By Arnold Aronson

The Brazil exhibit included a "tree" of softball-size orbs into which one could peer to see an image of a set. Photo courtesy of Arnold Aronson.

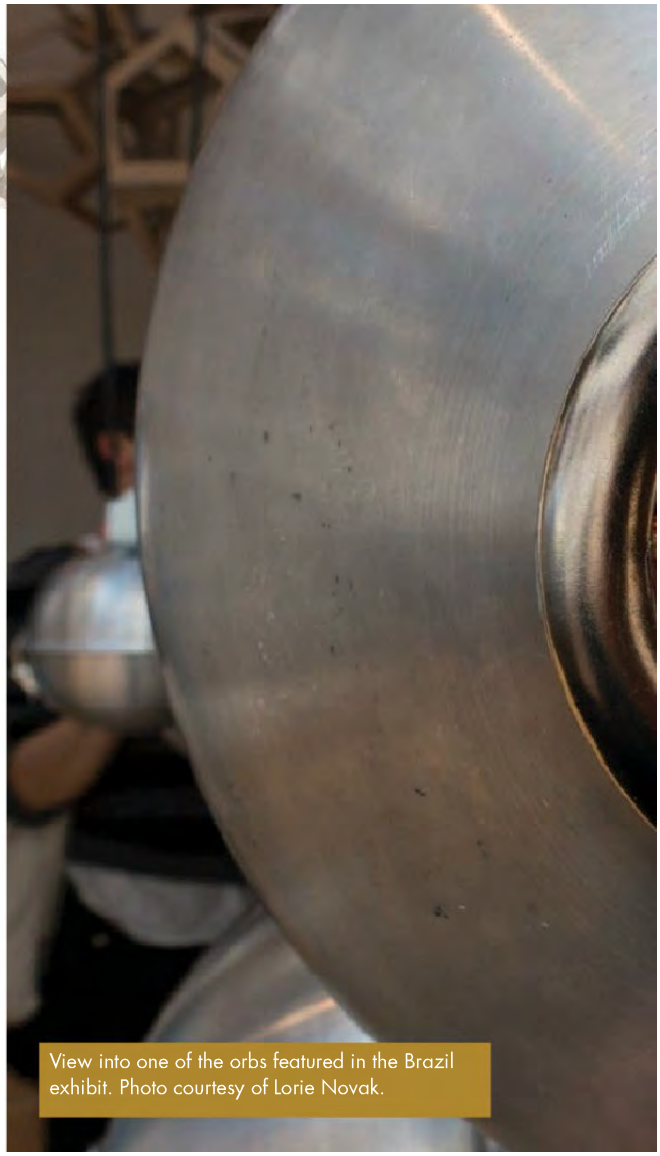
Finding THE HEART of PQ

The Prague Quadrennial has moved beyond an 'exhibition of costumes, sketches, and models' to embrace performance, installation, conceptual art, interactive, site-specific, and peripatetic theatre

Anyone who attended a previous PQ, especially those before 2011, saw a significant change this year. Instead of being presented in a single, more or less unified location, PQ15 was spread out over at least nine venues throughout Prague, as well as plazas, streets, galleries, and other public spaces. This trend began with PQ11 when the Industrial Palace—the home of most of the preceding PQs—became unavailable and the PQ was held at the National Gallery, the National Theatre, and St. Anne's Church, among other sites. But now, the practice of incorporating multiple venues was less an accommodation to necessity and more a manifestation of an aesthetic.

The exhibition sites included two Baroque palaces, a repurposed Gothic church, the house where author Franz Kafka was born, and the reconstructed Bethlehem Chapel, among others. Viewing exhibits meant moving from one locale to another through the streets, mostly in the Old Town section of Prague. Narrow winding streets lined with architecture spanning half a millennium were overwhelmed by throngs of tourists, along with the ubiquitous tourist shops and over-priced gelato stands. Within the sites, one moved up and down stairs (few locales were fully accessible for those with disabilities) and through mazes of rooms of all sizes. Costumed performers roamed the streets, sometimes indistinguishable from tourists or locals, and one would stumble across performances ranging from the infuriatingly self-indulgent to the inspired. There were lectures, discussions, and demonstrations from international superstars like Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage, and a wide range of international designers, directors, and scholars.

