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Empathy and exchange: audience experience of scenography

Joslin McKinney

Introduction

This chapter considers how kinesthetic empathy might impact on the audience experience of scenography. Traditionally, the scenic dimension of performance has been dealt with as spectacle, focusing on the visual transmission of information or symbolic ideas.¹ However, more recent scenographic practice has been characterised by work which is multi-sensorial in its appeal and engages audiences bodily as well as visually and intellectually. While ideas of kinesthetic empathy in relation to performance are most strongly developed in terms of intersubjectivity (Reason and Reynolds 2010), this chapter explores how the concept might illuminate the relationship between spectator and object in the context of scenography. Considering empathy in relation to my own practice, I discuss how this is a reciprocal relationship, centred on an 'exchange' through the medium of scenography, where the audience can, potentially, become co-creators.

Scenography here refers to the spatial aspect of performance environments, and the orchestration of materials and constructions (costumes, objects, architectonic elements, light and sound) as an intrinsic part of performance. Not limited to simply supporting scripted theatre performances, contemporary scenographic practice emphasises spatial, material and multi-sensory aspects, thereby locating scenography as an integral component of performance or even as a mode of performance itself (McKinney and Iball 2011: 1). For example, the Italian company, *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, uses visual and aural stimuli sometimes to the point of sensory overload (fast moving projected images, a rumbling bass which is felt as much as heard) in order to pull the audience members into 'an atmosphere with different density, an unfamiliar gravity' (Castellucci et al. 2007:162). Contemporary practice includes work by companies such as *Punchdrunk*² who use scenography to transform non-theatre venues and to stage performances where audiences,

immersed in a scenographic experience, are invited to find their own way through evocative spaces. This kind of work gives as much attention to the performance environment and the carefully selected objects placed within it as to the performers or to text and affords the possibility that significant encounters might occur between the audience and objects.

Scenography in this context challenges and problematizes notions of audience, who are no longer distant spectators of images and pictures that are laid out before them. It is important to consider both the audience as a collective entity and the responses of individual spectators within those audiences. As Helen Freshwater points out, an audience is an assembled group and accounts of a single reaction or response cannot do justice to the range of dispositions, beliefs and experiences within that audience (Freshwater 2009: 5 – 6). In this chapter, I use the term spectator to identify the experience of individuals. However, in the context of the type of contemporary practice I have described above, spectators placed within (rather than before) the scenography should also be considered as participants. While I recognise that uncritical claims for the empowering and emancipating effects of participation need to be treated with caution (Freshwater 2009: 70), the collage-like structure and the rich sensory content typical of this type of work offer an active and potentially creative role for the audience. Recent scenographic practice, therefore, appears to reframe the role of the audience. Audience members are implicated physically as part of the scenic space and can, within limits, construct their own experience as participants through the ways in which they choose to interact with the scenographic environment.

Despite the enthusiasm for this kind of work, there is little research which helps us understand its 'affective impact' or that of theatre more generally (Freshwater 2009: 11). A significant reason for this is the challenge, both methodological and philosophical, involved in attempts to investigate the ephemeral and often intangible nature of theatre experience (Reason 2010a: 15). To address this, I have adopted a practice-led approach, where I develop performances which focus attention on the scenographic. Alongside this, I have developed methods for capturing and examining audiences' experiences (McKinney 2008).

The research that forms the basis for this paper is a piece of immersive, participatory performance, *Forest Floor* (2007), which I developed to explore audiences' creative engagement with scenography. The central thesis being investigated through *Forest Floor* was that engaging with and responding to scenography is a process of exchange between the scenography and the spectator which takes place through the medium of objects and materials.

Roland Barthes's discussion of the nature of images applies to scenography and suggests three levels at which images might operate. As well as the informational and symbolic levels of meaning a scenographic image might convey, there is another poetic or 'obtuse' meaning (Barthes 1977: 52 - 68). This third level can have a powerful impact even though it is hard to describe; the 'obtuse' meaning 'is outside (articulated) language whilst nevertheless within interlocution' (Barthes 1977: 60). The 'scenographic exchange' I am investigating refers to a process of individual spectators apprehending levels of meaning, especially the obtuse, through speculatively creating images of their own.

The notion of scenographic exchange is an attempt to model the way objects in the context of performance might function as a medium of communication. Using my own creative practice enables me not only to work with audiences to see the way they respond and hear at first-hand about their experiences, but also to develop forms of performance where audience engagement and evidence of a 'scenographic exchange' can be registered through the performance itself in a tangible form.³ The role of audiences as co-creative participants in this research has been crucial; the form of *Forest Floor* was developed through workshops with audiences and shaped in the light of their responses, both reported and observed.

