their bodily performances as something to be watched from the upper balconies and from other perspectives. According to Harvie's analysis, spectators made themselves complicit in the prescriptiveness of the space by consciously submitting themselves to this grandiose *mise en scène* of space and bodies in order to access and collectively share a contemplative experience of the sublime. The audience's complicity with their own manipulation, Harvie suggests, can be considered as a partially compromised agency that enables the experience:

> (…) we actively participate with autonomous subjective agency in conditions of contemporary culture *even though* we recognize those conditions as somewhat compromised and compromising of our subjective autonomy. We are wittingly complicit with (aspects of) such compromises because, for example, they offer the pleasure of the spectacular and satisfy our possible desire for increased public surveillance. (Harvie "Agency and Complicity in 'A Special Civic Room'" 205; emphasis in original)

Harvie's analysis of this particular case at the Tate Modern complicates Rancière's notion of agency as a distant and autonomous contemplation that enables potential emancipation for the spectator. Firstly, agency is not disconnected from the artist's intention because the audience wilfully participates in this installation's manipulation of bodies, although each spectator individually negotiates the desired level of (sometimes prescribed) participation within this collective experience. Secondly, the spectators are observed and observers: their embodied presence and attitudes are constantly reflected in those of the other spectators, hence they are simultaneously both subjected by and objectified in the experience. If there might be moments of distant and autonomous contemplation, created by the absence of destination[12] in the performative activity of multiple spectators, there are definitely other moments in which contemplation is blurred with the effect of being objectified in the engulfing sublime experience. Hence contemplation can become an activity in which no distance is allowed. This experience of being at once within and behind the group, in a position of looking, is both pleasurable and disturbing: "We are simultaneously within the spectacle of the group and outside it, looking in. We are both autonomous and collective, a community of those who have perhaps some things in common, who may see the group as benign but the mass as threatening, and who experience our sense of being part of a public as both harmonious and anxiety inducing" (Harvie, "Agency and Complicity in 'A Special Civic Room'"216). Contemplation, in this particular case, is not simply a distanced individual

12. As mentioned above, Rancière suggests that the artwork is independent of meaning, disconnected from destination, and I extend it to the performances of spectators in the installation.

activity but is a shared embodied activity during which moments of self-consciousness induce a distancing effect.

Rancière, by making contemplation an active and critical mode of engagement with art, breaks with the widely spread binaries of participation and contemplation, activity and passivity, or empowerment and alienation, and complicates the notion of spectatorial agency, which, for him, seems dependent upon an insurmountable gap between intention and reception. But like Harvie's analysis suggests, agency does not exclude lending oneself to manipulation and to artists' intention: agency mixes with complicity, in order to access the artwork and become part of a collectivity of spectators. Audiences have to be considered as a collection of agencies that are each negotiated by individual capacities but are also seeking encounters, exchanges, and kinship. Understanding the spectator's experiences as a completely autonomous mode of perception, absolutely independent from the artist's intention, is literally shortsighted. It fails to acknowledge the potentially powerful exchanges happening between artists and their audiences, whether or not this communication sometimes gets interrupted by moments of distancing. Without denying the spectator's autonomous agency, it is possible to commit to a model of spectatorship in which the audience and the artist inter-influence each other, not necessarily within a struggle over control but rather within the larger aim to connect with each other as well as with the experience of art.

3.2. Heightened Attention and States of Liminality

As Colette Conroy suggests in *Theatre & the Body* (2010), "The body of the audience member is physically present in the same room as the acting body. Theatre is founded on the dynamic interplay between actor and audience, and between the two the entire set of communication strategies, mimetic games and temporal and spatial experiences that make up theatre are played out." (13-14) Performers commonly talk about how more or less receptive audiences from day to day contribute to making the performance more or less successful. Spectators talk about special moments of chance encounters that will never occur again or be shared twice, during which a whole auditorium feels connected, that are often related to the blurring of reality and fiction, such as when a performer makes a mistake or when other irruptions of "real life" invade the fictional realm. Nevertheless, the power of this exchange is more rarely understood under the terms of a shared responsibility over the co-creation of a performance, which is an avenue suggested by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008).

Fischer-Lichte understands the dynamic of mutual influence happening between performers and spectators as functioning in an "autopoietic feedback loop," which can be defined as a self-regulated productive system that responds to the stimuli of a looping exchange between performers and spectators. For Fischer-Lichte, spectators do not share power simultaneously or equally but influence each other's reactions alternatively, as within a living, self-regulated system that regenerates through a network of interactions:

> The effect of the autopoietic feedback loop negates the notion of the autonomous subject. The artist, like all participants, is assumed to be a subject engaged in a continuous process of determining and being determined. This mutual determination contradicts the notion of a subject that sovereignly exerts their free will and can fashion themselves independently of others and of external directives. Equally, this conception vehemently opposes the notion of a spectator determined exclusively by outside forces and escaping all responsibility for their actions. The perceptible workings of the autopoietic feedback loop, apparent in all forms of role reversal between actors and spectators, allows all participants to experience themselves as co-determinate participants of the action. Neither fully autonomous nor fully determined by others, everyone experiences themselves as involved and responsible for a situation nobody single-handedly created. (Fischer-Lichte 165)

Hence, for Fischer-Lichte, the inter-influence between the audience and the artists is less characterized by a struggle over control than by a more or less obvious contract, through which all participants become bounded in the simple act of attending the performance. She uses Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975) to describe the complexity of this tacit agreement in which both audience members and artists get involved and become dependent upon each other during the performance. Although this performance is not immersive, it provides an extreme example of the ethics behind spectatorship that can also apply to spectators of other performances. In *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović, after drinking a whole bottle of wine, eating a jar full of honey, and carving a star on her abdomen with a razor blade, laid down in pain on blocks of ice, intending to wait for the ice to melt, when a few spectators decided to intervene and ended the

performance. For Fischer-Lichte, Abramović made explicit in this performance the ambiguity of the contract between spectators and performers: "Throughout her performance, Abramović created a situation wherein the audience was suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives" (12).

Whether or not Abramović expected or hoped that someone would rescue her, the notion of the responsibility of the spectator is hereby twinned with a trust in the ethical judgment of the audience members, a judgment normally exerted in everyday life and challenged by the performance's context, which remains ambiguous about artistic intentionality. It was up to the spectator to decide whether or not the artist intended to stay there or expected someone to stop her. No matter how much spectators would have preferred not to get involved in this experience, the simple act of being there forced them to make a decision: whether to remain seated, leave, or free Abramović from her self-induced torture. In other words, it forced them to evaluate the terms of the contract that bound them to the artist and the performance. Their acts determined the process of the performance and the fate of the performer, but Abramović also determined their acts by forcing them to confront this impossible dilemma, in which the limits between life and performance are unsettled.

Although the shared responsibility bond is not always made as explicit as in *Lips of Thomas*, all performances implicitly require the audience to co-determine the experience, if only by simply getting infected by and infecting each other's presence.[13] Displeased

13. Simon Shepherd discusses in *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (2006) a physical contagion between spectators in theatre audiences, which he relates to kinaesthesia and bodily rhythms. (73-76)

audience members can transmit their annoyance to other spectators and disturb performers simply through their unresponsiveness. More commonly, laughing is reputed to be infectious. But Fischer-Lichte also introduces a notion of inter-influencing bodily rhythms, which she calls "special unifying energies in all participants":

> Rhythm lies at the base of our fundamental physical and biological mechanisms. It regulates our breath and heart beat – the human body is rhythmically attuned. The body perceives rhythm as an external as well as internal principle. We see certain movements, hear certain words, sounds, melodies and perceive them rhythmically. However, rhythm only develops into an energetic principle when we sense it physically – as with our own bodily rhythm. (Fischer-Lichte 58)

In her approach to spectatorial experience as an autopoietic feedback loop occurring between performers and spectators, Fischer-Lichte makes the perception of rhythm the organizing principle of performance. According to her, bodies perceive rhythms by tuning not only into other participants' bodies but also into the performance's architectonics and tonality, which would explain the collective feeling of getting infected during certain performances.

But Fisher-Lichte does not restrain the exchange between the audience and performers only to a process of embodied inter-influences. For her, during the spectatorial experience, we attend to others and to performance by a phenomenon of heightened attention, during which the presence of others (and of things) reveals their intrinsic meaning, and during which the experience of everyday life gets transformed: "Through

the performer's presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming. He perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy" (Fisher-Lichte 99).

Hence, in Fischer-Lichte's analysis, the special bond of "unifying energies" is a mode of revealing each other to each other and of transforming each other by becoming together, by experiencing reality together under a different mode of perception, a heightened attention.

To better explain what Fischer-Lichte refers to with the concept of heightened attention, it is worth mentioning the work of anthropologist Thomas J. Csórdas in his article "Somatic Modes of Attention" (1993), whose theory Fischer-Lichte uses to establish how the engagement with another being functions on a multi-sensorial level. For Csórdas, somatic attention is the phenomenon through which the experience of the other lies in the indeterminacy between the act of constituting the other as a distinct object in the environment and the encounter with this object. This formulation shares similarities with Winnicott's paradoxical encounters with otherness in the "potential space" (see chapter 2.3). Csórdas terms this dual process of objectifying while attending to and with another's body the "existentially ambiguous point" (138). Hence, for Csórdas, the experience of others is ambivalent between a distancing process of an objectification of the other and a genuine encounter in which body boundaries get blurred, such as when Catholic healers mirror the problems of the affected, when South Asian physicians tune their pulse with their patients' heartbeat, or when expecting fathers experience the same sensations as their pregnant partner.

Hence, when Fischer-Lichte refers to the spectator experiencing "the performer and himself as embodied mind" (99) (mind is singular in the text), she refers to this ambivalent state of somatic attention in which bodies not only seem to communicate together but also seem to become one. Spectators experience themselves and the performers as both individual and collective bodies, trespassing the boundaries of their own bodies in the process of becoming together, while trying to maintain a representation of themselves, others, and the performance.

For Fischer-Lichte, this blurring of body boundaries positions the spectator on a threshold, during which perceptions of reality get transformed. She terms this a state of liminality, an expression she borrows from anthropologist Victor Turner's (1920-1983) research on rituals (Fischer-Lichte 175). She further defines thresholds as highly ambivalent invitations to cross over that do not necessarily explain what is on the other side but nevertheless holds a promise for possibilities in the experience of a certain distance from everyday reality.

If for certain performances the dynamics between the spectators and the performers explicitly establish a struggle over control, there might exist other instances in which a more subtle balance between competing agencies gets established, one closer to Harvie's concept of complicity. As Fischer-Lichte proposed in her book, this balance relies on a mutual trust in ethical judgment, a co-dependence in the shared responsibility for the creation of the experience, and connections with others in a special bond in which participants attend to each other's presence in heightened attention and blurred bodily boundaries. But this experience of collectivity necessarily incorporates moments of distanced understanding, in which the spectator maintains his/her individuality by

constructing a representation of him/herself and of the other. This oscillation in experience between the collective and the individual, between the other and the self, might also explain an ambivalence between distance and intimacy in the understanding of the relationship between the performers and their audience, or even in the fundamental difference in theatre history between Brecht's distancing principle and Artaud's blurring of life and art. In Fischer-Lichte's conceptualization of the spectator positioned on a threshold, the spectator experiences distance through moments of self-consciousness in which s/he becomes aware of the elusiveness of the moment, suspending his/her contact with the ongoing exchange:

> The liminal state results from the ostensible contradiction between actively participating in a performance – from sensing the circulating energy physically to joining action on stage – while experiencing the elusiveness of the entire event. The spectators remain on the threshold for the duration of the performance. Their position is never fixed; they do not control the performance but their influence can be felt nonetheless. The audience oscillates between these various states, ultimately enabled, defined, and triggered by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. (Fischer-Lichte 67)

3.3. Shifting Positions and Conversations

The intimacy that can be experienced during performances as a connection between performers and audiences is hence a fragile bond that easily gets interrupted and is highly

dependent upon participants' capacities and free will. Nonetheless, connections do happen between audience members and performers, and among spectators. In *Theatre & Globalization* (2009), Dan Rebellato discusses theatre audiences as rehearsing ethical positions through "unusual experiences of commonality," arguing that "[a] cosmopolitan ethical principle is founded in both the autonomy of the individual will and the universal community of beings, and in a theatre audience we can have a very sharp sense of being both ourselves and a part of a larger community" (72). This feeling of belonging to a "larger community" seems to happen through unfixed and unstable connections that may vary in duration and do not necessarily happen altogether within the time frame of the performance, but can also happen later in the act of sharing memories of the performance. In Fischer-Lichte's state of heightened attention and Csórdas's somatic modes of attention, bodies seemingly communicate with each other by blurring their distinctiveness without completely annihilating otherness and selfhood: moments of self-consciousness rehabilitate the necessary distance in which one distinguishes oneself from the other, the group, and the fictional reality of the performance. Attention to the other needs to be understood as an act of openness that remains inclusive of differences, one that seeks high levels of connection intertwined with a form of distance during which the experience of otherness is being processed.

In a forthcoming article to be published in *Improvisation, Gender and the Body* (2015), Andra McCartney approaches the idea of listening as an act of intimacy in her own practice, a form of connection that is saved for the special intention to listen to someone as to a lover: "Listening to a lover is not only about respect and contemplation, conceptualized as diametrically opposed to grasping and mastering. Think of intimate

listening. Is there no touch involved, no being in touch, no grasping followed by letting go, no play with mastery, no falling onto or away from?"