At all previous PQs, one experienced a fairly obvious sense of boundaries—you were either within the confines of the exhibition or not. At PQ15, as at the Indian Ramlila performances or some of the medieval English mystery cycles, the entire city became the site



View into one of the orbs featured in the Brazil exhibit. Photo courtesy of Lorie Novak.

of performance—and, in a sense, you were never out of it, even at a restaurant or asleep at your hotel. The Netherlands, which over the past several PQs has rejected conventional scenographic display in inspired ways, captured this spirit perhaps better than any other country. The organizers from the Netherlands sent viewer-participants around the city to map it through observation and performance and report back to a site at the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace where information was collated and published. While the intensity of dozens of exhibits concentrated in a single site was lost, not to mention the inevitability of easily running into colleagues from across the globe, it was replaced by a sense of all-encompassing event and festival.

A WALK THROUGH THE EXHIBITS

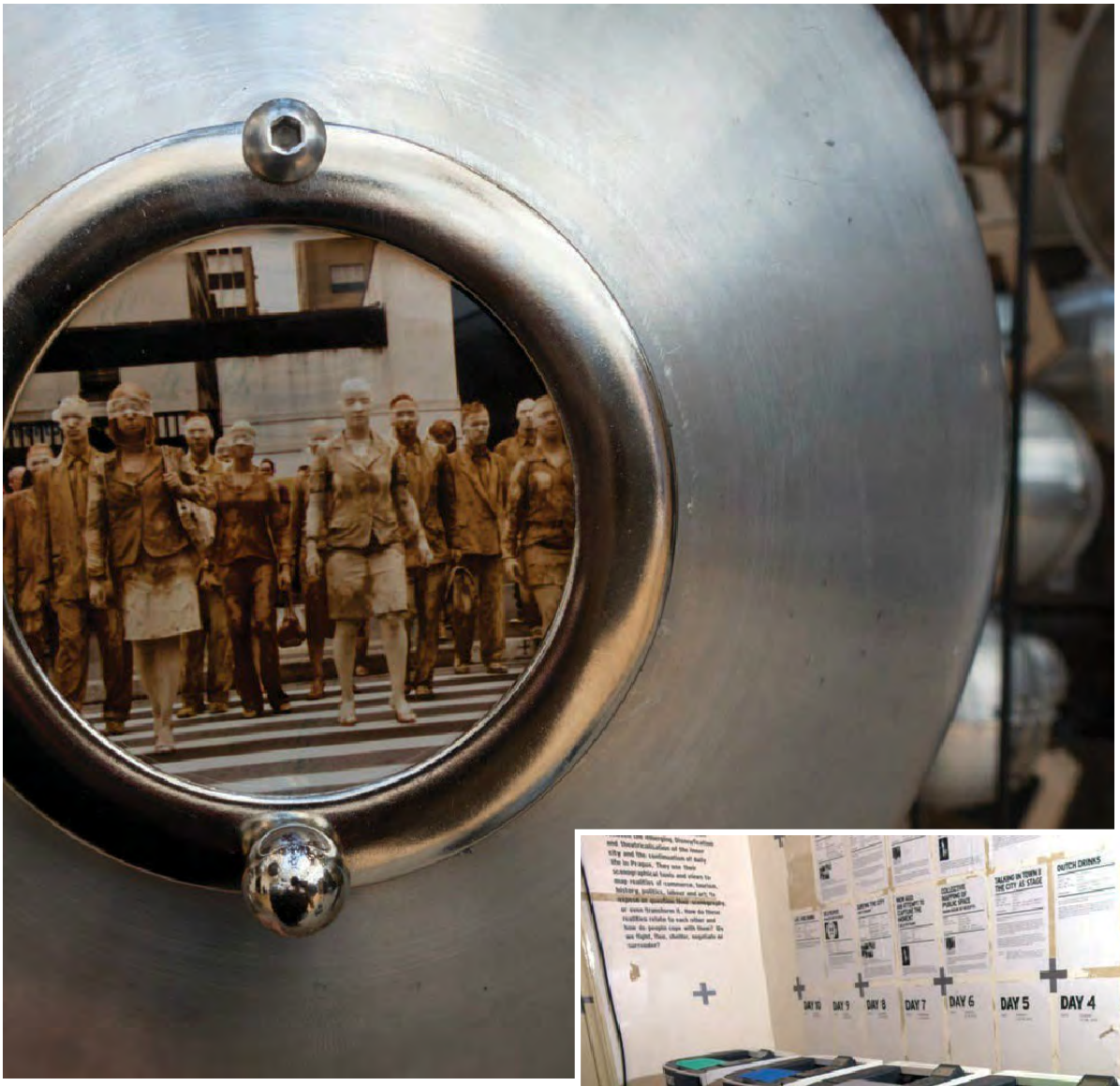
My own journey through the exhibits began with national pavilions in the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace and the Clam-Gallas Palace, the two major venues in the heart of the Old Town. Five sites around the city contained exhibits from countries and regions. (Even more locales contained student work, special exhibits, and performances.)

