

The Phenomenology of Non-Theatre Sites on Audience



Figure 1. Apocalyptic Junkyard in Eat Your Heart Out (2009), A.E. Harris Warehouse, Birmingham. Set designed and installed by Tony Appleby and Claire Wearn. Photograph by Steven Davies, Claire Wearn and Alicja Rogalska.



Figure 2. Apocalyptic Junkyard in Eat Your Heart Out (2009), A. E. Harris Warehouse, Birmingham. Set designed and installed by Tony Appleby and Claire Wearn. Photograph by Steven Davies, Claire Wearn and Alicja Rogalska.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF NON-THEATRE SITES ON AUDIENCE

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"Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life:
it exists to make one feel things"

Victor Shklovsky (12)

During Look Left Look Right's *You Once Said Yes* (2011), a series of one-on-one encounters with fifteen different performers across Edinburgh, I walked alone down Grassmarket listening to an MP3 recording. A voice described the street to me in great detail, the smells I would experience as I walked past the cheese shop, the hog roast shop, calling on me to notice things I had never previously considered despite my many trips down Grassmarket. This performance allowed me to experience Edinburgh in a new way, engaging all my senses, as each character shared their story with me and took me on the next part of my journey. How can such performances change the way we experience the world? What is it about performances which take place outside the traditional theatre auditorium which produce a phenomenological experience for audiences?

I will explore these questions through an analysis of *Kindle Theatre's Eat Your Heart Out* (2009) in Stan's Café Theatre Company's A. E. Harris warehouse. My research in this area stemmed from an interest in site-specific theatre, a discourse which, alongside explorations of phenomenology, frames this analysis. Although site-specific theatre is predominantly recognised as a mode of performance which is created for and centres on one particular site, it is useful to analyse this performance within site-specific

discourse, in light of Patrice Pavis's statement that "the term [site-specific] refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world" (337-38). Rather than focussing on how the original function of the site is revealed within the performance, which is frequently the current emphasis of site-specific discourse, I will demonstrate that of equal importance to emerging conversations about site-specific work is the phenomenological experience of audiences (i.e. matters they perceive with their bodily senses), within such non-theatre sites.

Eat Your Heart Out tells the story of a devastated world plagued by famine, where the last three cooks on Earth are set the task of creating a banquet for their Queen. Kindle Theatre transformed the interior of the A. E. Harris warehouse into an apocalyptic junkyard containing overturned cars, fridges, tyres and washing machines piled high against the walls, with a pathway between them along which the audience could move. Designed by local artists, the set consisted of rubbish collected from Birmingham which resonated with the locality of the site, as inhabitants of (or visitors to) Birmingham wandered through the city's discarded possessions. *Eat Your Heart Out's* junkyard was complemented by the setting of its warehouse, located down a backstreet in an industrial area of the city; its vast cavernous space, bleak external walls and metal gates providing the perfect backdrop for the desolate environment of Kindle Theatre's apocalyptic world.

Working within this site, rather than a traditional auditorium, gave Kindle Theatre the freedom to incorporate the audience in the environment of the performance, challenging conventions of the spectator's "pre-eminently visual experience" (Wiles 12). This was achieved as the performance existed in a site which was not constructed to support the act of passive watching, unlike the theatre auditorium which is "reinforced by stage lighting, air-conditioning, protective arm-rests and an architectural emphasis on sightlines" (Wiles 12). Such a non-auditorium performance environment can directly engage the audience in a sensory experience, defined by Mike Pearson, academic and director of site-specific company Brith Gof, as "*phenomenological*", where "the emphasis is on bodily contact, corporeality, embodiment" (29). In *Eat Your Heart Out*, Kindle Theatre created a sensory experience for the audience as they moved through the site, able to feel the crunch of leaves underfoot and the cold air of the warehouse alongside the visual impact of the junkyard surrounding them. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* emphasised that human perception is rooted in bodily experience, stating that by "remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall rediscover ourself [sic], since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is ... the subject

of perception" (239). As Mark Fortier notes, "phenomenology is not concerned with the world as it exists in itself but with how the world appears (as phenomena) to the humans who encounter it" (38) and it is the theatre's recreation of lived experience through performance which can introduce this encounter to an audience.