The idea of touch as defining connections has great potential to exemplify the notion of attention in spectatorship as an oscillation between distance and intimacy. Touch is a sense that allows us to establish contact with another while reminding us of our skin as a physical boundary, at the same time that those boundaries get blurred in the act of touching and being touched. In cognitive sciences, researches on synaesthesia and empathy have even shown that "[w]atching another person being touched activates similar neural circuits than actual touch and, for some people with mirror-touch synaesthesia, can produce a felt tactile sensation on their body" (Banissy and Ward, 2007: 1). As suggested by McCartney in her model for listening inspired by the intimacy of a loving relationship, there seems to exist a playful form of appropriation of the other in connection that can be paralleled with the sense of touch, an elusive and maybe misleading appropriation that momentarily abolishes boundaries of selfhood, only to constantly return to a more contemplative mode of attention that does not tend to blur boundaries with the other. Moreover, as I explored in chapter 2 (see 2.2), touch is a sense that can exemplify playful explorations of otherness in the environment, as Winnicott's framework of play in the potential space can construct a hypothetical model for fostering trustful relationships and a fair distribution of control in performances. In Winnicott's theory, playing is a game of relating the self to others and the world by experiencing the elusiveness of control and the precarious magic of intimacy. Maurice Merleau-Ponty also framed the attention to the world and others in a similar way: in a dialectical relationship between solitude and communication. We stand alone in our private interior world, while

we cannot ignore (and constantly seek to enter into communication with) the exterior world and other private interior worlds, a communication that keeps getting interrupted by moments of withdrawal in self-consciousness:

> (…) I polarize a world which I do not create. Consciousnesses present themselves with the absurdity of a multiple solipsism, such is the situation which has to be understood. Since we live through this situation, there must be some way of making it explicit. Solitude and communication cannot be the two horns of a dilemma, but two 'moments' of one phenomenon, since in fact other people do exist for me. (Merleau-Ponty 418)

In her article, McCartney draws her understanding of connections as being partial from Donna Haraway's text "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," (1988) in particular from the following quote:

> The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection. (Haraway 587)

Haraway implies here that the partiality of knowledge is not only caused by a perspective situated in a certain constellation of knowledge, but also that this perspective is incomplete without the presence of another, who makes the perspective constantly shift

positions and who joins one's perspective for the act of becoming together. Furthermore, McCartney reminds us of the other meaning for partiality, which Haraway hints at in the above quote, "as in partial to, liking and desiring connection":

> Here, Haraway is challenging the idea of partiality as prepossessed and inimical to change, far from objective and even rampantly subjective, the way it would be described in an online dictionary. Instead she focuses on how the partial -- the loved, the fragmentary, the tone within a more complex harmonic timbre -- relies on connections with others for objectivity and the creation of knowledge. (McCartney)

Hence, the desire for connection is also a desire for shared responsibility in the creation of knowledge, in which attending to the other with the other engages both in a process of mutual transformation. Within this form of engagement, one's boundaries are sometimes dissolved and other times reaffirmed or confronted, in a shifting activity that certainly transforms the understanding of self. Nonetheless, it is, according to Haraway, the only sustainable position: "The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that can change history" (586).

Conversations are modes during which the interlocutors' attention shifts between a distanced reflexivity to a more intimate but elusive connection. What happens in-between those shifts remains very mysterious: something gets processed and changes perceptions. After a good talk with someone, one can feel like s/he sees things differently, or hears, smells, or tastes differently. It is not just a figure of speech to say that someone has

changed perspectives; it has to be taken quite literally, especially when thinking about the exchange happening during and after a performance. By joining conversations in a desire for connection, one can not only transform him/herself and the other, but also contribute to changing his/her surrounding social, cultural, and natural environments by perceiving them differently.

This ambivalent in-between state during which, in a conversation, something changes in our perception of the world reminds me of Fischer-Lichte's understanding of the spectator as positioned on a threshold, inspired by Victor Turner's state of liminality in rituals: "According to Turner, the changes brought about by the liminal phase usually affect the social status of the participant and extends to the entire society" (Fischer-Lichte 175). But this liminal state is processed differently in performance, as she further develops:

> Whether the experience of the concerned subjects – caused by the destabilization of the self, the world, and its norms – leads to a reorientation and lasting transformation depends on each individual case. Spectators could also dismiss their transitory destabilization as silly and unfounded when leaving the auditorium and revert to their previous value system. Alternatively, they might remain in a state of destabilization for long after the performance's end and only reorient themselves much later upon reflection. In both cases, the participation in the performance provides a liminal experience. (Fischer-Lichte 179)

Hence, according to Fischer-Lichte, although spectators may experience a liminal state during their attendance at performances, they will not necessarily acknowledge its

effects, or at least not immediately. Transformation does not necessarily occur instantaneously but unfolds in time, which can vary for each person. The need to untangle the experience is manifest in recurrent returns to a performance by theatre scholars. The processing of performances in conversations after the event can further the transformative experience, the act of becoming together.

3.4. Encountering Audiences in Post-Performance Conversations

Following Freshwater's suggestion in the introduction of this chapter that audience research in performance might benefit from a dialogue that "give[s] participants the space to reflect upon the limitations of creative or political agency" (76), I engaged in post-performance conversations with audience members in my research, in the hope of developing a dialogical process inclusive of differences in spectatorial experiences that shares the responsibility of the creation of knowledge. I wanted to avoid the disembodied profiling of audiences and account instead for different perspectives, but also, as in McCartney's reading of Haraway, I desired to connect with and make room in this thesis for other perspectives then my own. Reporting on conversations might also help to conceive the phenomenon of audience reception as an experience that is unfixed, is unfolding in time, and can potentially thrive throughout an entire lifetime. My aim was to further the exchange that was created during the performance and seek other connections in the afterlife of the performance. My method included questionnaires and group discussions to structure those encounters and to help produce traces of the exchanges. The selection of a questionnaire might be surprising as a means to engage in a

conversation, but I found that it became a very practical tool to warm up participants. I see the questionnaires as a form of written dialogue between spectators and me, and some of the written responses I received were quite intimate, describing for instance personal memories or, in the case of the performance I created, engaging in a direct dialogue with me using the pronoun "you". The conversations in person took on different aspects, from one-on-one to group discussions organized by myself or organized by others: I attended on 26 March 2013 the "theatre club" at the Battersea Art Centre (BAC) for *Ring*, organized by Jake Orr and Guardian theatre critic Maddy Costa, and on 17 October 2012, David Szanto and Florencia Marchetti organized a group discussion after a performance of *Paths to Knowledge* for the Graduate Students Research Association at Hexagram Concordia.

Chapter 4 Immersion as Contemplation and Resistance: Two Case Studies in London, UK[14]

I attended the two immersive performances under study in this chapter during a research trip in the United Kingdom in March 2013. The first performance, *Ring*, was written by Glen Neath and directed by David Rosenberg and actively engaged its spectators by simply making them sit still and silently in the dark, listening to binaural recordings and thereby fostering a contemplative, yet creative and critical, mode of experience. As when Rancière questions the drive to make spectators "do something" (see previous chapter), *Ring* seemed to deconstruct the idea that immersive performances need spectators to actively move into a space for them to feel physically engaged in the experience.

Trial is an interactive, partly one-on-one, durational immersive performance in multiple spaces including streets in the London borough of Hackney co-directed by Felix Mortimer and Joshua Nawras. It was programmed at the Barbican Centre and produced by Retz, an immersive theatre company dedicated to "telling stories without boundaries" and "to bringing classic stories to life by allowing them to breathe in the real world." (Retz, "About") Interactivity in this immersive performance provided a disempowering experience that could activate spectators' personal ethics and desire to resist the imposed narrative, as my conversations with audience members and *Trial* directors have unveiled. Both performances produced flexible spaces that blurred the limits of the performances' worlds with those of the external world, creating a set of tensions and frictions that fostered reflection and creativity. But the performances achieved this in very different

14. The section herein on *Ring* was first developed for a paper presentation at a peer-reviewed conference (see Binette "The Ambivalence between Distance and Intimacy", 28 October - 3 November 2013.)

ways, one by immersing spectators in sounds, darkness, and nightmarish narratives and the other by forcing spectators into performing a nightmarish semi-improvised narrative in broad daylight in Hackney. If spectators left *Ring* feeling like they had just come out of a night dream, spectators of *Trial* found themselves trapped in a daydream unable to wake up.

4.1. Active Contemplation and Intimate Connection in *Ring*

Ring, a pitch-black performance, was a disorientating experience for spectators that provided a very complex interplay between "real" and fictional worlds using 3-dimensional recordings and immersion in complete darkness. The performance reshaped the surrounding space by using binaural technology and the suggestive power of darkness. During this conflicted experience of space, the spectators developed different strategies to engage with this environment. Some seem to have experienced immersion in darkness as a contemplative experience, while others embraced the close intimacy with the characters suggested by the technology and the immersion in a darkened room. It was performed at the BAC, a former town hall of the London borough of Battersea (annexed to Wandsworth in 1965) transformed in 1981 into an arts centre now renowned for programming innovative performance forms, many of which are immersive.

The audience completely filled the Council Chamber, a large room still bearing the atmosphere of its fading past, where rows of seats were arranged in two halves facing each other. In the middle, where the facing seats met, a lone performer walking with a crutch paced the length of the room. The audience members were handed a pair of

headphones just before entering the room and were told to put them on as soon as they sat down in a chair. The rhythm of the walk of the apparently injured performer resonated in their covered ears along with the noises of other audience members settling into their seats; it seemed like the headphones were transmitting the live sounds of the room. The performer introduced himself as Michael, a host or guide "leading proceedings," and asked all the audience members to stand up and sit next to people they did not know. Once the shuffling in the room was over, the performer warned about the intensity of the darkness to come that would last for a period of fifty minutes. He then ran a darkness test for about one minute, after which spectators could leave if they felt too uncomfortable under this unusual and absolute deprivation of light. Sometimes, spectators left immediately after the test; other times, they stood up in the middle of the ongoing performance and, following instructions that Michael had given earlier, lifted their hand and yelled "Help" so a staff member would assist them as they exited the darkened room. The immersion was beyond most people's previous experience of darkness.

When darkness returned after the test, falling slowly upon the audience, the live transmission of the room's noises imperceptibly switched to a recording. In the headphones, the recorded voice of Michael, whom spectators could still hear walking with a crutch, told the audience that they would soon have to rearrange their chairs into a circle. Although this action seemed highly impossible given the size of the audience, each audience member then heard Michael going from spectator to spectator, successively asking each of them to move, and heard the noises of people moving. Those actions were only taking place in the headphones, but thanks to binaural recording, the auditory illusion gave such a sense of spatial orientation that the fictional, nonexistent audience

members shifting their chairs became extremely tangible. Most spectators were generally confused about whether or not people were actually moving around them. Very cleverly, just as some spectators might have started to try to move their chair, Michael's recorded voice came to whisper in each spectator's ear not to move. The technology was so acute that many spectators reported having felt his breath on their necks.

Not every spectator discovered that the headphones had switched to a recording. Some remained convinced that some of the narrative's events were occurring live, while others understood that there was more than one recording and/or that the recording they were hearing was unique to them. Even for those who unveiled the trick from the beginning (some mentioned that they could hear a slight transitional difference from the live audio to the recording), the experience of spatial disorientation was still effective. Spectators had to constantly reorient themselves with their embodied memory of the room in contrast with that suggested by their headphones. Having to sit next to strangers certainly added to the confusion, in addition to enabling the existence of fictional audience members.

The located voices of the characters and their movements in the recording reshaped the room by giving the illusion that spectators were sitting in a circle. The performance space became flexible: for one spectator, the room had shrunk because the size of the group in the recorded narrative was smaller than the real audience. Moreover, since each spectator was cast as a character known to other characters in that fictional group, the intimacy suggested by the narrative might have contributed to creating a feeling of proximity. For other spectators, the room had seemingly extended, because the darkness opened into an infinite space. For myself, it felt like the room had two dimensions: the

"real" space in which we were siting and the fictional space of the narrative, both worlds flickering in my perceptual orientation in space. I even removed my headphones once or twice to ground myself back into the Council Chamber, in an attempt to reconnect with the "real" world.

From a technologically mediated spatial disorientation, the narrative went to a suggestive re-orientation through describing other spaces, such as a nightmarish hotel room and seashore memories. For many, this was a frustrating switch, as they would have preferred to carry on experiencing the mediated disorientation in darkness. But, as I noticed for myself, what was the most frustrating was to feel forced to imagine those spaces. Even if I did not want to leave the darkened room where the characters were sitting in a circle, I had to project myself into the hotel room, because the suggestive power of the description was stronger than my will. The seashore seemed to produce an even stronger displacement than the hotel room, since in a country like the United Kingdom, spectators hold very vivid memories of the sea.

Darkness became the site of an infinite range of projections, from frightening experiences to exhilaration and eroticism. Had you experienced a traumatizing event involving darkness, the performance could have become unbearable. In contrast, the whisperings in the dark to the spectators' necks connoted intimacy, if not erotic proximity. For many spectators, this experience of darkness was one of pure excitement, a mix of fear and glee that got compared during the BAC "theatre club" group discussion to an amusement park ride. The parallel between a ride and this performance informs about the eeriness of the spatial disorientation produced by binaural technology, especially given the fact that spectators sat straight in their chairs for almost an hour.

The completely darkened space had the potential to remind one of deathtraps, of sinking into dark waters, or, in contrast, of resting in a nurturing, calming void. The evocative power of darkness enabled spectators to adapt the space according to their own personal projections or desires. Those who preferred an introspective experience would therefore withdraw into their own thoughts and reflect upon their relation to darkness, whereas those who sought connections felt very involved in their relation to the characters surrounding them. Darkness enhanced the performance's flexibility to accommodate each spectator's idiomatic modes of perceiving the experience.

For instance, one spectator was convinced during the whole performance that she was the only one hearing this particular narrative in the headphones. She felt like she had a privileged relationship with Michael and reported being extremely disappointed upon discovering at the end that the recording had been standard for everyone. She felt cheated, but then related this feeling to personal experiences in relationships. Darkness, in this case, contributed to enhancing the potential intimacy between the characters in the narrative and this spectator, strengthening the connection that the spectator was seeking. Darkness provided a space in which she could project her desire for a deeper encounter.

