Morrissey, Judd. "Place Taking Place: Temporary Poetic Theaters." *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, & Practices*. By James O'Sullivan. New York,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 162–172. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501363474.ch-014>>.

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Place Taking Place: Temporary Poetic Theaters

Judd Morrissey

The Empty House

My work has been taking me outside again, a migration that I did not consciously plan, but one that happened gradually through adaptive and intuitive turns in my practice, responses to the shifting of my techno-cultural habitat, libraries of code I download in my sleep.

Writing, for me, began with a metabolic connection to walking. As a young body, I was not able to concentrate when still so I would weave and unweave myself through the city instead capturing the patterns and fragments that later became the substance of my fluidly transforming hypertext, *The Jew's Daughter*. This was before I knew anything about code, electronic writing, or performance but I arrived at these points through this initial point of departure, the process of writing while walking, a way of seeing that was partially blind to both the scene and the page.

On the afternoon of this writing, I performed in the architectural frame of a house with no walls, its sandy floor flooded irregularly with water from waves crashing in on the beach. I was viewing the scene through an iPhone embedded in a handheld paddle painted to resemble the ritualistic prop of Cornish fertility ritual. As I navigated the space, I read from an immersive landscape of texts situated in relation to scaffolding, water, clouds, and an interactive rose tattoo on the naked chest of my shivering collaborator. The words took on the textures of satellite imagery drawn from their precise

FIGURE 1 *Photo by Ji Yang.*

geophysical positions in space or from where they were originally conceived; some texts were inlaid with the floral patterns of the tattoo. When I read the word “buoy,” in homage to Alan Turing, who wanted the letter u to sink under its own weight, for the word to erode into an embodiment of his desire, I was looking at an actual buoy in Lake Michigan. The words around me were mapped to specific coordinates of latitude, longitude, and altitude. I was able to measure my distance to each line: I am 2745.60.40 feet from *bays of bayesian boys*, 4382.40 feet from *Den Norske Gutt (The Norwegian Boy)*. Directly overhead, at a higher altitude and facing down, I saw these words: *his patience at the center of the zero* (see Figure 1).

I am struck by the uncanniness of performing within Sarah FitzSimons’s sculpture *House*, an invitation connected to the Chicago Architecture Biennial, because the poem I read, distributed as a layer of augmented reality within the physical environment of the lakefront, once had as its working title, *The Empty House*, chosen to describe its liminal form as a virtually present performance of textual architecture. In this event of situated poetics, a nonrepresentational concept of space, created through a meticulous arrangement of language, inhabits another more concrete yet still porous expression of itself: a house within a house, a theater within a theater. Looking through the tenuous rafters, I read: *my house is sawn and double-slit*.

Installation Space

The installation of words on a page, software on a computer, and bodies in space can be transformative in nontrivial ways, unfolding as the symbolic process of a shipwreck, harmful invasion of malware, or training of military personnel. Installation can be elusive—silent, headless, self-updating in the background. Someone can be ceremonially placed into a position of authority, sometimes by being physically positioned within a spatial context: *the installation of a canon or prebendary of a cathedral consists in solemnly inducting him into his stall in the choir*. In this sense, a simple dramaturgical gesture can remodel one’s world. Like the word *theater*, *installation* describes both a space and an activity. Installation, in art, for example, is the process of installing the installation. An installation begins to take place once it is in place, perhaps evolving over time as a growing series of installments.

Installed programs of performative code, like the stage directions in the scripts that create leaders, can transform a space and its inhabitants, and are attributed with the power to generate new mixed, augmented and virtual realities. To close this circle of code and stage, let’s recall that the term virtual reality originally appears within Antonin Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double*, housed within his formulation of a Theatre of Cruelty.

I stand in the center of the *House* installation and scan the space, reciting a found play of George Perec: *To the north, nothing. To the east, nothing. To the south, nothing. To the west, nothing. In the center, nothing.* I look down and see these words in the sand: *a satellite view of the corpus.* To begin this writing is to place myself in the text's position. Lying down, font-face up, supine, I offer my recent body of work for self-dissection, to be excavated within its own locus of operations, those performative processes that stage, between space, language, code, and bodies, a sense of *place taking place*. With this phrase, remixed from Mallarmé's spatially arranged words, *Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu* (Nothing will have taken place but the place), I want to inhabit *the place* as it takes place, as placement, replacement, and displacement, as what is taking our place when the body, seated under the scanner's tripod, disappears within the radius of a mechanical blindness.