It is undeniable that within all theatre performances the audience are subject to a phenomenological experience which utilises at least two senses. Bert O. States investigates this in his *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*, analysing phenomenology in relation to a range of theatre styles including realism, which he claims achieves the "imprisonment of the eye" (169), as "the stage picture leads us by the [visual and aural] senses into its world" (51). In his book *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Stanton Garner also explores these ideas, looking at phenomenology within contemporary drama from 1950 to 1993. His analysis of Sam Shepherd's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) is particularly interesting as it highlights that theatre in the auditorium can also utilise the audience's sense of smell. He describes a moment in which a character made toast on stage, the smell of which "fill[ed] the spectator's appetites, calling to attention their bodily sentience as they [sat] across from the heating toasters" (Garner 99). I consider, however, that site-specific work, which is predominantly promenade in form and takes place in sites not originally constructed for performance, has the potential to create a profoundly phenomenological experience where the "visual need not take precedence" over other senses (Pearson 141). Thus working within the extensive A. E. Harris warehouse, Kindle Theatre had the freedom to call on different physical senses in the performance. For example, *Eat Your Heart Out* culminated in a banquet where the audience were served a two-course meal, a heightened phenomenological experience incorporating all five of the audience's senses, most significantly taste. Although it is not unheard of for audiences to consume food as part of a performance in a theatre, Kindle Theatre's creation of this environment in combination with the multisensory performance served to re-create the lived experience of eating a meal, as audience members sat side by side with others at long tables within the performance. The normality of eating a meal in this extraordinary context drew out their perceptual engagement with the world of the performance event.

Viewing work such as *Eat Your Heart Out* as a "performance event", a term most often used to describe site-specific theatre, "emphasises the significance of the spatial encounter and is conceived as a whole experience for the spectator" (Wilkie 153). Explorations of space are central within such performances, and using the term 'event' helps to nurture the audience's expectations of

experiencing and interacting with the performance in a shared space and time, much like other public events. The “spatial encounter” implicit in *Eat Your Heart Out* as a promenade performance, where the audience moves physically through the space, is vital in framing the journey of the performance. Garner explores this notion, stating that “theatrical space is phenomenal space, governed by the body and its spatial concerns” (92). In light of this, it is arguable that non-theatre sites can become theatrical with the physical presence of the audience, transforming site from a place (location) to a space (performance). Cathy Turner observes this distinction in her comment that “space is created by the ways in which place is *moved through*” (“Palimpsest or Potential Space” 373). The path which the audience takes through the performance then serves, along with the architecture created by the performers, to re-invent the space. As Turner suggests, “each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting. Thus space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings – a palimpsest” (“Palimpsest or Potential Space” 373). The A. E. Harris warehouse can thus be viewed as a palimpsest, as a previously un-theatrical place which, as a site owned by artists, is repeatedly transformed into a site for performance; performers and audiences alike continue to write-and re-write over it.

Utilising the open warehouse of the A. E. Harris, Kindle Theatre were thus able to manipulate the framework of the space

to distribute its audience ... providing prospects unfamiliar or impossible to conspire in the auditorium ... impos[ing] new arrangements with the audience ... to conspire effects of distance, closeness, obliqueness ... (Pearson 176)

In *Eat Your Heart Out* the cooks were spread amidst the junkyard, embellishing the architectural landscape of the set with performance, creating an environment which surrounded audiences and towered above them. As they moved through the performance, audiences could respond as they would to a sculpture, described by Paula Rabinowitz as “three-dimensional engagement” (36). She explains that “walking around the object to see its fullness, forces acknowledging, if only subliminally, the space beyond the object, encouraging an active looking” (36). Such an “active looking” can enable audience members to fully perceive the space around them. As Merleau-Ponty notes, “we are rediscovering our interest in the space in which we are situated. Though we see it only from a limited perspective – our perspective ... we relate to it through our bodies” (54). This “limited perspective” of real life is emphasised by Cormac Power in his comments that, as a human, it is impossible to press a “pause

button in which I can freeze my situation, step outside it, and examine its contents 'objectively', because my perceptions are following one another relentlessly from past to future" (186). I would argue, however, that such performances as *Eat Your Heart Out* can allow the audience to achieve a sense of Power's analogy. Our bodily perceptions of the performance event are heightened because we are aware that we are at an event to perceive something, and are therefore able to "actively look" at the contents of the performance around us. If in real life, we felt a breeze blow past us, we may be indifferent or distinctly unaware of our experience of it, whereas if we were moving through a performance environment and someone blew on us with a fan we may examine this feeling, particularly because we see how it is constructed. In this way "theatre and phenomenology are intimately linked in that both aim to cast the familiar in a fresh and unfamiliar light" (Power 178), as evidenced by my experience walking down Grassmarket in *You Once Said Yes*.