Another spectator recounted that she looked forward to the performance because she wanted to reflect on her experience of darkness:

> I think it's very rare I'm in complete darkness, especially in London and UK in general where we are always surrounded by strangers and light/light pollution. Even in smaller towns I never feel I am in darkness – because then there are stars. So this

> darkness is something I have only experienced in staged situations actually. I found it exciting, and want to experience it more, in a meditative way. (Christina)

She further added that the experience was soothing for her. The performance provided an unusual context of sight deprivation within which she could more easily withdraw from everyday life and explore a metaphysical space. Darkness, as an unlimited, unbounded space, has a strong power to provoke meditative contemplation. Moreover, spectators who experienced a more distant, contemplative state were generally more critical of the performance's narratives in their answers to the questionnaire, expressing a wish for more complexity and originality in the stories.

The performance's narratives were open-ended and very suggestive and the immersion in darkness contributed to enhancing this evocative quality of the text. It played with the idea of taking the spectators on a twisted, dreamlike journey, where they would encounter their own projected fantasies. From the beginning of the performance, the voice of Michael encouraged the audience to start exploring the potential of darkness: "The dark though is never really empty, is it? It can be full of unprompted images. Perhaps for some of you it can seem almost tangible, like a thick curtain, which can feel suffocating" (*Ring*).

Many spectators reported feeling oppressed in the dark, one literally wrote that she was suffocating, which makes one wonder how much the words spoken by the guide-character might have directly influenced her reaction. Moreover, darkness seemed to heighten the receptivity of some spectators, to a point where some of them might have let their own personal narratives take over the performance's narratives. During a meeting

with spectators in a group discussion I organized, one spectator communicated that he was so intensively immersed in and connecting with the final sequence (at the beach) that his memory of this moment actually transformed the script of the performance. At the end of the performance, Michael's voice asked us to imagine that we were on a deserted beach:

> There's a little girl alone... and you... on the empty beach. So you walk toward her, slowly. She doesn't see you or she pretends not to see you. She's too young surely to be able to swim. Imagine this: You can feel the hot sand between your toes. This is something else you recall later when you're going over it all in your head. You wonder how she will react to you as you step out onto the pier, it's actually wider than you thought at first, a good metre across, but rotten. You decide to call out, "Hello!" so that you don't take her by surprise. And she turns to look at you, stands up straight, her net still trailing in the water. "Where are your mum and dad?" You move closer, you say, "It's okay. Don't be afraid. My name's Frances. Be careful you don't fall." And, of course she backs away from you, falls, disappears into the water, she barely makes a splash. You rush forward quickly to save her and your foot breaks through the rotten wood... twists, and now all you can think about is your leg. No. Anyway, you can't move. You're watching the water, waiting for her to surface, to appear, but already it's as if she was never there. (*Ring*)

This spectator got so involved in this nightmarish narrative that he believed his character had deliberately pushed the child into the sea and reported on being horrified with guilt from having fictionally committed this act. Obviously the narrative, as well as

Simon Kane's interpretation of Michael, stresses the guilt that one should feel for having scared the child. But this spectator's creative imagination pushed the suggestion forward into changing the actual situation happening in the script in his experience of the performance. During the group discussion, we all debated on whether or not our character had pushed the little girl since this spectator was so utterly convinced that this was in the actual script and made us all doubt our own experience. After meeting with the author and reading his script, I could confirm that this murderous ending was coming only from this particular spectator's creative and receptive mind.

More generally, spectators oscillated during the performance between a state of contemplation and one of seeking connections with the performers, the performance, and/or the other spectators. The ambiguity of the real presence of audience members confronted the auditory illusion of the physical presence of fictional characters and contributed to this oscillation. Darkness had the power to immerse the audience deeply into their experience of the environment, while the limits of this fictional world collided with memories of the real theatre space and introduced a distance in the experience. Hence, darkness brought flexibility to the performance, allowing spectators to navigate from distance to intimacy, according to the variability of their perceptions and their creative and/or critical response.

The spectatorial experience of *Ring*, which did not require spectators to perform any actions or speech, enlightened the complexity of the exchanges between the spectators and the performance by underscoring their occasional resistance to the narrative, their withdrawal in distant contemplation, their private creative responses, and a certain level of complicity and intimacy. Darkness enhanced the suggestive power of the narratives of

Ring, created a sense of proximity and intimacy between some spectators and the performers, and/or heightened the withdrawal of spectators into their own thoughts. In any case, darkness provided flexibility to the performance space, enabling the performance to accommodate each spectator's mode of perceiving and specific navigation between states of connection and states of contemplation. *Ring* achieved to engage spectators in a creative and critical response by simply making them sit together silently in the dark for fifty minutes. I was able to get a sense of how the spectatorial experience of space is interdependent with the way each spectator perceives and connects individually with the performance by engaging with spectators of *Ring* in post-performance conversations. Those conversations unveiled the wide variety of responses that spectators may have had while listening in the dark, making their contemplative experience an active engagement.

4.2 Resistance and Play in *Trial*

Trial was based on Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) novel *Trial* (1925) and short-story *In The Penal Colony* (1919). The performance was divided into two parts that could either be experienced on the same day or on two separate occasions and was set in the streets of Shoreditch and Hackney, more particularly around Hoxton Market (see fig. 2) and de Beauvoir council estates (see fig. 3). Each part lasted for around two hours and alternated between one-on-one encounters and brief crossovers with other audience members and performers.

Retz aimed at creating an interactive system mirroring the constraints of Joseph K. in Kafka's *Trial*, a bank executive found guilty of a crime, of which he has no knowledge and hence denies committing. K. helplessly experiences the dehumanisation and disempowerment of a bureaucratic justice system serving obscure authorities and slowly absorbs the condemnation and resigns to stop fighting the judgement. Roughly inspired by Kafka's novels, Retz decided to combine K.'s journey into a meaningless trial with contemporary violations of privacy by government agencies using tracking and surveillance systems. Like K., the spectators of *Trial* discovered at the beginning of the performance in Shoreditch Town Hall that they were accused of an unknown mysterious offense, which was never revealed. Once released individually onto the streets, each spectator is intercepted by an undercover agent (see fig.4), who briefs them on the urgency of their situation and on the overarching power of the fictional Department of Digital Privacy. The agent closes the encounter by handing each spectator a solicitor's business card, whose office is located just down the road. During a solitary ten-minute walk on Hoxton street to the solicitor's office, spectators are followed, photographed, and tracked by the performance staff on private twitter accounts, who want to make sure their audience does not get lost, but thereby mirroring the surveillance system they invented for the performance's narrative. I remember walking by a coffee shop and noticing three young women taking my picture with an iPhone. This was rather unsettling, because I was not sure whether or not they were part of the performance, and I remember subsequently feeling paranoid, suspecting that every gawker I met on my way was an undercover staff member of Retz.

Fig. 2: Hoxton Street and the buildings of the City, London's financial district, June 2013; photo credit: Mélanie Binette.

The spectators' journeys unfolded thereafter as a succession of uncanny encounters, climaxed by the witnessing of a torture experiment on a death machine as in the *Penal Colony* (this short-story describes an execution system using a torture machine), during which a performer pretending to be a spectator seemingly gets neutralised by a machine that would deaden cognitive faculties. This latter scene and the entire second part of *Trial* were set in a former library and community centre in de Beauvoir Estate, a mid-century council housing development north of Regent's canal and Hoxton Market that was disguised for the purposes of the performance as offices for the Department of Digital Privacy. The gap between the performance's two parts could stretch over a period of a month, depending on when spectators had booked their tickets, with occasional irruptions of the performance in the spectators' lives through emails, for instance in the form of an invitation to the vernissage of an exhibition by a "department painter." At the end of part

one, spectators were given a time and the address of the Rose Lipman Building (de Beauvoir Estate's former community centre) for their trial.

Fig. 3: De Beauvoir Council Estate, June 2013; photo credit: Mélanie Binette.

Each of the spectators were cast as the main character in Retz's performance and could hardly withdraw from the task of interacting with the performers in a one-on-one relationship. The performers imposed a destiny on the spectators, one of a pending trial that seemed instrumental and tricked, since each character repeatedly insisted on the impossibility of appealing the judgement, which was already dispensed and which entailed a sentence on the "machine." Similar to K., spectators may have wanted to investigate the nature of the accusations pending on their character (the legal as much as the illegal options to escape the judgement) and the legitimacy of this fictional justice system and the ethics of the disinterested work of the public servant characters, who led spectators to their fatal end in the Rose Lipman Building with resignation and sometimes even cruelty. But spectators might have also wanted to test the limits of the

performance's system and of the performers' skills to improvise and compose with one's questions. By doing so, spectators claimed authority over their own experience, refusing to be subjected to a predetermined role in the performance's structure and acting in opposition to their casted character trapped in a system in which s/he no longer controlled his/her own fate. The boundary between the spectator's experience of the performance and their character's evolution in the narrative was blurred, as both attempted to escape a system that commanded their fate.

Spectators embarked on a journey muddying life and fiction, for which they were unprepared to different degrees (depending on how much they had heard about the experience), and they had to decide the level to which they engaged in the performance. The performance could feel very overwhelming and frustrating especially at the beginning, as clerk characters in the Shoreditch Town Hall tossed spectators around from one room to another and asked for personal details, before launching spectators back into the streets after a brief encounter with an undercover agent. I personally rotted for half an hour in a waiting room before a performer came to pick me up. Many of the frustrations I felt during the performance, whether or not the performers and the creators intended to cause them, actually contributed to constructing this feeling of no longer controlling one's own fate and of fighting an unfair and oppressive system. To wait for half an hour before any meaningful exchange happens, to interact with performers improvising less skilfully than others with questions (hence leaving spectators doubly puzzled), to feel discarded by the clerks at the Town Hall and then tracked by the performance crew on the street (see fig.4), or even to be irritated by what felt like incoherencies in the narrative:

everything in the close-ended system of the performance's interactive structure mirrored the oppressive and manipulative system denounced in the narrative.

Fig. 4: Road leading to Hoxton Square, where the undercover agent stopped spectators, June 2013; photo credit: Mélanie Binette.

The performers established a relationship in which spectators had to play, but the contract was not clear: were spectators expected to act or just to ask questions? How far could they act? I interviewed Mortimer and Nawras on the ethics and responsibility of the spectators in their performance, specifically asking how far people were ready to go in the narrative, and they replied that once during the final scene, which happened in front of a larger audience, five spectators fought two performers to stop them from murdering the character who had survived the machine, "wrestling" and "slapping in the back of their head" (Nawras). For Nawras, as he later mentioned during the interview, the fact that those spectators did not really hurt anyone demonstrates that they were playing more than really fighting, a playfulness that reaffirmed the limits of the performance's world: "no one went for a punch, there were still rules!" (Nawras). These spectators took on

their acting roles so seriously that they felt compelled to save the victim of the machine, whereas most spectators silently observed this final scene in which this female character was murdered in a passage of the estate. In contrast with Marina Abramović's spectators who, as described in Erika Fischer-Lichte's analysis (see chapter 3.2), disrupted the narrative to stop her self-mutilation, those spectators did not disrupt the performance to save the physical integrity of the performer (as the performance's finale was too extravagant to get misinterpreted for reality) but to honour the terms of what they understood was their contract as spectators of this interactive performance. They wanted their character to heroically change the finale, as they understood that it was under their responsibility to provide an ethical alternative to the narrative. Another spectator described the experience as "a chance to be as brave as you wanted and say things you may never be brave enough to say had a situation like that been real!" (Kimberley). For certain spectators, this performance gave them an opportunity to perform their ethical judgement and to rehearse what they considered as "good" behaviours in situations unlikely to happen to them.

There was a scene at the end of part one in which each spectator got trapped with Joseph K.'s character in a sort of prison cell behind the solicitor's office (see fig. 5), when another character slipped into the room to murder him with a poisonous syringe. I must admit that I was a bit confused with the narrative line of the overall experience: we were both following the crew's instructions to prepare for our trial and following the tracks of K., whom we had virtually encountered at Shoreditch Town Hall on a TV screen and who had warned us not to trust anyone. The assassination scene was even more confusing because, firstly, I did not understand why I ended up in K's cell or how I

was supposed to engage with him; secondly, both performers did not acknowledge my questions and did not even talk to me; and finally, the syringe did not automatically strike me as a murder weapon, as I believed that it was filled with tranquilizers. Interestingly enough, despite my frustrations during this moment of the performance, I felt genuinely guilty when I understood that I had witnessed a murder as a bystander and had not stopped the perpetrator from committing this fatal act. I remember being frustrated with that scene and convinced that if I had known, I would have stopped the murder. Even when the performers and the narrative were less convincing, the performance seemed to hold the potential to make spectators test and rehearse their ethical judgement. Another spectator also got confused and wished she had reacted against the perpetrator: "If I'd have realised Joseph was being killed, I would have intervened more heavily" (Hannah).

Fig. 5: The "prison cell" where spectators met Joseph K. was a warehouse space in an alley behind the solicitor's office, June 2013; photo credit: Mélanie Binette.

I also think that this wish to change the narrative was more common during the one-on-one experience, because a watching audience did not inhibit appeals to perform. As described by the same spectator, the one-on-one was quite a "consuming" experience,

whereas “There is a shift at the end of the *Trial* back to perhaps a more traditional stage and viewing performance which was a kind of deep breath for the audience – almost like a get out for us being too involved, which I’m not sure we needed, though it was a relief given what had just happened” (Hannah). The one-on-one experience was demanding and even felt oppressive at times, and returning to a position of watching from an audience, more in distance and contemplation, was a relief for many.