On my third day, I made it to Topič Salon, across from the National Theatre. There, on the second floor, were nine national exhibitions. More or less following the topography of the space, I first encountered Brazil with its "tree" of softball-size orbs into which one could peer to see an image of a set. Nearby was a wall with photos and design renderings of productions from a consortium of several Arab states. Off of this area were two rooms, one with the award-winning sound installation from Poland, and one containing the Israeli exhibit consisting of videos of contemporary work. In an alcove on the other side was Egypt, again consisting primarily of photos.

Moving past a small PQ bookshop toward the street side of the space one literally stepped into Cuba, whose exhibit was partially on the floor. In a room off to the right was an exhibition from Denmark that explored identity: "Imagine yourself with a different skin color," declared the statement in the *PQ Catalogue*. "Imagine your mother with a different gender. Does a change of skin and hair color make a difference?" Visitors could become participants by putting on makeup and wigs to transform skin color, ethnicity, and gender. It was a well-intentioned, if rather naïve—and to some, even offensive—experiment.

The archway to the left of Cuba led into the Golden Triga-winning exhibit from Estonia, which created an installation that included a video documentation of an amazing piece of political performance art. Theatre NO99 created a fictitious political entity, Unified Estonia, which had constituted itself as a fully functioning political party for some six weeks. One first passed through an antechamber with rather formal, classic furniture, then into a room with modern desks and tablet computers on which one could watch informational videos, such as one instructing politicians how to obtain donations. A tiny room off this space served as an intimate screening room for a 40-minute video of the group's final campaign rally. (The minimal seating capacity and the length of the video unfortunately limited viewership.)

The final room down this corridor was occupied by China. As I walked into this space I was momentarily stunned. Along the walls of the rectangular room were large model boxes (done in the equivalent of ½" scale) representing eight set designers and one lighting designer. Although each of the models had a small conceptual sculpture next to or beneath it, this was a straightforward display of the designers' work, typical of the majority of national exhibitions in earlier PQs—no iPads or computer screens, no installations, no expanded scenography, no participatory activity. The well-crafted



The Netherlands exhibit sent viewer-participants around the city and their reports were printed and published at the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace. Photo courtesy of Lorie Novak.

models clearly showcased design; however, they did include the latest technology, incorporating hologram-like videos that allowed the viewer to see performers moving within the set.

EXHIBITION MEETS PERFORMANCE

From its origins, the basic mandate of the PQ was for national centers to exhibit examples of design from the previous five years—providing some sense, however selective, of scenographic developments in those countries. But this time, as Executive Director Daniela Pařizková explained in the *PQ Catalogue,* "National pavilions, this year, will be even farther removed from exhibition of costumes, sketches, and models, as the PQ was simplistically described in the past."

While China was not the only country to continue the older practice this time around, it was among a surprisingly few that did so in such a traditional manner—with the visually seductive three-dimensional objects and tools of the designer's art. It is not surprising that two Chinese designers, Gao Guangjian and Liu Xinglin, won the Gold Medal and Honorary Award, respectively, for performance design. Until I walked into the Chinese pavilion, I had not realized how much I missed this kind of work at the PQ.

The transformation of the PQ into something dominated by performance, installation, conceptual art, interactive, site-specific, and peripatetic theatre was really a culmination of a trend that could be dated at least to PQ03, and one to which I must admit having contributed in a small way.