Growth of a Form

Beginning in 2013, I spent a year living in Norway as a Fulbright Scholar, teaching and developing work in poetic augmented reality. While preparing for my geographical dislocation, I came across a gap that offered a connection. The gap occurs within the Sherlock Holmes stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, between *The Final Problem*, when Holmes seems to die, and *The Empty House*, when he returns. In the latter story, Holmes claims that he'd spent the interim under the alias of a Norwegian explorer, Sigerson, applying his forensic talents to botany and the natural world. *The Empty House* became the working title for experiments undertaken during my own hiatus in the lushly dark and solitary landscape of Bergen, bringing together themes of limbo and exploration with the spectral in-betweenness of augmented reality.

The words *empty house* might conjure the image of Holmes in the story gazing out through a window at his double across the street, a wax decoy designed to entrap a would-be assassin. But a house is also a theatre as well as its audience, a *place of seeing*, where the one we observe on stage perhaps gazes out into a circular pattern of informational architecture as in the memory theater of Giulio Camillo.

While in Bergen, I developed a technique I'd been exploring that involved live-sampling tiles of digital satellite imagery from GPS locations and filling letterforms with the captured textures. In this system, the appearance of a text hovering in the space around a reader refers materially to a location: either where it was written, where it is being read, or a place that it is referencing (see Figure 2).

Initially, I created the texts and tracked my coordinates as I walked, sending both to a database that was visualized by the LAYAR AR browser,

FIGURE 2 Photo by Grace DuVal.

so that the language was placed where it was composed, but I became more interested in visualizing the texts as aggregated visual structures constrained to locales. At this point, I began using an algorithm for great circle distances to identify GPS points in proximity to my location, and to use the discovered points to place language in circular and constellation-based patterns, plotted at different altitudes within the surrounding environment.

This technique of arranging the texts in space with an automated deliberation, rather than physically inhabiting every point, still did not eliminate the need to respond to the various physical environments inhabited by the generated text. I spent two weeks modifying *The Empty House* specifically for the atrium of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in the summer of 2014. In this case, the museum's wall text for a Simon Starling exhibition entered the poem, as an appropriate under-layer that prompted further compositional changes, his name alone generating a movement of passeriformes. Starling's project, *shedboatshed*, in which he transforms a decrepit boathouse into a boat that he then rows to Switzerland and reconstructs into a shed again, entered into the poetics, just as it now helps to imagine the geophysical course of this work from Bergen to Chicago and back to Bergen, each instance building upon and also replacing the last since until recently the poem could only exist in one place at a time.

In Bergen, as the system for composition and visualization evolved, the context of the work also shifted as I discovered a situational connection

to Alan Turing. In the last two years of his life, Turing, the gay computing pioneer, visited Norway, seeking a more tolerant environment after his trial and conviction in the UK for crimes of gross indecency due to a consensual homosexual affair. During the time of his Norwegian travels, Turing was developing his theory of morphogenesis to account mathematically for patterns and forms in nature, and he seems to have named this project for a love interest. Kjell, a young man from Bergen, referred to by

(SIGHTHOLE)

Turing as *Den Norske Gutt* (the Norwegian Boy), later attempted to visit him in England but was apparently intercepted and deported by Scotland Yard, due to the intense scrutiny into Turing's private affairs. His name entered the space of my poem and also formed a new title for the work when I came across the words *Kjell Theory* in scans of handwritten notes in Turing's digital archives.

While Turing was developing his theory of morphogenesis, his own body had undergone a morphological change in that the estrogen treatments he received as a legally imposed form of chemical castration, an alternative to prison time, had resulted in gynecomastia, or the growth of male breasts.

Patients at the Center of the Zero

The anatomical theatre, in its earliest and clearest expression, the one at the University of Padua built in 1594, is a roughly circular space comprised of a central operating table surrounded by six tiered balconies where training physicians and other observers would gaze down upon the autopsy or surgical procedure being demonstrated. This structure that foregrounds the body as subject of observation, penetration, and enhancement was adopted as the symbol for the performance and technology collective, Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality (ATOM-r), which I co-founded in 2012.

Our first work, *The Operature* (2014), combined research into the early history of surgery with materials reanimated from the corpus of the writer, pornographer, and tattoo artist Samuel Steward. Steward was a friend and protégé of Gertrude Stein, who rather than embracing literary Modernism, located his work in direct relation to sexuality and bodily experience. Steward's *Stud File* is an autobiographical card catalogue and forensic archive tracking homosexual encounters over five decades, beginning in the 1930s when his activities were against the law. He used a self-devised alphanumeric coding system to loosely encrypt and cross-reference his accumulating experiences of sex with other men.

Steward, under the aliases, respectively, of Phil Andros and Phil Sparrow, wrote gay pulp fiction and became a tattoo artist. In Steward's tattoos, the rose, subject of Stein's Modernist resuscitation of literary language, is disseminated as an inscription in skin, carried by the bodies of thousands of sailors.