Not everyone felt compelled to act upon the finale like the five spectators who wrestled the performers, perhaps because not everyone wanted to experience the performance as a performer. Even if the performance casted spectators as the protagonists of a dystopian reality, they remained free to decide whether they would accept the role and to choose how they would engage. As for myself, I decided to remain distant, perhaps because of the context of this research but also because of my inclination towards analytical thinking:

> In real life, I would protest during my arrest and would never go to see the lawyer that the agent suggested, I would be too wary. Hence my behaviour worked as a reminder of the performance’s fiction, because it was not the behaviour I would have in a real situation. On the other hand, if I was really (improv) acting, I would make a scene and maybe force the guy to follow me, perform an action that would feed the performance’s narrative or dialogues. But I did not wish to act or perform as a “spectactor.” I felt like my role as a spectator was different, or maybe this simply isn’t the role that I wanted to have as a spectator. Also, as a matter of fact, I must say that I am not a huge gamer. I hence opted to adopt a reflective behaviour,

> asking many questions, piling information, trying to make sense of this absurd situation. Unlike many other spectators, I did not feel that I was in my own "action movie," because I decided not to act. This reflective, somewhat more distant state of spectatorship rather inspired in me a reflection about surveillance in London and about how the boundaries separating reality from dystopian narratives of control and power are fragile and porous. (My own answers to the questionnaire)

Although the immersive and interactive performance attempted to blur the frontiers between the real world and the world that it created, play delimited the field of the performance, stopping spectators from adopting disruptive or abusive behaviours that would seriously harm performers, damage the set (in the Lipman Building and Shoreditch Town Hall), or dismiss the narrative. While not all spectators decided to act, everyone had to get involved in the game as they had to ask questions to experience the performance. The one-on-one encounters with the performers allowed spectators to decide to which degree they wanted to perform, without feeling the pressure of an audience watching. The lack of indications on which behaviour to adopt, which was at first very confusing, turned out to allow spectators to choose the nature of their own engagement. While most spectators decided not to majorly disrupt the performance's narrative, many performed small mischievous acts of resistance to challenge the performers or the limits of the script, or to resist the casting that was imposed on them. One participant described: "I was quietly rebellious and I told lies. But I didn't try [to] disrupt the event at all seriously" (Ann). She further develops:

> I did try and establish a rapport [with the performers] where this seemed possible: with the man administering the last meal, for instance. In a way I did this not character to character, but participant to actor; I mean, I made a joke about the stale crackers and felt the possibility that he would acknowledge the limits of the "props" they were using. He didn't betray the "illusion," but I felt that he was very aware of the opportunity to do so. (Ann)

Some performers were more skilled at playing and improvising with the spectators, which could, in turn, become very unsettling: "I tried to disrupt the narrative, it's immersive theatre after all. I wanted to play a part in the play, not just take the lines. The actors were incredible at responding to this, which in turn made me more passive, especially when I was about to go for my trial" (Elaine). The spectatorial experience of control varied enormously throughout the performance, which I perceived as dependent upon how each performer understood their relationship towards the audience: as mastering the (unwritten) script or as a fragile encounter:

> Some [performers] struck me as allies, others as enemies or maybe just as obstacles. When they accepted my suggestions, I felt like I was more at risk, more involved suddenly. I sometimes felt like we were struggling over control of the narrative, sometimes playfully (as when performers were putting me at risk by accepting and responding to my suggestion) other times in defiance or resistance. When I didn't know what was going on and didn't feel in control, I returned to a more distant attitude of reception, listening and asking very humble questions.

> When I felt in control, I was more adventurous. Some actors were really good at making me feel in control (of the creation of the narrative, not of the fictional situation for which I was accused and prosecuted) and I think this is related to their capacity to be generous actors (actors who make their partners shine). Those actors were creating a space for me to play within the narrative of the performance, they were inviting me to join the fun. I am thinking of the solicitor's office clerk in particular. (My own answers to the questionnaire)

Play also stopped spectators from running off, as one might get tempted to if this situation happened in real life: if we wanted to experience the performance, we had to be complicit in maintaining its boundaries. But I remember feeling like a fugitive in an action film when I realized that crewmembers were tracking me during my walk to the attorney's office (also some characters later showed my photographed portrait, which I suspect was taken by the women in the coffee shop). I was quite tempted to run away, but this feeling was distant, like observing myself in a dream not in the real action of attempting to escape from a threatening danger. Another spectator also described this moment as a contemplative self-distance: "(…) I felt as if I was walking through a film. I felt almost as if I could observe myself walking along the street" (Jonathan) (see fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Hoxton Street Market, where spectators walked alone, June 2013; photo credit: Mélanie Binette.

A reviewer from the British Theatre Guide described in an online review of *Trial* on their website how he experienced the indeterminacy of the role of spectators in this performance as inhibiting his propensity to act:

> Had I had taken it seriously surely I would have scarpered and, if necessary, gone into hiding. Though for people to have known where I was in the first place would imply some sort of secret surveillance. If I had done a runner earlier, would my way have been blocked? Were there watches, live or electronic? I thought there might be and hence expected to be stopped when I did leave. Because you have been told to be wary of what you say and not to trust people, my own action was inhibited and consequently caused little dramatic conflict, just an increasing unsettling and foreboding. It doesn't become sufficiently personal to "play" your real self and you are not given the information to assume some other persona. (Howard Loxton, British Theatre Guide)

Spectators weren't on the same level of acting as the performers, being parachuted into a world they had yet to discover and walking towards a fate that unfolded slowly. But perhaps the experience of this performance went beyond role-playing. I would argue that the indeterminacy of the role of spectators put them in an ambivalent position towards the performance: a distant situation in which they constantly reaffirmed the limits between life and the performance. Each decision, each question asked was first and foremost conceived within the framework of the performance, hence needing to acknowledge the limits established by the performance's system of control. Unlike in real life, where the situation of a tricked instrumental trial such as the one in this performance would become unbearable, accepting the constraints of this performance's framework enabled spectators to play and to safely experience disempowerment. During the interview, Mortimer mentioned that a woman asked if it was possible for her to experience the performance with her husband because she had been taken as a hostage once. He was worried that she should not participate, but she insisted. As in Harvie's concept of complicity, spectators wilfully compromised their agency to access this experience, and I would add that they accepted experiencing an elusiveness of control because they knew this performance created a safe environment, where they were not forced to perform but where they could encounter another world mirroring the oppression and injustices of our own world. Play, as suggested by Winnicott, is a mode for exploring otherness through the elusiveness of control.

One spectator in particular seemed deeply distraught by the performance in his answers to the questionnaire: "Even now, six weeks later, I think about the *Trial* with a profound sense of unease and excitement that – strangely – compares to how I felt after a bungee

jump" (Damian). I had a one-on-one meeting in a café with this spectator, where I learnt that he had trained to become a lawyer and worked with immigrants. He strongly related his experience of the performance to the precariousness experienced by newly arrived immigrants who are confronted with a dehumanizing and sometimes hostile bureaucratic system in every sphere of their attempts to settle into their new country: job and apartment seeking, citizenship status, etc. During our conversation, Damian described their situation as one of "helplessness, not knowing what they are supposed to do." The performance provided spectators with a similarly disempowering experience, during which their voice was not listened to no matter how loudly they spoke and how much they tried to reason with the public servants. For Damian, the point of the performance was to acknowledge how a social status can become oppressive and how the truth is of little importance in contrast to labels imposed by authorities: "[I was frustrated] with my inability to get the Lawyer to say anything concrete and with the Legal Representative who responded to my analysis that I was no more guilty of a crime than her with the statement 'oh I'm not a criminal though' which seemed – masterfully – to miss the point" (Damian).

The experience of *Trial* was, for some spectators, unnerving and distressing, but as mentioned above, spectators wilfully experienced the oppressive close-ended system of the performance in order to access the perspective of a disempowered and completely helpless position. *Trial* provided an example of how playing in performance is a way to simultaneously experience the elusiveness of control in a safe environment and explore fearful situations: "It is very much a feeling of wanting to do it again. Similar to the feeling I have when I have finished something that scares me" (Damian). It helped

spectators test their personal ethics or courage to oppose or resist authority and made them aware of the very oppressive politics of space and governmental surveillance in contemporary London.

Ring and *Trial* deconstruct the widespread idea of engaging spectators in "doing" something as empowerment in interactive or immersive performances, contributing instead to activating spectators' agency differently. *Ring* did so by providing an example of how diverse and sensory explorative the spectatorial experience of space can be, even when spectators are sitting still in the dark while listening to the same recorded narrative, and *Trial* did so by forcing spectators to experience disempowerment through playing with and resisting an oppressive system.

Chapter 5 The Political Potential of Immersion and Conversations: "Blanket Fortress" and *Paths to Knowledge*

In "The Street is the Stage," (1993) Richard Schechner compares the transformative potential of carnivals, festivals, and street protests by framing them as theatrical and ritualized performances. Describing the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square, Schechner stresses the difference in the performances of the protesters' actions and those of the authorities in power: "The students improvised in public, while the officials, as always, rehearsed their options behind closed doors" (202). In *L'invention du quotidien* (1980), Michel de Certeau associates improvisation with everyday practices and considers that it holds the power to overturn systems of surveillance and control, which he associates with structured strategies. Acts of protest may provide examples of temporarily embodied utopian spaces creating alternative models of distributed control, at the same time that mass gatherings are likely to produce the explosive energy described by Antonin Artaud in *The Theatre and its Double* (1938).

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Shannon Jackson, in *Social Works* (2011), distinguishes performances that seek direct political actions and aesthetic performances that take social relationships as their aesthetic "material" or "medium" and I asked if aesthetic explorations of social relations could also provide models for political change. Given that protest actions tend to occupy urban or institutional spaces, I will frame them as immersive performances and in this chapter I will attempt to compare one of those more or less improvised protest actions with an immersive performance I created and performed during my studies, *Paths to Knowledge*. Both performances happened in the EV Integrated Complex at Concordia University during the 2012 student strike in the

province of Québec and both addressed issues of control in this space differently. While the students occupied the ground floor access to the elevators, I took spectators on a journey in one of the main windowed stairwells, firstly engaging them in contemplative listening and embodied explorations and secondly engaging with them in post-performance conversations. While the political potential of the protest action is more explicit than the contemplative journey of my performance, I argue here that both produced direct political action and fostered critical and creative reflections through aestheticizing space and social encounters.

5.1. The EV Integrated Complex and the 16-Storey Stairwell

Fig. 7: EV Building, Guy Street facade at dusk (left), spiral stairwell (right); photo credit: Tom Arban; retrieved from http://www.kpmb.com.

The EV integrated complex, which opened its doors in 2005, was designed by the Toronto-based firm Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg (KPMB) Architects and the Montréal-based firm Fichten Soiferman et Associés (FSA) Architectes, which jointly won a national competition for their design of the new buildings of Concordia's Sir George Williams downtown campus, also called "Quartier Concordia." According to Concordia University, Quartier Concordia is an urban planning project aiming at

revitalizing the campus' surrounding city blocks and at rebranding the university as "a place where a dynamic urban energy is in unique balance with a lively diverse community." (Concordia: "Quartier Concordia") The leading vision for the design of the new buildings was to create a "vertical campus," with numerous atriums opening onto multiple levels and blurring the limits between departments, in the hope of fostering interactions between the professors and the students (FSA Architectes: "Université Concordia, Pavillon de génie, informatique et arts visuels, 02"). On the engineering side of the EV complex, for instance, each three-storey has a wide-open atrium space featuring in its centre a spiral stairwell connecting all three floors. These atriums create a pattern on that side of the building and five of these almost identical spiral stairwell lobbies are vertically aligned on top of each other (see fig. 7). The EV complex has sixteen floors on the engineering side and eleven on the visual arts side. The Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science are connected on eleven floors, with Hexagram (Concordia's Centre for Research-Creation in Media Arts and Technologies) joining both faculties physically, intellectually, and practically on the eleventh floor. The architects also aspired to create continuity between the inside of the building and its surrounding urban context. The EV stairwells are among many commuting spaces in the new buildings that establish visual connections with the cityscape.

The EV stairwell where I performed *Paths to Knowledge* is fenestrated from the top of the sixteenth floor to the fourth floor. The stunning view from the sixteenth floor platform seems to be the result of a design decision to democratise the view from higher floors, which could otherwise be reserved for office space. The bright and transparent

space of the stairwell is accessible to anyone, and I witnessed people doing more than simple commuting within its walls during my research. I met a graduate student who used the stairwell to jog and he mentioned that reaching the sixteenth floor view was a reward that he used as motivation to exercise. Many students simply come to admire the view, silently meditating at the window and taking a break from their studies. Muslim students use the space for their daily prayers and there are many vestiges of other practices in that space, such as cigarette butts, exam copies, or food wrappings. The EV stairwell is an inspiring accessible space reminding the entire professorial and student community of Concordia that the context of production of their research is the city of Montréal. This space of circulation generates a plethora of other activities whereby the stairwell dwellers both share and creatively appropriate the space. As in de Certeau's description of walking as connecting "rented spaces" together in a meta-narrative resisting the privatisation of space (see 2.2), the stairwell engages users in opportunities to cross paths. In contrast, the elevators are a rapid, efficient way to move within tall buildings and those in the EV complex are enclosed spaces deprived of any contact with the exterior once the doors shut. Commuters in these elevators rarely speak to each other in their forced proximity and often look down at the floor so as not to catch anyone's eye.

5.2. The 2012 Student Strike and a "Blanket Fortress"

In the spring and summer of 2012, a major student strike turned into Québec's largest social movement since the 1995 referendum on Québec's sovereignty and the most widely repressed movement in Québec since the federal imposition of a martial law in

Montréal during the 1970 October Crisis. What became renowned as the *Printemps Érable* ("Maple Spring") began as a student-led fight against tuition hikes, but quickly grew into a larger social debate over state collusion, the privatization of public resources, and the disintegration of the welfare state.[15] The student movement triggered a political awakening for many citizens and street protests gathered hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life for a period of over eight months.