Spain's Muérete exhibit was housed in a claustrophobic room in the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace where viewer-participants, one at a time, could lie on a raised coffin-like box, wearing headphones, and be surrounded by the detritus of computers and the digital trash of our age. Photo courtesy of Lorie Novak.

The PQ is based on a kind of contradiction. It is dedicated to the exhibition of theatre design and architecture, and yet a theatrical design is complete only in the moment of performance and a theatre is complete only when it is filled with spectators and performers. Thus, an exhibition of the artifacts of the process of theatrical creation, fascinating as they are, is by definition incomplete.

At PQ03 there was an attempt to address this disparity. The previous PQs had always incorporated three sections: national, student, and thematic (the latter consisting of national exhibits organized around a specific theme such as design for Shakespeare or Mozart). In 2003, the thematic exhibit was replaced by "The Heart of PQ" under the leadership of Sodja Zupanc Lotker and curated by Tomaš Žižka. Located in the soaring central hall of the Industrial Palace, this was a kind of massive installation, designed by Dorita Hannah, that provided a multitude of sites for performances by individual artists and companies, installations, interactive and immersive performances and events, and lectures. It put performance and audience participation at the literal heart of the PQ.

In 2007, when I was general commissioner and Sodja Zupanc Lotker was programming director, the participating countries were encouraged to incorporate performative elements into their exhibits. There was also an attempt to create a unifying scenographic frame for the entire exhibition—partially successful but inevitably limited by resources. A record number of performances and events occurred throughout the city, thanks to Lotker's inspired work, and the central hall was now given over to the student-centered Scenofest whose workshops often resulted in performative events. While some exhibitions were more art installation than exhibit—Switzerland was a notable example—and several were conceptually designed, the majority of exhibits still showcased traditional theatrical design from individual designers.

After PQ07, Lotker and I had a post mortem discussion about where the PQ might go in the future. We agreed that the emphasis on traditional stage design was too narrow, that the mandate had to broaden to encompass all forms of performance (well beyond theatre, opera, and dance that had traditionally made up the primary content of PQ exhibitions) and that the notion of space was at the core of scenography. Lotker, who would assume the role of artistic director of PQ11, ran with those ideas and the name of the event was changed to the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space. (This caused some international linguistic issues because terms like performance, design, and scenography often have different meanings in different languages.) I also suggested exploring the linguistic term "inter" as in international, interdisciplinary, intervention, etc. Lotker also picked up on this offhand musing and created Intersection—the highly successful and popular installation on the piazza of the National Theatre that year that contained performances, installations, and interactive events.

As artistic director again in 2015, Lotker wished to take the PQ even further in this direction. In an article in *Theatre and Performance Design* titled "Expanding scenography: notes on the curatorial developments of the Prague Quadrennial," Lotker stated, "The transformation in the form of the Prague Quadrennial is directly connected to a shift in the perception and understanding of contemporary scenography, aligned with new thinking about performance, as well as major developments in the art of exhibition display. This shift understands scenography as an expanded disciplinary field no longer limited to traditional forms of theatre, opera, and dance, but encompassing all performative genres; scenography is also no longer understood as limited to the visual aspects of performance but has expanded to include the spatial, the sonic and the olfactory. Changes in theatre forms have inevitably influenced scenographic practice,

The entry from Venezuela was an enclosed rectangle that one peered into through several openings. Inside, lying on the floor, was an apparent corpse in a pool of blood killed in the process of writing "Libertad." Spectators were encouraged to write messages. Photo courtesy of Arnold Aronson.

prompting it to evolve from something that was previously perceived as being in 'service' to the written play and to the director, into an artistic discipline in and of itself. Scenography encompasses a variety of media and genres, and even exists as an independent art form—the scenographic installation. We wanted the PQ to explore new ways to exhibit this expanded scenography, an exploration in which, significantly, the contexts of live events play an important role."

The gradual shift that had been unfolding for more than a decade exploded at PQ15 into something that could best be described as a massive work of immersive, urban performance art in which the city itself became a site of performance, and the spectators became part of a vast performance network.

