

On Performing Spaces
(For William Engelen)

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I.

Stage plays or musical pieces are performed. But spaces? Not very sure of the way I formulate it, I look it up in the Grimm Brothers' dictionary, this treasure chest containing the branches and roots of German language usage, and find, to my surprise, that the clearly scenic definition applied to the word today is a derivation. Older definitions of "perform" (Aufführen) and "performance" (Aufführung) refer to building houses or to hunting and the practices of beaters, who attempted to drive the game to the hunters ("aufzuführen"); and finally, to the society who is receiving someone new or to which someone new is introduced. The reflexive verb "sich aufführen", which has a negative, unpleasant connotation ("to make a scene") is the only one of these definitions that remains current.

It seems as if, in addition to the actual aim of constructing housing, the gesture of making something visible, of exposing, of putting something on display, seems to be unavoidably, inseparably connected to the task of construction. And generally, it is not only the completed building, the display side, the façade that faces the public, drawing attention to itself, but the construction site also draws attention under certain conditions, whether intentionally or not. After all, the construction is "performed" at the construction site. This building arena has always been a rich source of inspiration for artists of all kinds, from the visual arts, to theater, to film. It is enough to recall Fernand Léger's great series "Construction Workers" and his demand for "model-like objecthood", or the invention of the simultaneous stage of the Russian Constructivists, who discovered the value of displaying the building scaffold. After all, it was not just about showing society under construction or presenting a space for simultaneous, independent actions, but also about transforming building tools in the structure, turning the scaffolding into the building. In this way, the past life of the house could be staged as the prelude to life. Thirty-five years after Jean-Luc Godard showed the large Parisian construction site as a cinematic, panoramic background for a life at a turning point, city marketing has come up with the trick of effectively presenting the big construction sites along the vanished Berlin Wall as a "Berlin showplace." Going along with that, German cinema has proclaimed that life is a construction site. Unfortunately, a general analysis of construction site aesthetics does not yet exist. It would have to lead us to the heart of the intimate relationship between cult and technology. The archaic cult that veils upcoming life (traces of which are still contained in the Japanese cherry tree festival, with the act of putting up outdoor parasols, behind which families can while away the time) returns again with the practice of completely veiling modern construction sites with translucent plastic sheets, strips of which are thrown over the whole building scaffold. The flow and flutter of the textile surfaces – caused by wind and the pneumatic balance of air pressure along the edges of the raw structure and the places where it is anchored to the scaffold – give occasional life to the building. And

although the whole thing is only meant to be a practical duster, the observer can see a gesture in it, which shows that the site is caught in transition. The public fascination, which arose when Christo wrapped the Berlin Reichstag, revived a great deal of this mystery in the right context, at the right time. The masses of visitors who experienced this presentation of a building at the time the entire city was undergoing a transformation would not have considered the archaic aspects of the wrapped revelation, but probably had an impression of an odd transformation, which they themselves had become part of. In German cultural traditions, the Richtfest and the Maypole with its decorations are references to archaic cult rituals, which are celebrated by erecting the Richtbaum (pulley-beam), the canopy pole, or the tree of life. Behind these cult acts are cosmological and cosmogonical notions of the cosmic tree and the canopy of the sky that covers it; these notions are always re-enacted whenever a canopy is set up to celebrate a wedding. We inherited traditions from Oriental tribes of shepherds – such as that of a bridal pair being married under a canopy”, the curtained, four-poster bed, and ultimately the bridal veil itself as a symbolic piece of that heavenly canopy, which spreads itself and its glittering stars over the place where the couple sleeps. In this cosmological reference to building, which is thousands of years old, in this performance of buildings is, at the same time, the performance of rooms, which one sees when one is inside them. Canopy and house refer to the cosmic order, and their structure is often enough a model of these cosmic ideas, meaning that reciprocal performances of spaces take place, although they are not actually spaces, but might signify spaces.

VII.