In March 2012, striking students were very hopeful about winning the negotiations with the Charest provincial government and the atmosphere in the protests was very peaceful and carnivalesque. On 22 March 2012, an estimated 200,000 people marched all over downtown Montréal to protest the tuition hikes without anyone getting arrested (see Gervais). As the negotiations between the government and the student associations failed repeatedly in the following months[16], the confrontations between police forces and protesters became tenser, notably with student Maxence Valade getting severely injured and losing an eye during the Victoriaville demonstration of May 4 (see Duchaine and Teisceira-Lessard). On May 18, a law that criminalized protesters and demonstrations was voted in at the National Assembly of Québec. In its original version, Bill 78 required

15. Olivier Clain explores the context in which the student strike morphed into a larger social movement in "Présentation: Carrés Rouges. Éléments de sociographie du mouvement de 2012" (2013), from the issue of *Recherches Sociographiques* dedicated to the 2012 social movement, and Henry A. Giroux connects the fight for educational rights with a larger political awakening on the struggle of the concept of democracy in North America in "The Quebec Student Protest Movement in the Age of Neoliberal Terror" (2013)

16. Éric Martin analyses the blockage of the negotiations as under the hegemony of a neoliberal power in "Le printemps contre l'hégémonie. La mobilisation étudiante de 2012 et le blocage institutionnel de la société québécoise." (2013)

that any gathering of ten or more people[17] in the streets provide an itinerary to the Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) (Bill 78: division 3,16). The movement then reached an even broader number of people, including a legal demonstration of jurists protesting against Bill 78 on May 28 (see Cameron and Santerre). The debate had moved from protesting against tuition hikes to denouncing state repression, neoliberal politics of austerity, and the imposition of control and order over democracy and freedom of speech. Protesters started gathering every night at Place Émilie Gamelin to march all over the city, banging on pots and pans,[18] while the SPVM proceeded to carry out mass arrest using "kettling" tactics. By mid-June, following what appeared to be excessive police repression during the Grand Prix Formula 1 events,[19] the daily demonstrations became

17. Bill 78 was amended at the Assembly to change the restriction from 10 to 50 people. (see Bourgeault-Côté). Philippe Langlois investigates the legislation of the government's opposition to the student strike in "Révolte contre le néolibéralisme, riposte contre la liberté d'association." (2012)

18. In reference to the Latin American protests of the "cacerolazo," the "casseroles" protests in Montréal started as a way of denouncing the government's attempt to silence the population by voting in Bill 78. The protesters banged on any kitchen tool they could find from their balcony, on sidewalks, in public squares and at street crossings during the first days that the bill became effective. Soon after, the practice also reached street protests, as more people decided to ignore the authority of the bill. (see Léveillé, Pilon-Larose and Santerre)

19. For instance, blogger Marilyne Veilleux reported getting arrested for reading George Orwell's *1984* on the métro line to Île Notre-Dame, where the Grand Prix events were taking place. Her story went viral on the web (see Pernault). Also, two journalists from *Le Devoir*, Catherine Lalonde and Raphaël Dallaire Ferland, wore a red square (the strike's symbol) on the métro during the Grand Prix weekend to see if they would get arrested. They did but were released without charges. The rest of their article provides further evidence that SPVM officers were profiling and arresting citizens for their political beliefs during the Grand Prix weekend (see Lalonde and Dallaire Ferland).

sparser, although on the twenty-second of each month thousands of protesters continued to gather to march together, until the Charest government finally was defeated at the elections of 4 September 2012.

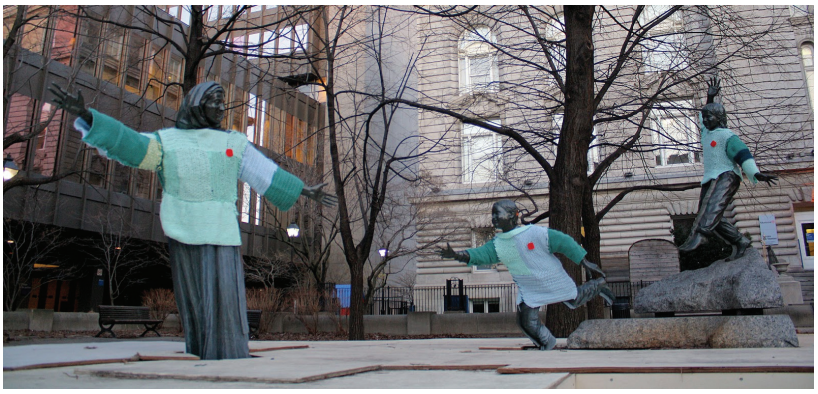

Fig. 8 (left): Queen Victoria on strike, McGill University; photo credit: Jurjen Barel; reproduced with permission from Jurjen Barel.
Fig. 9 (right): *Marguerite Bourgeois porte le carré rouge*; photo credit: Maille à Part; retrieved from: http://mailleapart.blogspot.ca; reproduced with permission from Maille à Part.

To borrow from Lefebvre's double triad, the strike was lived, perceived, and conceived not in distinct successive moments but in a blurred and confused experience in the protesters' embodied minds. During the demonstrations, they perceived the brutal representation of spaces produced by the Charest government, as riot police officers on foot or horseback chased protesters, launching tear gas and using public transport buses to temporarily incarcerate protesters after "kettling" them. The SPVM and the Charest government imposed a representation of public spaces as places where order should prevail over freedom of speech and the right to protest. At the same time, protesters produced alternatives for this representation of space, creating their own representational space by ignoring Bill 78 and marching in the streets, or by using creative tactics such as

disguising famous statues (see fig. 8: Queen Victoria on strike, and fig. 9: *Marguerite Bourgeois porte le carré rouge*, an art installation created by Maille à Part, a guerrilla knitting collective, that showed the historical founder of Montréal's first school wearing a red square, the symbol of the strike). While some representational spaces were improvised, others were highly theatrical, orchestrated, and conceived, such as the protest

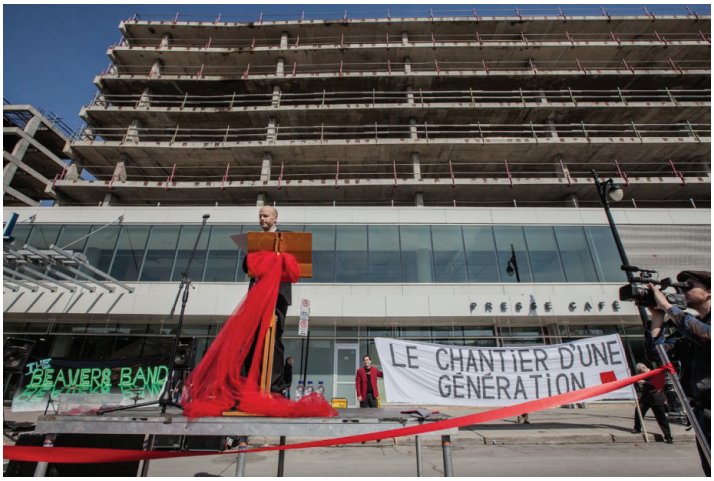

Fig. 10: Profs Contre la Hausse: Inauguration of "Îlot Voyageur"; photo credit: Édouard Plante-Fréchette; retrieved from: http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/education/201203/17/01-4506583-droits-de-scolarite-les-etudiants-proposent-des-solutions.php.

action of the red ribbon inauguration of the "Îlot Voyageur" in February 2012 by "Profs Contre la Hausse," a collective of university professors and Cégep teachers supporting the strike (see fig. 10). The site, a 2006 failed investment project of a real estate development by the Université du Québec à Montréal, came to symbolize the potential failure of the corporatisation of universities during the strike.[20] All those protest actions

20. The project was interrupted halfway and the concrete structure above the Central Bus Station remains abandoned as of 2014. But in July 2013, the project was partly sold to the Vancouver based Aquilini Investment Group and in November 2013, the Pauline Marois government (which replaced the Jean Charest government) invested another $246 million to transform the other part of the project into offices for

aimed at creating embodied utopias as described by Lefebvre's concept of absolute space, an alternative space whereto promote another conception of public space, one where social groups can freely express their dissent against ruling authorities and use their bodily presence as leverage to potentially change society.

The strike at Concordia University was agreed to by a vote during the general assemblies of the Graduate Student Association and the Concordia Student Union in March 2012 and the tension rapidly escalated on the campus (see Péloquin), as students who did not support the strike dismissed the authority of student associations by ignoring the strike vote and proceeded with their final examinations and assignments. Resentment grew between strikers and students who rejected the movement, and the administration increased the security control in university buildings and even called for a police intervention on the picket lines on 12 April 2012. Nevertheless, protest actions were tolerated on campus in the early days of the strike, and on 16 March 2012, a few art students organized a small sit-in in the elevators lobby on the ground floor of the Visual Arts side of the EV complex.

Students built a "blanket fortress"[21] with old bed sheets and duvet covers and they sat on the floor, filling time by chatting, writing, knitting, and drawing while distributing pamphlets providing information on the student strike. The improvised construction, which was reminiscent of the houses children build with pillows and bedsheets, created a gleeful atmosphere. One of the bedsheets also loosely blocked a stairwell located just on

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Revenu Québec. (see Lecouteur-Bédard and Lavoie) Overall, the project lost $300 million in public funds (see Dubuc).

21. This term was created by the students.

the left of the elevator lobby, leading to the Faculty of Fine Arts dean's office. The students did not stop anyone from passing through their "fortress," but simply used their bodies and the bedsheets as reminders that those trespassing to attend classes violated the strike vote. There were several other ways to access to the upper floors: two other stairwells nearby and more elevators on the engineering side that had even shorter waiting time. Hence people could easily redirect their journey to access the upper floors. The students' act of resistance was purely symbolic and did not effectively block anyone from attending classes or meetings. Some people stepped over the students' bodies to get to the elevators and students did not show any hostile behaviour in return. The reactions of passersby varied, from expressing support, to passive disapproval, to even explicitly violent gestures, such as that of a woman who aggressively pulled the blanket blocking the passage to the dean's office, leaving it hanging only on one side. She could have easily walked underneath, like most people had been doing, but instead she chose to break the imaginary wall the students had built.

While the "blanket fortress" did not literally block the passage from the ground floor to the upper floors, the representational space it created clearly disrupted the narrative of harmonious interactions in the EV complex. It highlighted the ideological tensions within the institution during that particular social context and transformed simple commuting into a political act. Passersby had to situate their commuting behaviour within an array of political positions, from engaging with the cause by respecting the barricade to fiercely disapproving, like the woman who pulled down the blanket or, as in Lefebvre's triad, they had to decide if their practice of space would support the dominant representation of

space (the institution of knowledge) or if it would support the representational space created by the students.

The students occupied a space where social interactions were usually restricted to a minimum and forced commuters to engage with them, if only by physically stepping over them. They encouraged, but did not force, conversations. As when Schechner describes the carnivalesque character of the Tienanmen square protests, their "mood of fun, comradeship, irony and subversion" (203) was either shocking or exhilarating, depending on how bystanders positioned themselves in regards to the strike. The protest act only lasted for one day, but during that short period of time an ephemeral new dimension opened into the otherwise homogeneous space of the EV complex: a space of difference sparking alternative conceptions of democratic access to education. They spontaneously performed their disagreement with the Charest government by constructing a temporary structure that aestheticized this institutional public space.

5.3. *Paths to Knowledge*

In contrast to "Blanket Fortress," the performance I produced aestheticized the stairwell space by engaging spectators in active contemplation and aimed at leading each spectator to encounter and explore the stairwell's agency and reframe their experience creatively and critically in post-performance conversations. *Paths to Knowledge* [22] was an

22. I performed *Paths* three times in August 2012; once in October 2012 for Hexagram's Brown Bag Series; once in November 2012 for "Contested Sites, Archives, and the City," an exhibition at Concordia's Faculty of Fine Arts (FOFA) gallery for the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) conference; twice in January 2013, one of which was for K.G Guttman's class in Contemporary Dance: DANC 301

immersive journey and solo performance of a script down a windowed stairwell of the EV complex for about twelve spectators. It was performed during and after the social turmoil triggered by the student strike. The performance was structured around the reflections I was having as a striking graduate student witnessing and participating in strike protests and actions, and was intended for an audience of spectators familiar with the academic world. It did not seek to engage spectators in interacting with myself as a performer during the performance. Rather, it sought to lead them towards experiencing the stairwell differently and towards listening and observing in a contemplative way to engender creative, critical, and political thoughts, which were discussed in conversations after the performance and in correspondence.

At the same time, spectators were invited to occupy the space in their own way (see fig. 11), for instance some explored the sensual materiality of the concrete structure by touching and smelling, while others stood very close to the windows, immersing themselves in the view and others stayed back, siting in the steps to quietly observe the other spectators and listen to the script. Some followed my path closely, always making sure I remained in their visual field, while others lingered on the above platforms during the transitions of the sections of the performance.

"Creative Process II"; and once in February 2014 for Dr. Cynthia Hammond's class in Art History: ARTH450F "Advanced Seminar in the History of Art and Architecture: Space, Experience and Architecture."

Fig. 11: Spectators. *Paths to Knowledge*, 24 August 2012; photo credit: Florencia Marchetti.

Paths to Knowledge started as I waited for spectators in the spiral stairwell atrium located on the fourteenth floor of the engineering side of the building. I brought them with me into the lobby's spiral staircase, all the way up to the sixteenth floor, without saying a word during the ascension. Some groups of spectators talked, and others walked in silence. From the sixteenth floor, we followed a corridor that led to another stairwell, an all-windowed concrete structure connecting all of the floors from the top to lower ground levels. The sixteenth floor platform in this stairwell was two storeys high and offered a spectacular view over Montréal's skyline that extended as far as the Appalachian Mountains on clear days. It also featured a flight of steps reminiscent of bleachers, as if inviting an audience to sit and look at the spectacle of this cityscape. Once we entered the space, I climbed the flight of steps overlooking the window and invited spectators to occupy the space as they wished. Some sat on the steps, others went straight to look at the view. Some groups were very quiet; others excitedly described the view and

pointed at places and landmarks. When I felt that their attention was slowly coming back to my position above them on top of the steps, I started performing the script.