But what did this mean for individual national exhibits? Does a conceptual installation tell us more or less about the scenography of a particular country than a display of design artifacts? Granted, any exhibit reflects the vision and taste of the curator(s); it is inevitably selective and provides, at best, a fragment of the totality of scenographic work from the country. Yet it reveals something. Any sensitive artist—that is to say, any good artist—regardless of field or discipline, captures something of the spirit of the time and place. Installations, of course, can be more overt in their message.

The entry from Venezuela was a case in point. The exhibit was an enclosed rectangle that one peered into through several openings. What you saw inside, lying on the floor, was an apparent corpse in a pool of blood killed in the process of writing "Libertad." On the walls were photos of police in riot gear battling demonstrators. On the outside hung pens that spectators were encouraged to use to write messages. The curator, theatre director Juan Souki, said that he did this in part because in Venezuela such freedom of expression was not possible. Some messages responded to the work while others were little more than random graffiti. The image was theatrical; the pavilion was a scenographic work and the spectators had to make a specific effort to view the work. But what did it tell us of Venezuelan stage design?

Or, to take another example, Spain, whose installation was entitled Muérete (Die). Visitors to the claustrophobic room in the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace could, one at a time, lie on a raised coffin-like box, wearing headphones, and be surrounded by the detritus of computers and the digital trash of our age. They could remain as long as they wished. (Visitors entering the room frequently assumed, initially, that the body on the pedestal was a permanent part of the exhibition.) The statement in the *PQ Catalogue* made reference to the economic crisis in Spain and the need to confront the "anxiety and unease" of the world. Again, we were in a theatrical environment that made a sociopolitical statement. But it revealed nothing directly about the current state of Spanish scenography.

To take one more example, the installation of Russia in a room of Kafka House consisted of a large construction of Meyerhold asleep in bed that filled nearly half the room. This was a direct reference to theatre history, and the P*Q Catalogue* provided us with what might be read as stage directions: It is "29 September 1933, at 3:42 am. Moscow . . . . Autumn; it is drizzling outside." We are asked to contemplate Meyerhold's dream and to consider certain existential questions. The image printed in the catalog suggested something surreal, but the actuality was more mundane, more crude, and there was sunlight pouring in through a window. Here the installation made an overt theatrical reference, although the narrative that accompanied it suggested a philosophical and perhaps political theme.

There were at least a dozen more installation/performative national exhibits, and perhaps twice that number of student exhibits that were based on immersion, dialogue, and participation. The best were engaging, often emotionally charged, sometimes startling. They were scenographic and at least some could fall somewhere along a continuum of performance. But for someone who wanted to know what was happening in the world of theatre, even in its broadest and most encompassing definition and manifestations, it could be frustratingly opaque.

TABLETS, SCREENS, AND DEVICES

As noted earlier, China was among the few countries to showcase conventional theatre design. However, many countries, including the US, did present a selection of recent work, but by and large they did so on tablets, small screens, or other electronic devices. Even with photographic images, as in the aforementioned Brazil, they were reduced to peepshows. The ever-increasing use of video, of course, perhaps reflects the ubiquitous presence of video in scenography these days. There is also a practical economic aspect to this mode of display. An entire exhibition can almost literally be packed in a suitcase or trunk as opposed to the shipping containers that are needed to transport fragile models, costumes, and the like. Furthermore, a photograph places the design in context; a video allows us to see at least a portion of a performance, which places the scenography in time. Theatre, after all, is an art of time: décor changes through the course of performance, costumes move with the performers, light also moves while transforming both sets and costumes, and sound can be experienced in concert with space and visual imagery.

But we all understand that seeing a video of a performance is a very different experience than watching an actual performance in real time and space. Moreover, if we go to a performance, we have committed ourselves to watching or even participating in a single, unified event that unfolds through time and space. But most of the exhibits employing digital devices used a dozen or more screens. Unlike our handheld devices on which we can stop, reverse, zoom, skip ahead, and so on in an essentially personal encounter, most of these displays could not be manipulated. To engage with these exhibits, one had to choose a screen, get close enough to decipher the image, and commit to at least a minimal amount of time in the case of videos to get some sense of the piece, and then move on to the next screen and the next. After doing this with one pavilion, you then move on to the next to repeat the process.

The irony was that in an attempt to move beyond the artifact to the actual performance, the experience of theatre was, on the one hand, reduced to something both miniature and flat, while on the other hand, creating a kind of sensory overload through distraction and lack of focus.