For *The Operature*, ATOM-r recreated Steward's designs as temporary tattoos and applied them to our performers' bodies as markers for augmented reality within a live performance. The set design referenced the form of anatomical theater, its central component being an operating table with an embedded interactive screen. This was part of a larger modular assemblage of five tables that, when combined, formed a stage for choreography with openings in which bodies could be placed. More abstractly, the circular form of the theater was referenced in the visual placement of geospatial texts that surrounded us in tiered radial configurations.

In the middle of the ninety-minute work, we staged an intermission in which performers laid themselves down for examination upon the assembled tables, and the audience was invited to scan their tattoos with smartphones, revealing texts, videos and 3D objects overlaid within the performance space, itself a museum of health and medicine.

Sighthole (an intermission)

In the approximate middle of this writing, I've placed a *sighthole*.

I've been using this word to name a void in the center of environmental data captured by Lidar scanners. Short for light detection and ranging, this technology swallows up whole landscapes with its rotating laser-eye, producing massive point clouds of data, while being unable to capture information in the immediate radial vicinity of the scanner's position. This creates a circular nothing in the center of the data. For this reason, if one wants to disappear, they can simply place themselves beneath the device, as in *when the station and target digital scan of images were in progress, we sat under the scanner tripod to avoid being visible in the scan*.

While the above italic text is sampled from a Google search to confirm this practice of self-deletion, I experienced the phenomenon when working on a new project with fellow poet-artists, Jennifer Scappettone and Abraham Avnisan, in which we used a Lidar scanner to capture an underground copper mine. We have since been processing the mine's virtual double in relation to a poetic system drawn from a book of nineteenth-century telegraph codes for the mining industry. In the project, SMOKEPENNY LYRICHORD HEAVENBRED, we are engaging the multivalence of these codes and relationships between apparently disembodied communication networks and the exploitation of natural and human resources. The data-

voids in our mined scans are becoming portals between disparate times and places, or gaps in the cloud from which machine-poetic lament rains down to the tune of the song *Pennies from Heaven*.

Double Theaters

The double view of augmented reality took place as a particularly appropriate juxtaposition when *The Operature* was presented in 2013 at the Anatomy Theatre and Museum in London, a former anatomical theater converted into a new media performance space. Here, the work, as though returning to an origin, was contained within its own spatial metaphor. The self-similar complexity of this arrangement seemed to express itself as a persistence of unexplained technical glitches that culminated in the interruption of the work's final moments by a fire alarm with the relentless shriek of a ghost from a previous century. As soon as we finished, we all had to immediately evacuate.

A Circular Theater with Two Stages / One in the Middle and the Other Like a Ring

Kjell Theory evolved, out of the space created by *The Empty House*, as an augmented reality poem, various exhibitions, a series of solo performances, an outdoor site-specific walk, and a large-scale performance of ATOM-r (see Figure 3). The subject matter of the work expanded through doubling or juxtaposition when my mental image of Turing in Norway with gynecomastia brought to mind the blind prophet of Greek myth, Tiresias, described by T. S. Eliot as an *old man with wrinkled female breasts* who is *throbbing between two lives*. The apprehension of this hybrid figure led me to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*), a feminist, genderfluid play by Guillaume Apollinaire that was first produced in 1917, and for which he coined the term surrealism. In Apollinaire's play, a cisgendered woman, Theresa, wills her transformation into a man, Tiresias, while her husband gives birth to 40,049 babies. The play's performance of gender reversal in fact doubles as a plea to the men of France to replenish a population that had been ravaged by the First World War.

The comedic absurdity of Apollinaire's play is stylistically contrasted by the poetics of his visionary prologue which contains a war-time hallucination of stars in the night sky becoming the eyes of newborns. Apollinaire's astronomical vision of birthing is also impregnated with his ambition to transform theater, to infuse its tired conventions with a new spirit. While evoking this explosive generation of babies, stars, and theater, Apollinaire also specifies for the architectural design of a space in which the play should be staged: *A circular theater with two stages / One in the middle and the*

FIGURE 3 Photo by Grace DuVal.

other like a ring / Around the spectators permitting / The full unfolding of our modern art. This space was never built, but it notably expresses the importance of a form that can appropriately house the intricacies of work's event. This may be a complex theater with multiple vantage points and no clear center, one in which a viewer may surround or be surrounded by the spectacle of the work.

ATOM-r's *Kjell Theory* layers Turing's theory of forms, which describes *a mathematical model of the growing embryo*, and Apollinaire's theater of gender transformations and male birthing, into a queerly embodied mixed reality that is also an expression of visionary blindness. The performance, which premiered in 2017 to coincide with the centennial of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, is surrounded by configurations of geospatial text merging original writing with algorithmic mutations of Apollinaire's prologue, and implements augmented costumes, props, and tattoos, to create a performative emergence of *place taking place*, a generative ephemerality impregnated with the present absence of virtuality, a nothingness that is also the birth of a new constellation.

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