The script was inspired from diary notes I took during multiple journeys to the stairwell, which became a sort of refuge for me during my studies.[23] The creation of this performance, and its initially marginalised position at the edge of this research, played around theoretical notions, expanding their influence on my tangible personal experiences and processing knowledge through "making" and "doing." The script was divided into four uneven sections, each starting on a particular floor: *The Well (Abstraction)* on the sixteenth floor, *The Cage (of Bodies and Rooftops and Ivory Towers)* on the tenth floor, *The Case (Our Empty Classroom)* on the sixth floor and *The Escape (the Street)* from the fifth floor to the street. Those section titles refer to four different words used to describe or name stairs in English or French (stairwell, cage d'escalier, staircase, and fire escape), each representing a theme that was also inspired by the view offered on each particular floor.

23. I would situate the style of performance writing that I used in the flux of post-dramatic theatre, which is a theatre aesthetic coined by German theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann in 1999. I would inscribe my writing within this aesthetic because of its fragmented nature and its use of open meanings aiming at activating the materiality of the performance rather than constructing closed-up dramatic worlds. During my undergraduate studies, I was highly influenced by the work of British performers and writers Tim Etchells (Forced Entertainment) and Fiona Templeton (Theatre of Mistakes), whose performative writing styles could also be categorized as post-dramatic.

Fig. 12: Performer: Mélanie Binette. *Paths to Knowledge*, 17 October 2012; photo credit: Abelardo León.

The Well (Abstraction) was inspired by the vision of God described by Michel de Certeau at the beginning of the *Pratiques d'espace* (see chapter 2.2): to view the city as an orderly abstraction. As spectators discovered the view from above, the script suggested that bodies feel ethereal and light when observing the city from such height (see fig. 12). I talked about the locus of ideas and how this view could help to think about the city and organize one's experience of it. I paused frequently between ideas and moved around the space to allow spectators to receive my spoken words and make them resonate in their own heads and bodies. The space is similar to a cathedral; it carries a sort of sacredness because of its vertical dimension and the echo created by the roughness of the bare concrete, which is similar to the surface of old stones in a medieval cathedral. But the performance also transformed the space into a metaphor for the inside of my head: I was taking spectators onto a quest to find the location and materiality of my ideas. I explored different tones of voice throughout the performances, because it was not something I could plan in advance by rehearsing in the empty staircase. The spectators' bodies muffled most of the echoes, which made me realise that my voice was literally

traveling through them. As the performances progressed, I adopted an increasingly more intimate tone. I also referred to the fantasies of control described by de Certeau and correlated the bird's eye view from the stairwell to the vision from the SPVM helicopters that surrounded the campus around the March 22 protest. As we processed down the stairwell, the script became less lyrical and made more direct references to embodied practices and lived experience.

In general, spectators remained still when I was performing the text, because they seemed very conscious of how their movements or noises in the echoic stairwell might affect the experience of others. When I was silent and when we were transiting between floors, they moved their bodies and explored the space, sometimes interacting with each other. As we proceeded down, the rhythm of the steps imprinted onto the spectators' bodies as much as the rhythm of their footstep imprinted onto the soundscape, and I could hardly tell whose rhythm we were following: the steps or the feet, the architecture or the bodies? Each group of spectators ended up producing their own rhythm. I was following them as much as they followed me, slowing down my steps when I noticed that a group was slower or toying with more adventurous groups, running down the steps to make them feel like they had lost me.

The Cage (of Bodies and Rooftops and Ivory Towers) was the section performed on the tenth floor and at that level, the embodied experience of the site already felt less ethereal because the nearby rooftops formed a ground upon which spectators and I could lay our eyes and create a landscape. In that section, I spoke of suffering from physical pain because of studying long hours and feeling trapped simultaneously by physical and mental struggles. I wanted to create an allegory between feeling the materiality of our

bodies increasing as the city grew bigger as we went down the stairwell and the importance of grounding academic thought in experience and practice, to stress that this process is sometimes painfully difficult but always necessary. I talked about the responsibility of crossing boundaries, which I purposely left open to interpretation. The subtitle of *Paths* is a "top-down procession," which mocks the sacredness and authority often attributed to academic productions of knowledge and echoes an anonymous cardboard sign I noticed during the March 22 protest: "I came down from my ivory tower."

Fig. 13: The sixth floor. Performer: Mélanie Binette. *Paths to Knowledge*, 24 August 2012; photo credit: Florencia Marchetti.

The section of *The Case (Our Empty Classroom)* was performed on the sixth floor, which windows faced a classroom reserved for a course I attended during the 2012 winter term (see fig. 13). I pointed at the empty classroom and shared my anxieties about the outcomes of the student movement. I kept modifying this section as the performances went on, because the political context was changing in Montréal. After the former Québec premier Jean Charest lost to the current premier Pauline Marois on 4 September 2012, I added a question about how much these elections would actually change the

situation. In January, as a movement for aboriginal and environmental rights was growing all across Canada under the banner of "Idle No More," I made a parallel between the students' struggle and this aboriginal movement, which were both fighting the same neoliberal indifference and repression of civilian rights but from different governments (the Idle No More movement was addressing its requests to Canada's prime minister Stephen Harper).

In the last section of the performance, *The Escape (the Street)*, I described my witnessing of the "Blanket Fortress" and contrasted it with Concordia's efforts to brand the university as a vibrant urban campus. Striking students critiqued the adoption by universities of a corporate model of competition. In North America, universities are increasingly developing services that have less to do with improving higher education and critical thinking and more to do with promoting the international ranking of their establishment. Luxury student housing and gym facilities are among some of the investments that are made to promote universities as good consumer choices. Striking students feared that this reorientation of the definition of education as a commodity service rather than as a fundamental right[24] would produce the collateral effect of reducing access to higher education, even in a province like Québec where the government controls tuition, but not the university related fees, which varies with each institution. Governance boards are pressuring university administrations to renovate their facilities to remain competitive on the global education market, leading at times to bad management and rushed investments, such as the previously mentioned Îlot Voyageur. I

24. Kim Sawchuk describes the student movement's vision of the right for education as a fundamental value in: "La grève est étudiant/e, la lutte est populaire: the Québec Student Strike." (2012)

wanted to highlight this reorientation of universities towards a competitive industry and I stopped spectators in front of the window on the fourth floor to point out a former squat house that was getting demolished to construct private luxury student housing (see fig. 14). Although not directly financed by Concordia University, this housing development extends Quartier Concordia's mission of urban renewal and branding as an energetic urban hub.[25] I wanted to contrast the university's efforts to promote itself as a welcoming and thriving nest for students with the hostility and disciplining of students actions on campus during the strike.

Fig. 14: Squat under demolition. *Paths to Knowledge*, 17 October 2012; photo credit: Abelardo León.

On the fourth floor, I announced to the spectators that we had arrived at the escape, suggesting that we were not only escaping from the stairwell and the building but more significantly from institutional knowledge. We left the windowed stairwell and walked down the spiral stairwell of the second floor atrium and then down another stairwell

25. Quartier Concordia subscribes to the contemporary trend in Western cities of using institutions and the experience economy to trigger urban regeneration through an influx of what urban studies theorist Richard Florida coined as the "creative class" in his controverted book *Cities and the Creative Class*.

leading to EV's grand entrance hall (see fig. 15). No matter the weather (and I performed in January), I took the spectators with me across the entrance doors and onto the street, where the performance ended. Concordia's entrance hall is a wide-open, bright, and transparent atrium that blurs the boundaries between the building and the street, giving the impression from the inside of an uninterrupted flux of exchange between the city and the institution. Extending the public realm of street pavements inside institutional buildings is a trope in contemporary architecture, what Hans Ibelings coined "supermodernist" architecture:

> [I]l semble que le leitmotiv prioritaire des architectes devienne à present l'idéal – d'ailleurs vieux de plusieurs décennies- d'un espace sans limite ou indéfini. Étant donné l'importance à notre époque du contrôle total, cet espace illimité n'est pas une jungle dangereuse ou un vide angoissant, mais plutôt un espace sous vide contrôlé. L'espace indéfini n'est pas un vide mais un container sûr, une envelope flexible. (62-64)

Fig. 15: EV Building, Great Hall; photo credit: James Brittain. Retrieved from: http://www.kpmb.com.

As much as the EV entrance hall gives the impression of an uninterrupted exchange between the city and the university, the institutional space remains under high surveillance and control and the security desk is one of the first things encountered when entering the hall. On 22 March 2012, the date of one of the largest student street protests, all doors were locked on the downtown campus to make sure that the protest would not spill inside the university walls. The flux of exchanges is maybe not as transparent and free as what the architecture suggests, especially when these exchanges are filled with radical ideas on rights to higher education. I refer to this idea in the script as the "transparent boundaries," a materialization of an illusory freedom. But under other circumstances, Concordia University remains relatively accessible, unlike other universities where students need to scan an ID badge to enter buildings.

In my final words outside on the street, at the end of the performance, I wanted to suggest that, as an academic, I desire both the macro and the micro visions of urban space (see chapter 2); conceptual and practical knowledges; and the heavy, material, and experiential bodies on the street as much as the light, spiritual and thinking bodies on the higher floors. I wanted to leave the spectators with doubt about the real locus of the escape, as I explained: "Let's be honest, sometimes we cannot wait to go back to the upper floors. After all, a flight of steps can either become a landing or a takeoff." The abstract view from the floors above could also provide a space for lifting up minds, hearts, and spirits, widening horizons, and taking a break from the harsh reality on the streets, especially that experienced during the eight months of social turmoil in Montréal in 2012. Social and political activism sometimes needs to take some distance in order to maintain perspective.

5.4 What Did My Performance Want?

In Lefebvre's terms, throughout the creation of the performance I lived and conceived a representational space in which to project a conception of public space as a place for self-expression, encounters, and creative dissent. The creation process was lived, as I used a subjective and improvisational method to write the script, but the performance was conceived: it was rehearsed and orchestrated for most of the procession, except for when my body was perceiving and reacting to the presence of spectators or of impromptu users of the stairwell. *Paths to Knowledge* also became an embodied utopia: a free space in which to embody political thinking on Concordia's campus. After the police intervention in April 2012, the climate of tension compromised the autonomy of thinking within the university walls, sending a message of hostility to collective expressions of dissent on Concordia's campus to the Charest government. I occupied the stairwell as an academic public space where free political thinking could still thrive, provided that a few spectators and I decided to embark on the journey of performing this script in the stairwell.

Although the climate on the campus was no longer explosive when I performed in August, the memory of the conflict was vivid and the atmosphere of Montréal's streets spilled into Concordia's urban campus. The streets of the entire city seemed wounded by months of confrontations between protesters and the SPVM, especially for those who regularly experienced or witnessed the street protests. De Certeau suggested that urban space is a series of locations haunted by former tenants (see chapter 2.2) and I would thereby suggest that by the end of the summer of 2012, ghosts of the protesters' occupations and of police repression saturated Montréal's streets. Most of the protesters I

knew and I were exhausted from such a long political fight, and we were demoralized and anxious because our perception was that we had not had any real impact despite such wide mobilization.

As explained in chapter 2, the world I created in *Paths* lives beyond the limits of my own subjective world and beyond those of the subjective worlds of my spectators; it is an irreducible otherness that wishes well. Hence, I would ask this question: "What did my performance want?" I think that my performance, in dialogue with the space where it was produced, wanted to give to Montrealers, especially to students, a safe space to return to their experience of the conflict and for healing. Many of the spectators were deeply involved in the protests and needed a break from the streets. *Paths* provided spectators and me with distance and poetry to help digest and heal from the recent events and with a space within which our thoughts could resonate. As an artist, I served to unveil the potential buried in that space and realised what I was doing as the performance unfolded and as I encountered audiences in post-performance conversations.

Paths wanted to highlight the stairwell's capacity to make commuters dwell, slowing down their journey inside the tall building, providing the community of researchers, students, professors, and university staff with a perspective over Montréal and a space whereto contemplate and meditate. Taking the EV stairwell instead of the elevators in this 16-storey building is a bit like taking a train instead of flying. It brings an understanding of the scale and dimensions of the territories we inhabit. Walking down a stairwell measures the building, each footstep providing a measurement unit for the body to understand the distance separating the upper floors from the street level. The performance slowed the daily commuting journeys of academics, who, instead of rushing

from one department to the other, could linger on each stairwell platform and ponder the concerns brought in/by academic life. Academics and students sometimes commute through university spaces without ever trespassing the frontiers of their discipline or community of knowledge, like when commuting every day through the engineering side of the building without ever talking to anyone from that faculty. *Paths*, conjunctly with the EV stairwell, wanted to provoke encounters, as well as to provide spectators with a time and space in which to interrogate their relation to Concordia University as an institution, as a community of researchers, and as a site for the production of knowledge in Montréal, Québec, Canada, and North America. In the context of the year 2012, *Paths* particularly wanted to resist the brutal colonisations of space and create a safe interstice in the institution where to enable political thought and contemplation about the socio-political situation in Montréal.

5.5 Engaging in Conversations

I will now explore the states of spectatorial connection, contemplation, intimacy, and critical distance that I unearthed from engaging in post-performance conversations with my audiences. To borrow from Rancière's theory described in chapter 3, the gap between artists' intentions and spectators' experiences sometimes appears irreducible. Yet, as I am re-reading the questionnaires, a strong sense of connection surfaces here and there in the spectators' answers, whether it was a connection with me as a performer, with the group of spectators, or with the performance itself. Returning to the questionnaires is helpful for I can quote the spectators' words, even if their experience is channelled through my own

perspective as an editor of those words. At the same time, the questionnaires are double-edged, because I tend to prioritize them from the many other informal ways in which I encountered audiences, such as over post-performance beers, during group conversations that were not always recorded, or while having informal exchanges in university corridors weeks after the performance. My memory of those exchanges can only be partial, shadowed by my own perspective, yet it seems worthwhile to report. As Merleau-Ponty suggests (see chapter 3), attention to the other happens in a dialectical relationship between solitude and communication, and my connection with my audiences must be occulted by my irreducible solipsism. I will hereby share a few memories of those informal encounters, before moving on to the answers I gathered with the questionnaires.