Places that have been moved, blurred paths, transformed spaces. At first, Engelen's works seem to be like the compositions of an architect who performs rooms without actually building them. He has everything that an architect needs in order to build castles in the air. There are blueprints, sections, isometries and slanting blackplans, and yet there is no house, no settlement, no city planned. And despite their great similarity to architectural models, the models he shows are free of essential building components, especially of ceilings and walls. But the recollection of ceilings and walls, of rooms and apartments, of houses and streets, of cities and landscapes, is there. This kind of recalled, imagined architecture is more present than real ceilings and walls could ever be. The work of the artist is to evoke these things in us. There is a series of hundreds of photographs of Berlin façades, which Engelen "observed in passing". Hundreds of façades display thousands of windows. Strict monotony dominates their prosaic arrangement. Yet among the varied uniformity of these holes, whose livability one doubts more than usual, a small life shows itself somewhere in the openings: a person, a dog, a couple. Sometimes it's just the even deeper black that flows out of the open windows. Suddenly the window frames become "frames of possibilities", the inhabitants who cannot be seen. It is as if a couple of notes appear in an endless gray noise – just a few, but then they multiply and suddenly are a whole cluster. During winter, the noise would be completely gray, but now it is summer on the little stage of windowsills. The lives of these lone actors write their own great scores, which only the artist knows how to read and perform.

Describe your apartment to someone with the aid of pen and paper. After the furniture, you will stick to the walls – where they are located in the plan, until at certain points or corners you become unsure. In the models "Doors for Walls" all of the walls have been removed, and yet there is a clear idea of the apartment. Only the openings in the walls – the doors – are used. They are captured in the correct vertical positions, above the surface of the floor.

Admittedly, the doors themselves stayed at home. They have been captured on photographs, transferred to transparent plates, which represent the doors in the models. Now doors are indeed switches and gears, and as such, they have multiple functions. They can separate or connect – or half-closed, do both. And so, in these images of doors on the site of the doors, sometimes one stands in front of a closed door, sometimes one can see into the room. Because the plates representing the doors are half-transparent, one looks at the studio apartment room with a changed perspective of the model room. Yes, in order to be quite correct, one can see a third room, the exhibition space, in the background and in the reflections of the plates. So here, there is some overlapping, some shifting, which reminds us of listening or remembering. Without these kinds of overlaps and shifts of things past and present, it would not be possible to either listen or remember. When walking through it, each visitor will experience the model space, which is in 1:1 scale, in different ways, but in any case, it will not be experienced as one experiences the original. After all, one goes through the doors here, and there, through the wall. In this case, one could even call them "silent surfaces", in the way graphic designers speak of "silent lines". They are only there because our imagination creates them by connecting the points. Under these conditions, the absence (of lines, surfaces, etc.) has an effective advantage over the presence: the viewer puts himself into the game. And this is how spaces without walls want to be performed. Engelen has also dedicated a musical composition to the doors, "Slamming Doors Composition No.1". Doors are not just switches. In opening and closing, they are acoustic witnesses of what happened to them. Each door, each movement of the door, sounds different; and then the users, the inhabitants – everyone opens and closes doors differently. Closing a door, especially, is a language without words. First, the composer arranges the doors the way one separates woodwinds from brass instruments. Then he adds exact construction instructions. The door players are instructed to maltreat the doors in four volumes according to the pattern S, M, L, XL, from quiet to very loud, in seven fixed modes of movement (including the feet). The score gives the players precise instructions on how to accompany their actions with singing, speaking, and yelling. However, they choose which part of the score they will play. It remains to be seen if one should consider the slamming doors composition as a sound sculpture, a concert or an acoustically activated listening space.

William Engelen is a Dutch artist living in Berlin. Like most Dutch people, he is concerned with limited spaces, which must be arranged, defended and used as effectively as possible. There is a drive to increase them. These spaces are artificially multiplied; they carry the traces of ingenious regulation. The repertoire of this planning and these inscriptions in the landscape return in the scores and models, with different sites and meanings. Like his Dutch architectural colleagues from MVRDV, Engelen overlaps layers of surfaces, turning them into overlapping graphic patterns that now refer to space, now to time. He employs architectural models as patterns to be used in performing his compositions; frequencies are taken from procedures such as chess games. Depending upon the number of times they appear in the fields, he makes tall columns, either moving up or down. Ordinary life is full of such frequencies, which follow habits and odd rules of play. Engelen prepares their patterns so carefully that he can hear and see them. His scores can change what has been seen into something to hear or give what has been heard a visible – even sculptural – order. But there is something else, too. There is always the trace of a movement or a kind of melody, which either meanders or jumps over, under, in front of, behind or between these surfaces. It appears to

be the thing that one can hold onto, despite all of the artificiality of the surfaces and spaces. But be careful. "Do not work from the assumption", says the artist, "that there is a one-to-one relationship between a movement and its meaning". So the imagination remains open.

(1) Ferdinand Léger, *Conférence über die Schaubühne* [1924] (Berlin: 1968) 11, 32f.

(2) Jean Luc Godard, "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" (1966).

(3) "unter die Haube kommen" in German.