Cliff McLucas of Brith Gof uses the phrase "the host and the ghost", to "describe the relationship between place and event" (qtd. in Turner "Palimpsest or Potential Space" 374) in site-specific theatre, something which is particularly useful to my exploration of phenomenology within *Eat Your Heart Out*. According to McLucas, "the host site is haunted for a time by the ghost that the theatre makers create" (qtd. in Turner "Palimpsest or Potential Space" 374). The A. E. Harris, originally a metal factory, now owned by Stan's Café Theatre Company, is thus a 'host' to a multiplicity of 'ghost' performances. The potential of this approach has been seen by many others, as witnessed by the recent trend of theatre companies taking ownership of disused sites, for example Shunt, who make work in the tunnels under London Bridge and Theatre Absolute, who took up residency in the former Fishey Moore's chip shop in Coventry.

The incorporation of such "ghost" architecture into a "host" site can also serve to cast the site into a "fresh and unfamiliar light" (Power 178), seen in the sense of tension created between performance and site. Alluding to his work with Brith Gof, Pearson describes this as

the creation of a kind of purposeful paradox ... through the employment of orders of material seemingly unusual, inappropriate or perverse at this site: an opera in a shipyard, an early Welsh epic poem in a disused car factory. (36)

In the case of *Eat Your Heart Out* this incongruence was created through the combination of decadent music, a junkyard and a banquet within a site which was once a metal factory. Rather than creating work which was rooted

in the history of the site, Kindle Theatre had the freedom to draw from a variety of stimuli: their music inspired by the Baroque era and their apocalyptic setting by our "contemporary obsession with Armageddon" (Kindle Theatre) in order to create a different world within the A. E. Harris. Such a "paradox" (Pearson 36) serves to enrich the performance event, as the juxtaposition of the site and the content of the performance can influence the atmosphere of the space as it is experienced by its audience. The candle-lit banquet, for example, was held within a vast and eerie room, the very opposite of a convivial dining experience. By juxtaposing contradictory sensory elements within *Eat Your Heart Out*, Kindle Theatre were able to make the audience all the more aware of their surrounding environment.

Kindle Theatre's *Eat Your Heart Out* also served to create an interactive relationship between its performers and spectators, something which is perhaps more readily achieved in an "open performance area", as there are "no formal divisions" (Pearson 75). As Peggy Phelan notes, performance is substantiated on "the interaction between the art object and the spectator" (147), but within such performances as *Eat Your Heart Out* this interaction is heightened as the audience's physical presence is brought to the forefront. In performances within the theatre auditorium, as Garner observes, audiences are aware of their presence within the performance, which is sanctioned "through our applause, our laughter, even the attentiveness of our silence" (49). Site-specific performance, however, provides the audience with an awareness of their *individual* presence, as audience members stand together in the light, aware of themselves in the gaze of the performers and each other. This realisation of presence can be explained in light of phenomenology, which "takes account of the fact that to be in the world is to encounter other people, and part of our awareness is an awareness that others perceive us" and specifically in Jean-Paul Sartre's investigation of "how we act in light of others who are watching us" (Fortier 41). In *Eat Your Heart Out*, the narrator facilitated this relationship by conversing with the audience directly, handing them objects to pass round such as a box containing a tiny carrot, highlighting the preciousness of food in a world of scarcity. The audience's sense of touch was instantly awakened, allowing them to embark on a phenomenological exploration of this world through the object they held in their hands.

In an age where audiences are increasingly ready to interact with performances and contemporary theatre companies are able to facilitate such a desire with new modes of performance, it seems eminently fitting that new spaces for performance are being explored. Gay McAuley critiques the spatial construction of the traditional theatre auditorium as one which makes

the audience feel “disempowered” (281-82). She argues in favour of performance spaces which are “ordered in such a way that genuine exchange can take place between the human beings on stage and those in the auditorium” (McAuley 281-82). From the initial interventions into performer-spectator interaction from revolutionary practitioners such as Augusto Boal, among numerous others, continuous interventions within the theatre auditorium have since attempted to situate spectators within the action. Notably so is The Royal Court’s production of Tim Crouch’s *The Author* (2009), in which the entire staging consisted of two banks of audience directly facing each other, where the performers were seated amongst them and the story emerged from within the auditorium. However, it seems that work created outside a theatre auditorium already has an advantage in that there is no existing conventional performer-audience structure to contend with, just a space with which to play. Turner emphasises this notion in her comment that “it was the emptiness, not the structure, that fascinated me: this was a place in waiting, its previous functions outgrown, its future uncertain” (“Framing the Site” 36).