This chapter looks first at how concepts of kinesthetic empathy can assist with conceptualising scenography as a bodily as well as a visual experience and how empathetic sharing of bodily sensation might influence conscious reflection on scenography. I then turn to *Forest Floor* and examine the findings, drawing on and developing ideas of kinesthetic empathy as they relate to scenography. Finally, I incorporate a phenomenological perspective on empathy to develop the idea of reciprocity or exchange between the spectator/participant and the scenography

Kinesthetic empathy and scenography

Originally associated with scene painting and with architectural perspective drawing (Hannah and Harsløf 2008: 11 and Rewa 2004:119 n.1), the term 'scenography' has more recently been used to describe the way the performance environment constitutes a dynamic and 'kinesthetic contribution' to the experience of performance (Rewa 2004:120). Critical accounts where the scenic space is 'given as spectacle to be processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as a field of vision for a spectator who aspires to the detachment inherent in the perceptual act' (Garner 1994: 3) reflect a type of practice which emphasises scenography as a coherent and totalising statement. But these accounts are not adequate to address contemporary practice. The audience experience of scenography now needs to be considered as an embodied experience, embracing the spatial and material elements of performance (McKinney and Iball, 2011: 24). Focusing on the kinesthetic dimension of scenography assists with that shift by emphasising bodily engagement and the interaction of the senses as the foundation for emotional and intellectual engagement.

In the 1970s Bernard Beckerman claimed that audience response to theatre 'relies upon a totality of perception that could be better termed kinesthetic' (Beckerman 1979: 150). But he was thinking mainly about the way a seated audience respond to 'the texture and structure of action' as revealed through the bodies and movements of the performers on stage. In considering kinesthetic empathy in relation to scenography I have found Susan Leigh Foster's (2011) investigation of the development of concepts of kinesthesia and empathy and choreography insightful and relevant to the context of my own practice and research. In particular I have followed Foster in engaging with James Jerome Gibson's formulation of kinesthesia as central to the operation of perceptual systems. Gibson observed that kinesthesia relates to detection of a whole range of movements in the body, vestibular, cutaneous and visual as well as muscular, and 'cuts across the functional perceptual systems' (Gibson 1968:111). Although visual perception may appear to be central to the experience of scenography, it involves all perceptual systems through kinesthesia. Foster explains how visual kinesthesia is integrated with other kinds of movement:

The eyeball itself could tell us very little about the visual world around us, but the eyeball combined with the ocular musculature that surrounded it and the vestibular system that oriented it with respect to gravity could give very precise information about one's surroundings. (Foster 2011: 116).

Kinesthesia functions as a means of picking up or detecting information through the interaction or 'flux of energy' between our bodies and the everyday environment (Gibson 1968: 319). The eyes, Gibson says, should be thought of not as 'cameras' but as 'apparatus for detecting the variables of contour, texture, spectral composition, and transformation in light' (Gibson 1968:54). This, as Foster points out, suggests 'an ongoing duet between perceiver and surroundings' where an active observer is alert to 'constancies' and changes in their surroundings (Foster 2011: 116). This awareness of the outside world through one's own body can be considered as the foundation for empathy.

Although empathy is clearly related to intersubjectivity, the term originally described aesthetic experience, specifically 'the relationship between an artwork and the observer, who imaginatively projects herself into the contemplated object' (Gallese 2001:43). It was Robert Vischer, who in the late nineteenth century, sought to describe the operation of the artistic impulse, particularly the 'subjective content' that the viewer brings to 'aesthetic contemplation' of objects (Mallgrave and Ikononou 1994: 21).

Vischer articulated three levels or stages of a spatial and bodily understanding of forms. First, he distinguished between sensory, immediate feeling and a kinesthetic or responsive feeling (Vischer 1994: 92). The former is simply an automatic physical reaction to stimuli whereas responsive feeling requires a more active engagement of the body, 'scanning' rather than just 'seeing', moving beyond a first impression of an object or a scene and making a more active effort to 'finding our bearings amid its relationships' (Vischer 1994: 94). This more conscious attention involves the whole body in adjusting one's gaze or in reaching out to feel. Considering scenography, bodily response might be stimulated by scanning the patterns (or rhythms) created by architectonic structures, colours, textures and sounds, shifting intensities of light

or movement of fabrics. As in choreography, the effect of empathy with objects means the spectator finds themselves pulled into the 'volumetric totality' of the experience through paying close attention to the dynamic interaction of body, space and objects (Foster 2011: 155).