Joan and her friend, who both work at Concordia, seemed really touched by my performance's approach to Concordia's reaction to the student strike. She shared her frustration, and even mentioned shame, regarding the administration's decision to close the university on March 22. I remember that after this particular conversation, I was more aware of this performance's purpose to provide certain members of Concordia's community with a space whereto re-appropriate the university, a space where dissident thought could safely thrive on campus. Another conversation with undergraduate students from KG Guttman's contemporary dance class also underscored this purpose of *Paths*. Young women from this course had experienced Québec's largest student movement in history during their first year of university and the talk after the performance went back and forth between their memories, anxieties, and passionate thoughts about the strike and my own. The young women in this class spoke to how their first experience of academic life had been one of hostility and the denial of their voices. The conversation provided an

opportunity for some of them to voice their concerns as well as to collectively return to our memories, to unfold and weigh the events together. *Paths* created a homely environment whereto connect for those who had felt cheated by the university administration and repressed by the campus authorities and the SPVM during the strike.

During the Hexagram Brown Bag Series performance, I remember thinking that one spectator was really not enjoying *Paths* while I was performing. She was often sitting on top of the steps, removed from the group, and she stared at me with what I decoded as a disapproving look. I opted for an intimate style of performing, looking at each spectator in the eyes, sometimes gently touching them to show them where to move, establishing soft contact and yet maintaining a safe distance with them. Hence I could sense some of their reactions on the spot, but some expressions were difficult to read and my anxiety obscured my interpretations while performing. During the discussion organized at the Series after the performance, I was surprised to learn that this spectator was actually deeply distraught by the performance, especially by the references to death and spirituality in the first section of *Paths*. Her physical withdrawal was introspective, not critical, at once contemplative and yet connecting with the script. The post-performance conversation unveiled her state of connection during the experience, which would have otherwise remained occluded by my anxieties as a performer or, in Haraway's term, my perspective was incomplete without the perspective of another.

The questionnaire was oriented towards three major points: the experience of space, the experience of the presence of the performer, and the experience of the presence of other spectators. I did not address directly the more political themes of the script, because I wanted to let the experience of space speak for itself. Nevertheless, these political

themes periodically irrupted in the spectators' answers. Answers were formulated under different framings: sometimes people seemed to address questions directly to me, asking about something they did not understand in the script or about something they disagreed with, suggesting other artistic choices that they would have preferred, or simply demonstrating their appreciation of the work. Some tended to use a detached tone, similar to the one I was using during the performance; others wrote as if I was their only interlocutor. In many cases, it seemed to me like they were trying to further the interrogations I was having in the script, adding their own layer to the issues: "[I was] not frustrated [but] puzzled by the text of the performer which made me think differently: For her resistance starts when we acknowledge that we are given no choice. For me resistance comes when we oppos[e] with something or somebody; it's a choice" (Louise).

Some adopted a very lyrical tone, appropriating the stairwell space by using their own allegories: "L'escalier en colimaçon avait quelque chose d'un espace de transition, de decompression, une antichambre dynamique qui nous disposait mentalement pour la suite: une sorte de sas" (Audrey) (see fig. 16); "Descendre les marches donne une impression d'un lieu infini. J'avais par contre l'impression d'être un grain de sable dans un sablier et de pouvoir me situer dans l'espace temps de la performance" (Gabriel). A few spectators shared personal memories connected with, or triggered by, the space.

Fig. 16: Spiral stairwell, second floor atrium. *Paths to Knowledge*, 24 August 2012; photo credit: Florencia Marchetti.

Generally, people noticed the interplay in the performance between the interior and exterior spaces, an ambiguous experience of the stairwell as an in-between space where their embodied mind could experience scales and perspectives differently throughout their descent. They framed it in their own words: "a constant play between what we're doing inside and what's happening out there, what we can see and what we were prompt to think about, between our bodies moving through the space inside and our sight going beyond the walls…" (Laura) or this very sensorial analysis:

> Sound and resonance defined the very enclosed space. Dusty but intimate. Vision is unbounded. Beyond the window seems to have lots of possibilities. Kind of romantic, as a city. In comparison, the stairwell is very cold, concrete and stuffy, though, your voice and words, the meaning of the words and content, broke the temperature of the space from time to time (this can only be an expression expressed in text, I don't think I can tell you this in words). (Sandra)

Spectators sometimes had very opposite reactions to the stairwell space. Some perceived it to be a comforting meditative space, inside which their thoughts could resonate along with my words, while others experienced vertigo or suffered from the heat (mostly for the performances in August, during which the temperature reached more than 30 degrees because of the greenhouse effect of the windows) and experienced the space as oppressive: “a square nausea tour that led down” (Amanda). Some projected a very personal conceptualisation for the space: “Je visualisais le lieu en trois temps: l’espace mi-clos du palier, l’espace extérieur et l’espace imaginé (et suggéré par le son) du reste de la cage d’escalier” (Gabriel), or this very detailed description:

> There was a strange juxtaposition or maybe dichotomy between the small space and the large space. The small space consisted of details like the warning labels in the fire prevention and advanced looking HVAC mechanical pipes. The small world also consisted of the little cars and the little people. The large vast space consisted of the ideas and the echoing sound. At first it appeared as though we were travelling from a large space to a small space, from the meta to the daily grind but at the end of the performance I realized that we had gone from the small place to the overwhelming big place. (Martin)

Some were bothered by the presence of other spectators or users of the stairwell, who distracted them from the experience of intimacy that they felt they were having with the space, the performance, or even, in some occasions, with me. Others embraced the irruptions of life, the sound of opening and shutting doors somewhere in the giant concrete structure, and the many surprises that the stairwell space and the world beyond

the windows have to offer. One time, when I opened the door to the sixteenth floor platform, a couple was sitting in the steps chatting in a foreign language and they stayed during the performance, simply lowering the tone of their voices, their conversation intermingling with the English words I was saying. In post-performance conversations, the spectators of this performance commented on this co-presence as being a "real moment of public space," for different appropriations of the stairwell co-dwelled without imposing their presence on each other. But more generally, when the stairwell was quiet, my voice seemed to infiltrate the entire space, and one spectator said in his questionnaire that I was "more a voice than a body" (Martin). Another experienced anxiety when I disappeared from his sight:

> (…) there was a moment of mild panic when Mélanie had preceded us down the stairs, and both I and some others had delayed to look out the windows or feel the space in other ways. I felt as if the performance was getting away from me, and I had to rush down the stairs to catch up. A little like trying to escape a burning building quickly but calmly. Seeing Mélanie's hand and shoulder down the open space between the stairways was reassuring. (Dominic) (see fig. 17)

Fig. 17: Detail. *Paths to Knowledge*, 24 August 2012; photo credit: Florencia Marchetti.

Many observed the group, its pace, the directions of the spectators' gazes, and the way the group moved in the stairwell. Most spectators became very aware of their own and other peoples' bodies. One described the experience as an "impression de collectivité momentanée" (Rachelle). I also asked about the position they occupied within the group of spectators, to which Rachelle struggled to answer: "J'ai beaucoup de difficulté à répondre à cette question. J'avais plutôt l'impression que nous formions des 'amas concentriques' sur les paliers, même si quelques personnes restaient dans les escaliers" (Rachelle). Another spectator described how the connection between other spectators and herself built up through the unfolding of the performance:

> It was a small and cozy group. At the beginning it felt a bit awkward because I did not know anyone and we weren't sure where we should stand. However, as the piece went on, I felt that we were one, in some sense, because we were involved in

> a performance and everyone around us was not. Though we did not speak to each other, I felt connected to them. At times, we exchanged glances, knowing glances, as we reacted to something in the performance or in our environment. (Michelle)

Some felt like I was commanding the space, others that the group members were taking turns leading us down. One spectator experienced something that might be closer to Harvie's notion of complicity: "We, as a group, is following you, but doesn't feel like being led. The spectator and the performer each has taken up a different position but not necessarily one of hierarchy.… Your performance came out clean and with a clear direction without a feeling of being manipulated" (Sandra).

It is interesting to note the use of the pronouns "we" and "you" in the previous comments. I used the pronoun "we" a couple of times in the performance, like in the following sentence at the very beginning of the performance: "We, graduate students, need spaces of this sort to engage our bodies in the thinking activity." By doing so, I intended to hint on the many ways that we formed a collective in this stairwell: as sharing the experience of this performance, as sharing a space with our bodies in this place, and as (in most cases) sharing an identity relating us to Concordia as an institution. Whereas most spectators did not hesitate to use the pronoun "we" in their answers and to engage with my suggestion that we formed a group of academic *bodies* in the institution, one spectator reacted strongly to my use of the pronoun "we": "I think the use of 'we' in the performance was too universal or presumptuous, perhaps, of the experiences people may have in institutional spaces. Is there another way the performer can engage her spectators and through her interpretations other than by using the term 'we'?" (Suzanna) Her critical

withdrawal from my proposition that we formed a group reminds that the pronoun "we" is highly risky and always involves an artificial social construction in which one may feel excluded.

The conversations highlighted the possible tensions I might unintentionally create as well as the potential moments for connection, which are different for everyone. After reading Suzanna's comment, I was more hesitant to use the pronoun "we" for the following performances, but I nonetheless continued to use it, because I thought that experiencing tensions, both physical and intellectual, was also part of this journey. Other spectators strongly connected with the suggestion that we were a group, probably because their participation in the student movement might have enhanced the feeling of engaging in a collective experience and, as Antonin Artaud suggests, "the agitation of tremendous masses" (85) seems to create an addictive and enduring exhilaration that holds an explosive transformative potential.

The way the spectators' words resonated with the words from the script, completing them or disrupting them, helped in sharing the responsibility of the performance. This not only assisted in co-creating the event, as in Fischer-Lichte's terms (see chapter 3), but also in furthering the exchange by collectively returning to the event and discussing its dynamics, its transformative potential, and the possibility of becoming together. Engaging in those post-performance conversations helped to further a bond of trust, in which each voice had a chance to participate in the posterity of the event.

When I performed only the first section of *Paths* for Dr. Cynthia Hammond's undergraduate Art History class, one of her students had already experienced the performance in its entirety a year before, in January 2013, and she mentioned during the

post-performance conversation that she was surprised at how she remembered the rest of the performance and at how it vividly activated memories of the strike, which had otherwise started to feel like a distant event. Even if I did not perform the other sections of *Paths*, we collectively took the journey through the stairwell and she said that she started remembering the rest of the script as we went down the platforms, even if I was not stopping the walk, and that it connected her with memories of the larger socio-political context during which she had previously experienced the performance. It seems like *Paths* and the stairwell opened a breach in the space-time of the EV complex, creating a differential and radical space for those who remember the performance.

Chapter 6 Conclusion: Spaces of Difference

The immersive performances examined in this thesis created flexible spaces that blurred the limits of their parallel worlds into the external world and introduced spaces of difference, alternatives to escape from or contest the domination and control of space under neoliberalism. Space is fundamentally shared, as de Certeau describes in his concept of rented space and as Lefebvre theorizes in his double triad. These performances demonstrated the potential for space to reinforce an experience of collectivity, as well as to critique and disrupt previously established orders. They did so by engaging spectators spatially, but not under the terms of movement and action as directly empowering or what Rancière called a false binary between active and passive spectatorship. Instead, they engaged spectators in thinking critically and creatively and also in connecting with the performers, the group of spectators, and the worlds of the performance. Finally, I myself engaged with spectators to produce this thesis to bring parcels of that collective thinking into my text.

Ring and *Trial* both twisted the logic of making the spectator "do something," *Ring* by fostering an active form of contemplation in the dark and *Trial* by pushing spectators into resisting its oppressive environment. In both cases, spectators were caught in-between two worlds, the one created by the narrative of the performance and the "real" world: an in-between space of overlapping realities. The "Blanket Fortress" disrupted spatial narratives and created a space of difference in the EV building by fostering social interactions and by promoting students' vision of democracy, while *Paths to Knowledge* produced a context to explore a site that provoked encounters, in which spectators'

boundaries and my own were blurred in an allegory of a spatial materialisation of our thoughts. These case studies seem to have created embodied utopias, similar to Lefebvre's absolute space, in which people could dwell and think together in between reality and fiction, encountering others and otherness.

Ring and *Trial* also bear interesting names that both address important aspects of spectatorship in performance: the collective experience and the contract between performers and spectators. *Ring* insisted on the essential live presence of other spectators to enable the experience. If one were to listen to the recording of *Ring* alone in a darkened room, the experience would not be as uncanny, for the presence of other spectators installed doubt about the potential actuality of the recorded events. *Ring* was evocative of the magic happening during the constitution of a community of spectators, of the eeriness of synching a group of people together even if only momentarily, and of the power of imagining together. *Trial* imposed a trial on spectators in its narrative, but also put them *on trial* by testing their judgment as spectators and their capacity to share the responsibility of the performance, as Fischer-Lichte would formulate it. Each spectator had to ponder the level to which s/he was willing to engage with the performance, thereby defining the terms of the contract that tied him/her to the performers. *Ring* and *Trial* seem to both suggest that performing and attending performances are inevitably social acts, hereby echoing this questioning from Shannon Jackson's *Social Works*: "If some art is politically engaged, does that mean that other art does not have to be bothered with politics at all? If some art is presented as social, can other art forms present themselves as mercifully free of the encumbrances of sociality?" (18). Aesthetic encounters between audiences and performer(s) always involve a certain

level of political and social engagement since, like Rancière suggests, spectatorship holds an emancipatory power through critical thinking.

The collective walk in *Paths* framed the stairwell as an aesthetic social event: as in de Certeau's conception of walking as a creative act of appropriation (see 2.2.), spectators performed as much as I did throughout our descent of the stairwell, each flock evolving differently and creating new patterns. But even when I performed *Paths* on my own (to rehearse or sometimes, just for the pleasure of it), without encountering anyone, I was not alone on those steps. As when Haraway suggests that the world is an independent witty agent (see chapter 2.4.), the stairwell's concrete walls, the city of Montréal, and its buildings engaged with my performances like totems or allies, wishing me well and launching surprises that, in turn, made me a spectator.