Perhaps such work is being created in line with changing modes of perception in contemporary society, where, as Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests in *Post-Dramatic Theatre*, “a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving is replacing the linear-successive” (16). Tim Etchells, artistic director of Forced Entertainment, writes that we live in an intensely media-driven society, where we are constantly “channel hopping” (111). It is contested that our perspective of the world around us can increasingly be seen as a collage of documented experiences, pictures, conversations from our own witnessed events and those we see on television and the internet. As a result it is arguable that the spectator of contemporary theatre, as Elinor Fuchs suggests in her *Death of Character*, is “too restless and driven to be contained in a theatre seat ... prow[ing] the total entertainment, simultaneously consuming and consumed” (141). In performances like *Eat Your Heart Out*, the audience can break away from the same act of watching which they encounter daily on various digital screens, and develop a phenomenological awareness of their own living, breathing existence within the surrounding live performance event which they perceive through their bodily senses.

Beyond the constraints of the auditorium the spectator, or what Dermot Moran terms the “experiencer” (177), takes on a fundamental role within the action of the performance. As a result, audience members could perhaps be more suitably described as witnesses to the performance event. In his site-specific performances, McLucas refers to the audience as “witness”, seen

along with the “host” and the “ghost” to form a “trinity that constitutes the work” (qtd. in Turner “Palimpsest or Potential Space” 374). Forced Entertainment, who created such site-specific performances as *Nights in This City* (1995), holds the notion of witnessing central to their work. The artistic director, Etchells, argues for a more meaningful notion of the audience as witness, commenting that “to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker” (17). It is this consideration of the audience as ‘witnesses’ which exemplifies the phenomenological impact of *Eat Your Heart Out*. This was epitomised in the banquet section where, after eating an offal stew which was brimming with sausages and other morsels of dubious looking meat, a ‘cooked body’ was wheeled on, covered with a white cloth, which the audience could only assume to be the Queen. Thus the audience members were not only witnesses to the cooks’ crime, but were implicated in it, as consumers of the stew seemingly made of the Queen’s body. Their phenomenological perception of the performance was thus intensified by their physical complicity and embodied knowledge of the cooks’ crime.

In site-specific performance the audience-as-witnesses may also be placed in role in line with the conventions of the site. An example of this is The Other Way Works’s *Black Tonic* (2008-09), performed in various hotels across the UK, which framed the audience as guests at the hotel. Four audience members were able to attend each performance; their tickets were printed as room bookings which were validated at a ‘reception’ in exchange for a room key. Throughout the performance the audience were guided to follow several actors who were portrayed as either staying or working in the hotel. The action took place in various locations around the hotel, including the audience’s own designated rooms, the characters’ rooms, the corridor, the lift and the hotel bar. As the event took place within the real space and time of the hotel, The Other Way Works created tension between the reality of the site and the performance occurring within it, in an imitation of guests and staff by performers and audience alike. The audience were thus made to feel as if they were witnessing the event happening around them whilst staying at the hotel, enabling them to perceive the performance from a particular phenomenological perspective.

It seems, then, that a significant part of the notion of audience-as-witnesses is a consideration of the way in which the audience are framed in a meaningful role within the performance, reinforcing their phenomenological presence. This was particularly significant within *Eat*

Your Heart Out, as the audience themselves were alluded to as food. Upon entering the site, for example, a brown paper tag labelled with their name and expiry date was tied to each audience member's wrist.¹

Such attention to detail acknowledged the presence of each audience member as a live participator in the performance event, with their name in writing, and an expiry date; the latter a recognisable label which we associate with food. Within site-specific performance, audiences are often framed in a specific role. Turner observes this, commenting that when watching a performance, "every audience member has a vast range of perceptual roles at their disposal: theatre spectator, tourist, game player, partygoer, voyeur, connoisseur, witness, scientific observer, detective" ("Framing the Site" 25). In the case of *Eat Your Heart Out*, our perceptual role was characterised literally as dinner.