The final stage of Vischer's account is where, through a process of imaginative projection, it is possible to 'incorporate our own physical form into an objective form' and effect an empathy between oneself and an object:

When I observe a stationary object, I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it. With a small object, partially or totally confined and constricted, I very precisely concentrate my feeling. My feeling will be compressed and modest...When, on the contrary, I see a large or partially overproportioned form, I experience a feeling of mental grandeur and breadth, a freedom of will. (Vischer 1994: 104)

The pantheistic and transcendental dimension to Vischer's line of thinking, where 'the human being is seen to merge with the universe' (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994: 26), was criticised by those, succeeding Vischer, who sought an account of aesthetics more clearly rooted in psychology (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994: 28). But in the 1960s Michael Polanyi took up the notion of empathy with objects again, this time considering how empathy with objects might facilitate scientific knowledge as well as aesthetic appreciation. Polanyi says that when we perceive an object we 'incorporate it into our body – or extend our body to include it – so that we come to dwell in it' (Polanyi 1976: 16). In contrast to Vischer, where some conscious effort and imagination seems to be required, Polanyi describes 'indwelling' as a tacit process, 'which we are quite incapable of controlling' (Polanyi 1976: 14), but which operates alongside the conscious process of attending to something. Through tacit processes we come to know 'more than we can tell' (Polanyi 1976: 18). For example, the skill of a car driver, acquired through indwelling, is not the same kind of understanding as knowledge of the 'theory of the motorcar' (Polanyi 1976: 20).

Vischer's account of aesthetics suggests complete empathetic merging between the observer and the object, whereas Polanyi's account of indwelling describes a reciprocal relationship between the body and the object; at the same time as we are using our body to attend to objects, we notice the effect of these objects on our body. Simon Shepherd shows how Polanyi's theory influenced Beckerman's account of kinaesthetic perception in the theatre (Shepherd 2007: 75) and how this leads, through 'through shifts in tension', to empathy between 'ourselves and the performers' (Beckerman 1979: 149). In what follows, I consider how empathy, stimulated by kinesthetic perception, might arise between spectators and scenographic objects as well.

Forest Floor

Forest Floor was developed to explore the idea of a 'scenographic exchange' through transforming its audience into active co-creators. Audience members were able to respond directly within the performance itself through interacting with scenographic materials and contributing to the direction and content of the performance through creating new scenographic images. It was through this interaction that I hoped to see evidence of this exchange.

Creating an environment and structure for the performance where audience members had real agency was a central concern. A basic level of participation was achieved quite easily through the design of the event and through setting expectations of the audience.⁴ However, the challenge was to create a situation where the audience felt enabled not simply to join in as participants but to make to make their own creative interventions in response to the performance. This meant attending to the stimulus to participation and potential co-creation that the performance itself could provide. The aim was to create an immersive experience, which provided, as expressed by Alison Griffiths, 'the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favour of a more bodily participation in the experience' (Griffiths 2008: 2). The sensory quality of the scenography, the distinctiveness of the environment and the particular nature of the objects within it were all important in establishing *Forest Floor* as an immersive space. At the same

time the performance itself needed to leave room for participants to make a meaningful contribution and influence the event. Griffiths considers interaction in the context of immersive environments to be 'an activity that extends an invitation to the spectator to insert their bodies or their minds into the activity and affect an outcome via the interactive experience' (Griffiths 2008: 2). The main way this was achieved was through the use of a narrative structure which was open-ended.

Three fairy stories (Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Bluebeard) provided a framework for the performance. The familiar patterns of these stories would, I speculated, give narrative structure to scenographic images without the necessity of a script. At the same time, the potency of fairy-tales, as discussed by Bruno Bettelheim (1976) and ways in which they might be inflected and subverted, as, for example, in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1981), seemed to offer plenty of opportunity for wider resonances, variations, extensions, adaptations, deviations, and, potentially, new stories to be developed during the performance.

My role was in *Forest Floor* was that of director. In addition, there were five performers – two actors and three scenographers – and audiences of between 10 and 14. Before the start of the show the performers helped the audience members to dress in the same hooded white overalls and head lamps that they were wearing. The audience was led into a performance space defined by silk tubes, suspended from the ceiling like stylised birch trees. A collection of objects—shoes (heavy black brogues, women's red slippers); a fur overcoat with a red lining; a full white net skirt; a top hat; a chair; twelve palm-sized puppets; buckets of theatrical snow, rose petal confetti and chalk— was arranged at the back of the space. The lighting was low, and the space was filled with haze. The soundtrack consisted of layered, rhythmic sounds of scraping and tapping organised into five sections, each longer than the last and gradually building in intensity over 45 minutes.⁵ This environment structured the duration of the performance and provided cues for the performers.