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Appendix A: Approval Letter, Research Ethics Committee

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Queen Mary Research Ethics Committee
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Prof. Jen Harvey
Arts One – Room 3.14A
Department of Drama
Queen Mary University of London
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13th March 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: QMREC1158 – Reception of Site-Specific Performances

I can confirm that Ms Melanie Binette has completed a Research Ethics Questionnaire with regard to the above research.

The result of which was the conclusion that her proposed work does not present any ethical concerns; is extremely low risk; and thus does not require the scrutiny of the full Research Ethics Committee.

Yours faithfully

Ms Hazel Covill
Research Ethics Committee Administrator

Appendix B: Note on the Questionnaires

The purpose of the questionnaires was not to create a statistical portrait of audiences of immersive theatre, but to develop a qualitative approach for researching and engaging with audience members in post-performance practices. The questionnaires were used as a tool for engaging in critical conversations and for thinking collectively. I also returned the questionnaires of *Ring* and *Trial* filled with my own answers as a way to exchange further with the spectators and the creators of the performances. The questionnaires allowed for reaching audience members who lived far from the performance's location and/or who could not attend the group discussions. In London, I used social media to circulate my request and the Standing Conference of Drama Departments (SCUDD), a UK network of performance scholars, practitioners and culture workers. I often received questionnaires from performance scholars and this research also became a means for us to exchange academic ideas in a written form close to a conversation.

As the questions were open-ended, spectators' responses varied tremendously, which also informed on how the performances under study produced flexible experiences for spectators. Spectators' written answers tended to provide more introspective and personal insights on their experiences compared to the responses observed during large group discussions, in addition to offering a flexible amount of time for spectators to organize their thought. I received 35 questionnaires in total: 8 for *Ring*, 7 for *Trial* and 20 for *Paths to Knowledge*. The following three appendices provide sample questionnaires for each performance.

Appendix C: Sample Questionnaire of *Ring*

Hi! I am a Montreal Master's student researching on theatre audiences. I want to know what happened with everyone else during David Rosenberg and Glen Neath's Ring*. Please think of this questionnaire as a conversation, there are no good answers, just different experiences for each one of us. You can skip questions if you like, and write for as long as you want. You can email back the questionnaire at* mel.binette@gmail.com*. Thanks!*
Mélanie Binette

QUESTIONS:

Please describe yourself broadly (not necessarily work, but what defines you) and leave a few words about your familiarity with the performance group/ artists:

How would you describe your expectations when waiting for the performance to begin?

And how would you describe your expectations when darkness came slowly?

How did you feel in the dark? Was it different than the way you normally feel when immersed in complete darkness?

When did you realize that the sound in the headphones had switched to a recorded track?

How would you describe the presence of other audience members in the room with you?

How would you describe the (virtual/real) presence of the performer(s)?

How did you feel about being cast as a character in the narrative?

How would you describe your experience of space (imagined and real)?

How would you describe your visual experience during the performance?

How would you describe the experience of sound during the performance?

Did you keep the headphones on during the whole duration of the performance?

Please describe your body position: did you move or did you remain still during the performance? How was your posture?

Where were you sitting?

Did you leave the theatre during the performance or did you witness people leaving?

Can you remember some particular sensations, thoughts or memories that seemed to be triggered by the performance?

How would you describe the return of the lights, at the end of the performance?

Did you feel frustrated at any point during the performance?

Please feel free to add any other thought about the performance or about my questionnaire that you'd like to share:

Appendix D: Sample Questionnaire of *Trial*

Hi! I am a Montreal Master's student researching on audiences of site-specific performances. I want to know what happened with everyone else during RETZ's performance. Please think of this questionnaire as a conversation, there are no good answers, just different experiences for each one of us. If you are interested in knowing about other people's experience, I will organize group conversations in May, you may email me at mel.binette@gmail.com if you are interested in participating to one of those. You can email back the questionnaire at the same address.
Thanks!
Mélanie Binette

QUESTIONS:

Please describe yourself broadly (not necessarily work, but what defines you) and leave a few words about your familiarity with the performance group/ artists:

How familiar are you with East London?

During the performance, did you feel like you were in London's Shoreditch/ de Beauvoir town? If so, can you tell when and why?

Did you at anytime feel like you were somewhere else than in London in 2013? If so, can you describe this time and location?

How did you experience your walk in the streets during the performance (first part)?

How did you feel about walking in the streets after the performance?

How did you behave during the performance? Were you trying to disrupt the narrative? Did you go off-tracks? Were you asking questions? Were you obedient? Shy?

How did you experience the contact with the performers, especially when you were alone with them?

Did you miss the presence of other spectators during part 1?

How willing were you to give your identity details to the performance crew?

Did you feel frustrated at any point of the performance?

Did you want to go back to some of the sites of the performance afterward (at any time)?

Can you remember any memory/ thought/ feeling that seemed to be triggered by the performance?

Please feel free to add any other thought about the performance or about my questionnaire that you'd like to share:

Appendix E: Sample Questionnaire of *Paths to Knowledge*

Questionnaire for performance in EV building:

Please state your principal occupation in life (not necessarily work, but what defines you) and leave a few words about your familiarity with the artist:

Please describe broadly your experience of space during the performance:

How would you describe your position within the group of spectators? (Were you in the middle, in the front, in the back, etc.)

How did you experience the co-presence of your fellow spectators?

How did you experience the presence of the performer?

How would you describe your experience of sound during the performance?

Would you say that your experience of sound has affected your gaze? If so, can you describe how?

How did you feel physically while proceeding down the stairs?

Can you recall any emotion you might have felt during the performance, or did you associate your experience with any personal memories (it can be mere associations with objects, not necessarily thoughts)?

Did you feel frustrated at some point of the performance? (Whether it was physically, intellectually, emotionally, etc.)

How would you describe your exit of the performance?

How did you feel after the performance
(physically/emotionally/intellectually)?

Was this your first time in this place? Would you say that the performance will change the way you will experience this particular space in the future?

Could you describe your journey to get to the meeting point of the performance?

What other question would you wish I could have asked?

Would you have any other general or specific comment regarding this questionnaire?

Appendix F : Script of *Paths to Knowledge*

Paths to Knowledge

A top down procession to the street

CONCORDIA EV BUILDING, August 2012 version.

By Mélanie Binette

> *And among all the dramas that the architect has laid upon the earth, I know of no more lovely things than his flight of steps leading up and leading down, and of this feeling about architecture in my art I have often thought how one could give life (not a voice) to these places, using them to a dramatic end. When this desire came to me I was continually designing dramas wherein the place was architectural and lent itself to my desire. And so I began with a drama called "The Steps".*
>
> Edward Gordon Craig (quoted in Boyer, 73-74)

> *The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.*
> Donna Haraway (590)

16th floor: The Well [abstraction]

Standing at the top of the stairs

Welcome to EV's 16th floor. This section of the performance is titled 'The Well'.
A well is something in which one may fall endlessly, a fall with no bottom.
In French, the verb 'puiser' is used to illustrate the action of retrieving an idea from an external source.
Ideas are hence located in imaginary places, in someone else's head most probably, which makes the idea's location a mobile variable.

Starting to go down, slowly, emphasis on leg movements when walking downstairs

A well also generally functions thanks to biomechanical efforts, which makes the body an actor of the thinking process. When running up and down the stairwells, we find ourselves retrieving all sorts of ideas.

Next to the handrail
We, graduate students, need spaces of this sort to engage our bodies into the thinking activity. People come here to pray. People come here to jog. People use these stairs to do illicit things, such as smoking, cheating for exams, to tag their names. We used to go to stairwells to rehearse our parts when we had nowhere to go. *The echo* would give a dramatic stance to our acting.

Approaching the window
But the spectacle here is on the other side of the glass window. Car lights, moving skies, pavements swarming with people; fantasies of time unfolding and fantasies of urban renewal.

Turning around
People come here to understand the city, where it starts, where roads lead to, to embrace the shape of buildings, or to catch a glimpse of water, of mountains, of sky. You see: Mont St-Grégoire on the horizon line. That's the beginning of Victoria Bridge there, and over there, the Atwater market. If we all squeeze in that corner, we can observe the Mont Royal lookout. Maybe someone is glancing back at us.

Sitting on the floor, back turned to them, but turning my face from left to right.
From here, the buildings are man-sized. They stand like sentinels watching upon us. They are enlightened guides. Think of returning home from highway 10 and watching the skyscrapers come closer, slowly, like seeing your dad waving at you at the airport's gate.

Turn to them.
'It's hard to be down when you're up' was written on top of the twin towers in New York. People sometimes hide in stairwells to find peace of mind, to heal, to get closer to God, to see through His heavenly eyes, to believe in life after death. The city is strangely quiet seen from above. Cars move slowly. There is no doubt that problems cannot climb stairs. Problems definitely stick to the ground. They are invisible from the view from above and the city seems ordered, fluid, stable.

Getting up, leaning on the wall.
One day at sunset, while investigating these stairs, I bumped into a Muslim student who was praying towards the East End of the city. He was just there. Montreal's

cardinal directions are false: the South shore is the real east, a pink landscape reflecting the sun at dusk. What will happen of his prayers?

Getting closer to them. As close as I can.
I scared him, I invaded his retreat: he left. Sometimes, there is just not enough space.

Going down one level
We feel the fear of getting caught when not using the stairs in a conventional way, in a functional way. But we also feel the thrill of being out of place. Of resisting I guess. Some people stare at you because you are standing, gazing, not proceeding up or down. Some become suspicious: what are you planning, scrawling in your little notebook?

Lingering on the handrail next to the window.
When snow falls over Montreal, the people down in the whiteness become more visible, more tangible and seem so vulnerable. Like kids playing on a snow bank right before the snowplough arrives. Last March, helicopters surrounded the campus, this very building. They might be back soon. The authorities in power like to think of people as stick figures, easily managed and faceless. But that's only the dimension of the things seen from above.

We're not seagulls. We look up, not down.

Siting on the handrail, in the corner. Legs are turning as if falling in slow motion. At the end, I slowly take a look down. As I return to the floor, I try as much as possible to stand in equilibrium, to slow the movement.
The stairwell, on the 16th floor, has an endless bottom. You may fall forever if you break the glass. But if you stand on the edges, you may be briefly able to situate yourself.

When going down each floor, I slow the pace when passing in front of each window. Could play on rhythms and pacing.

10th floor: The Cage [of bodies and rooftops and ivory towers]

blocking the door by holding the handle
This section of the performance is titled the cage, as in French: 'une cage d'escalier'.

Stairwells are also fire escapes. On such a tall building as this one, the windowed stairwells certainly participate in neutralizing the feeling of entrapment that could be experienced during the procedures of evacuation, in the event of a fire.

But remember, windows are just another transparent boundary.

Sitting next to window, peeping
It is strange to think that people come to hide in stairwells. We tend to forget how exposed we are to the gaze of others when we're on high floors. People steal, people spy on each other, people have sex, people scratch their nuts or pick their nose. People weep, people let it hurt.

Bodies ache, especially student bodies: bending over books and sitting for hours in front of computers, twisting our spine, burning our throat, our skin, wrinkles and gray hair appearing on our forehead, losing sight. Knowledge is painful. The mind tends to deny the body: we forget to eat, we have trouble sleeping. Sometimes, we disconnect so much from our physical realities that our entire body feels numb. The mind should never ever produce entrapment, although it is often the case, and it is too often misperceived as a choice. It tries to make boundaries transparent, so we forget they exist, we forget about the choice, we forget about our responsibility to cross over. Resistance starts when we acknowledge that we are given no choice. And resistance somehow seems to be a body function.

2 flights of steps down (8th floor)
Take a look at all those rooftops. What is fantastic about them is that each single one of them has a door that leads to a fire escape, that leads to the street.

6th floor: The Case [our empty classroom]

standing next to window
This section of the performance is titled the case, which is empty and which, as often, needs to be filled. *(show classroom)*
This classroom has been emptied of bodies and ideas. This is where other SIP and humanities students and I have interrupted a seminar last winter, to save our bodies and ideas for street action. We thought that, by making ourselves visible, we would succeed in pushing those oppressive transparent boundaries. We would succeed in creating a space for discussion, for exchange. But maybe we've made ourselves a little too visible. What is the good amount of visibility one may seek for change to occur, for communities to appropriate space and to hope for a better future? Or futures? Maybe we have to oscillate between visibility and invisibility, maybe that's today's paradigm. A constant shifting of scales.

5rd floor: The Escape [the street]

sit and block door on 5th floor

In March 2012, Art students were symbolically blocking the stairs in the EV building, they had built a blanket fortress and were peacefully sitting on the floor leading to the elevators. Bodies on the floor, simply resisting by being there, by their attendance to the world. It did not take long before measures were taken to have them disappear. In today's democracy, could it be that bodies are way more feared than voices?

Show condo project on slum building

The Quartier Concordia. This university proclaims to spill knowledge over all the surroundings, and advertises itself as proudly participating to Montreal's dynamic urban energy. Nonetheless, on March 22nd 2012, all of its doors were closed to civilians, especially to its very own students. People were denied access, because they can occupy. And whilst occupying, they create spaces, absolute spaces, where the mind, the self and the body are in harmony.

Opening door but blocking passage

We have now arrived to the escape. From the institution, to a world where we need to develop new skills to be able to see from below and where we are bodies before than anything else.

Proceeding across the corridor, down through the spiral staircase leading to the 2nd floor lobby, down the stairs to the EV atrium, crossing the space and the two doors of the hall leading to the street. Once out on the street, onto the small pavement space next to the big C sculpture with a map of the campus:

But let's be honest, sometimes, we cannot wait to go back to the upper floors. After all, a flight of stairs can either become a landing or a take off.