The notion of the audience as objects of food within a cannibalistic world was carried throughout the performance and enforced through *Kindle Theatre's* utilisation of the 'host' space, transformed by the 'ghost' architecture of the set. Beyond the junkyard was a tunnel made from chicken wire which the audience walked through on ground covered in hay. Such inclusion of natural elements from the outside world once more drew on the audience's phenomenological experience of the performance. States refers to this as "living things" which are "tethered to the real world" (37). By "living", States suggests objects that "are alive in the sense of belonging to immediate existence, to the steady flux of signs, but not yet to the world of art" (37). Placing such a real world material as hay on the ground so that the audience could smell it and feel it beneath their feet triggered feelings associated with being on a farm, alluding to the journey of animals to the slaughter house. This served to increase the audience's sense of their perceptual role within the performance. The tunnel was constructed in a circular path, so that the audience could see the other audience members traversing the space on the other side, a herd of bodies moving through chicken wire. This reinforced the notion of the audience's phenomenological "encounter" (Fortier 41), witnessing others as they imagine they are being witnessed themselves.

Thus, such alternative "host" sites for performance as the A. E. Harris enable a "ghost" performance to create a phenomenological experience for its audience-as-witnesses, whose physical presence within the site brings the performance event to life. Previously un-theatrical sites such as the A. E. Harris which are now used as received sites for art are thus vital, not only in serving to support developments in performance as practitioners continue

their “enquiry of what theatre is *and might be*” (Wilkie qtd. in Pearson 9), but in “allow[ing] us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet we are always prone to forget” (Merleau-Ponty 32). Stan’s Café Theatre Company comment that the A. E. Harris space is “here to help make interesting things happen that otherwise wouldn’t happen” (Stan’s Café Theatre Company), highlighting the possibilities of work within such spaces,

whereby practitioners use their focus on geographical space to explore a range of theatrical, conceptual, political and virtual spaces. Thus the potentially restrictive *specificity* of the work is expanded to allow for ambiguity and multiplicity. (Wilkie qtd. in Pearson 9)

It is thus important to look beyond existing definitions of site-specific theatre as work which occurs within one particular site, requiring that layers from this site are revealed within the performance through “reference to ... historical documentation ... [and] found material” (Wrights and Sites). McLucas claims that “the public is an active agent and theatre doesn’t exist until it/they is/are engaged” (qtd. in Pearson 37), thus it is crucial to continue to analyse the response of audiences to such work. It is evident from *Eat Your Heart Out* that phenomenology is a key element of work occurring outside the theatre auditorium, and should be recognised as an eminently useful frame with which to analyse the audience’s experiential knowledge such performance events. As States explains, “if you want to investigate a new aspect of human experience you can’t use the old vocabulary of signs because, as far as expressiveness goes, the old vocabulary *is* the old experience” (100). It is fundamentally important to consider that such performances take place within, and are thus open to, the effects of the real world, allowing the artist to create a deeper connection with the audience’s experience of the performance event. As Acty Tang, site-specific performance practitioner states, “I don’t want spectators to look at a stage that is wiped blank every time, failing to make the link with their realities” (qtd. in Ledger 98). Sites for performance which exist beyond the constraints of a traditional theatre auditorium can also challenge artists to experiment with the spatial placing of the audience, incorporating them within the environment of the performance. Once the audience members are moved from their comfortable theatre seats, they can become part of the space, shaping it with their movement, potentially engaging in a phenomenological experience of the performance which utilises all of their senses.

As Garner writes, “to interact with a world of objects on a phenomenal

level is to ... discover the instabilities of self and body within this world" (115-16). Such an experience seems profoundly significant in an age permeated by media technology where our "world view is being increasingly dominated by technical equipment" (Auslander 32). It seems that performance which allows the audience to actively engage with the work at hand in a multi-perspective form of engagement would appeal to new generations of young people brought up within such digitised environments, as Auslander contests, "the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatisation" (55). If Fuchs is right in her assumptions that the modern spectator is indeed becoming "restless" (141), then we must embrace such modes of performance for finding new ways of exciting them.

Notes

¹ It is presumed that the company achieved this through the ticket booking system, as it was essential for each audience member to provide a name when booking tickets for the production.

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