The first three sections (which lasted 15 minutes in total) were conceived as an induction for the audience into the world of *Forest Floor*. Cumulatively they became acclimatised to the particular themes and aesthetic language of the performance, and to the degree of agency that they had as participants. In the first section the two

actors used movement alone to relate key episodes from the fairy stories. In the second section these actions were repeated and the scenographers introduced objects and costumes to embellish and give context and meaning to the movement: Red Riding Hood's granny was given a chair to rock in, the wolf a big red-lined fur coat; Bluebeard's wife was dressed in the net skirt and long white gloves for her wedding and the puppets became the previous wives. The scenographers also chalked on the floor images of pine tree forests and sweets and cakes for Hansel and Gretel, wolf footprints and words of warning. They sprinkled snow, and threw confetti at Bluebeard's wedding. Members of the audience were offered chalk and confetti and invited to help.⁶ Then the objects and costumes were swept into a heap and the actions began for a third time, but now with the interventions on the part of the scenographers becoming more intuitive and improvised, for example the silk tube 'trees' were made to move and impede the actors or the Granny was dressed in the wolf coat. This necessitated responses from the actors which created new lines of action and variations on the original fairy stories. This induction was intended to establish a common language of objects and ideas as a foundation for creative responses through the rest of the performance.

The range of audience engagement and participation was observed in each performance by myself (in costume and taking part alongside the audience) and by the scenographers and performers. Following each performance we discussed and made notes on the detail of what had happened and this was supplemented by studying videotapes of each performance from fixed cameras which recorded the whole space. We paid particular attention to the different ways in which participants contributed, the materials they were drawn to, the interactions that occurred between participants and objects, participants and performers and between participants. After each performance we considered how our response as scenographers and performers facilitated or inhibited the contributions from the participants and how it incorporated our growing understanding of how performers might facilitate participation and creative interaction.

In addition, immediately after each performance I led a semi-structured group discussion with the whole audience. They were asked to reflect on their experience of the performance, their role in it and the contributions they had made or witnessed.

The six post-performance discussions were transcribed and extracts from what participants said are included in the following analysis.

Bodily engagement and interaction

In looking at both the responses from the post-show discussions and the participant observation one striking factor was that the headlights worn by both performers and participants served to amplify the act of looking as a mode of engagement:

I could choose to look at whatever I wanted with my headlight. If I couldn't see something clearly I could put my own light on it and look at it, which is how I felt engaged from the start.

This account reflects Vischer's idea of scanning as a means of engaging and orientating ourselves in relation to a scene or an object. But whereas Vischer is concerned with the experience of an individual, the *Forest Floor* participants were often conscious of being part of a group. The headlights meant that each participant was able to see where other people were looking. While some felt inhibited by this, some used their lights to draw other people's attention to something they were doing or looking at, and some enjoyed misdirecting others by adopting a technique of looking obliquely at something so that the light did not give away the object of their attention. The headlight beam meant that even standing watching the actions of other people was to make an active choice about where to place themselves that impacted upon the space. Although the white overalls made participants largely anonymous and difficult to distinguish from the performers, some reported feeling initially self-conscious about handling the materials. But gradually this subsided, often through the agency of the materials themselves:

I was pretty disengaged when it started and it wasn't until I had the snowflakes in my hand I felt impelled to do something. And then I did and suddenly that I was great. And actually I found my mood lightening.

For this participant, handling the snow was a catalyst to immersion in the world of *Forest Floor* and this was accompanied by a loss of self-awareness and a change in

emotional state. Usually by this point the majority of the participants would be actively participating (using the puppets, the chalk, the snow and the petals, investigating the silk tubes, wearing items of costume) and the roles of actor, scenographer and spectator became blurred. The original fairy stories disintegrated and spawned hybrid stories. This, together with the build-up of materials in the space, assisted participants in feeling more free in their contributions; the messier the space became, the more juxtapositions and layers that accrued, the less inhibited they became. Over the course of each performance it could be seen that participation, which would generally start out as imitation of what the scenographers were doing, developed into actions that were initiated by audience members who participated through making their own scenographic interventions.