To my mind, only the UK figured out how to do this well. The UK team fully understood the dynamics of its room in the Clam-Gallas Palace, painting the walls white to serve as large projection screens and presenting well-crafted documentary videos of individual produc-

The exhibit from Canada showcased theatre productions through the presentation of scenographic artifacts humorously displayed in outhouses. Photo courtesy of Arnold Aronson.

tions in a format that allowed for relaxed and easy viewing. (The individual videos were periodically replaced by a collage of all the videos that served as a kind of table of contents.) In other words, the UK exhibit employed digital technology to present a clear and accessible overview or cross-section of recent British scenography. The jury granted the UK a "Special Award" for the exhibit.

It is also worth citing the exhibit from Canada. This was one of the larger and more elaborate exhibits and it showcased theatre productions through the presentation of scenographic artifacts. But understanding that to fully contemplate an individual production one needed a degree of isolation and privacy, the design elements for each production were humorously displayed in outhouses. You entered the outhouse and the set model was most often viewed through the toilet seat, while photos, renderings, props, etc. were on the walls. (This was slightly reminiscent of the UK exhibit in 1991 in which models were displayed in shiny trash cans.)

Is there a solution? At an art exhibition, such as the Venice Biennale, it is not unusual to encounter installations or videos. But they are created by artists whose genre is installation art or new media. Such art may take on elements of the theatrical and scenographic, but it emerges from a particular artistic framework and conception that implies a particular relationship to a spectator and the surrounding space. If there is a group show, then it is curated by a professional curator used to creating exhibits for galleries and museums.

While it is true that performance designers deal with many of the same tools and elements as visual artists, they do so with a different intention, a different relationship to the spectator, and very often a need to collaborate on a vision with other participating artists. It may be that given all the elements of performance that must work in concert, there is simply no way to create a scenographic exhibition that is fully satisfactory. Installations and performances essentially substitute one form of performance for another; exhibits of design artifacts inevitably eliminate the performance that is the end product of the design. Viewing at an exhibition is not the same as viewing at a theatre (even if the theatre is a street or site-specific environment). Armenia, whose heart-wrenching exhibit of documentary photos from 1910 of children with their dolls—children who were subsequently killed in the Armenian Genocide—essentially rejected the connection of scenography to theatre. Armenia's *PQ Catalogue* statement declared, "Armenian contemporary scenography has eliminated the idea that scenography is solely a part of a performance. Scenography has liberated itself from all kinds of bondage to become a completely new direction within contemporary art."

We must acknowledge that in many parts of the world, traditional forms of theatre are less and less central to mainstream culture, and at the same time notions of what constitutes theatre is being redefined and expanded. So perhaps scenography as a self-contained, self-generating form of art is, in fact, part of the future—but, I would argue, only part. Theatre as an event defined as performance in front of spectators still exists and will continue to exist. And since live performance is, perforce, visual and spatial, it is designed, whether that consists of the elaborate décor of opera, the arrangement of a few chairs on a bare stage, or the transformation of a found space through the placement of spectators. While the PQ should no longer be limited to the exhibition of such design, neither should it eliminate it.

In an attempt to deal with the breakdown and elimination of traditional categories, PQ15 inaugurated some new categories for the awards—separating out

Russia's exhibit, in a room of Kafka House, consisted of a large construction of Meyerhold asleep in bed that filled nearly half the room—a direct reference to theatre history. Photo courtesy of Lorie Novak.

Best Exhibition Design and Best Curatorial Concept from the Golden Triga; best use of Media, best use of Space; and the intriguing Gold Medal for Provoking a Dialogue. But perhaps a reconsideration of categories is needed. (It is telling that the jury was unable to award a prize for either costume or lighting. Ineluctably tied to theatrical performance, there was simply not enough for the jury to consider.) Just as there used to be national exhibits and thematic exhibits, perhaps now there could be exhibits of performance design and exhibits of scenographic installations and events. The latter might even include visual artists who work scenographically or employ performance. Think of the light environments of James Turrell or, looking back a few decades, the installations of Joseph Beuys. If scenography is expanding—and it is—then an exhibition of expanded scenography needs to find a way to accommodate the expansion without ignoring that from which it is expanding. ❖

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