The stimulus to interaction and some form of scenographic exchange seemed to be immersion through bodily participation in the performance. In *Forest Floor* this aspect of affecting the outcome was crucial to the motivation to participate. One person described using chalk to draw a forest of trees on the floor in their own style and being aware of how what they were doing was altering the bounds of performance space as a small but significant contribution: 'my own little thing... it felt really good'.

Interaction and empathy

Whilst the majority of the audience felt comfortably able to contribute as participants within the structure of the performance, there remained a range of dispositions towards active involvement. At the extremes, some felt inhibited by what they perceived to be the expectations on the part of the performance makers and their anxieties about fulfilling them; whilst others felt their actions would be inconsequential in the face of what they suspected must be a pre-determined plan. Even though both of these of these reactions might be considered negative responses they arise, nonetheless, from empathetic awareness. In both cases the participants were trying to picture the intentions of the performers and director. Anxiety about making the right kind of contribution was reflected by a participant who said they thought they needed more practice throwing the snow. They had noticed how the performers did it, how they made it fall, and decided that what they had done did not have the same effect. On the whole, concerns about tokenistic participation were assuaged as the performance progressed and it was seen that

participants could, in fact, alter the course of the performance. By about 20 minutes into most of the performances, we aimed to let audience members take the initiative. This meant paying close attention to what participants were doing and responding in ways that registered and validated their contributions. One of the performers described how a participant drew around a pair of shoes which were then moved. The performer, conscious this same person would be watching, put them back in exactly the same place 'because they would like that'.

At first the performers found it hard to hand over control to the audience because they worried about the performance losing shape and momentum. Often, around the mid-point, it did. Although we were aiming to effect a seamless transition from the early part of the performance where the performers were in control to the later part where the participants could determine what happened, this was rarely achieved. Most of the performances contained periods where nothing much appeared to be happening and momentum would drop. For the performers (and for some participants) this could be very challenging as they felt a responsibility to 'keep things moving'. But we came to understand that we had to allow this to happen. It was a question of trusting the participant and finding ways to show them that trust. Key to this was being alert to participant interventions and, where it seemed right, making a response. The performers learned to attune themselves to the feeling in the room and pay attention to how participants were handling materials and the images they were creating. When this was achieved the performers described this as 'a kind of conversation', a reciprocal relationship which was really satisfying.

Moments like this sometimes came about through intense moments of connection between a performer and a participant through the medium of the puppets. A performer recalled how she and a participant stood face-to-face, each with a puppet in the palm of their hands, slowly articulating the arms so that they almost touched. It was 'a really personal moment...the two of us connected, nobody else [...] it was really equal'. What took her by surprise was the intensity of the experience. Video footage of this moment shows the performer and the participant concentrating on their puppets and not looking directly at each other. They are making the stiff arms of the puppets move and gesture towards each other and this is the means by which a moment of connection, of empathy, comes about.

Kinesthetic empathy with objects

The puppets in *Forest Floor* seemed to be a key site where empathy operated kinesthetically and emotionally. As well as operating as a vehicle for empathetic sharing as in the example above, there was also a strong sense that participants' direct encounter with the puppets themselves was rooted in an empathetic response. After every performance at least one participant commented that they did not like to see the puppets being badly treated (thrown about, stood on). One participant said 'I saved one life. I felt they were trampling on them and it was an awful sight. I just grabbed one that was left.' Another commented on 'the profound sadness of those children...They could go off to Auschwitz at any moment. They could be taken away from the world'.

To consider a puppet as a living thing is to respond to the 'magic and wonder' of theatrical illusion. This is a view which has often been attributed to children or 'folk' audiences, whereas 'sophisticated' viewers see the 'grotesquely comic' effect of the puppets in the 'attempt to animate the inanimate' (Reason 2008: 343). Reason proposes that the principal pleasure afforded by puppets is that the two aspects - an object and a life - are intertwined and seen simultaneously. This 'double vision' of puppets (Reason 2008: 342) challenges assertions that puppets are perceived exclusively as either living beings OR as inanimate objects. From watching and listening to participants in *Forest Floor*, their appreciation of the construction of the puppets as objects was not a sophisticated or knowing response. It seemed to be wholly connected to their emotional reaction to them as living beings.

There was far less reference in post-performance discussions to the puppets as objects. Nonetheless, their construction seemed to me to be significant in the responses they aroused. Their material qualities (their size, their weight, the way they looked and moved) were discovered through spectators handling and manipulating them. Their stiff arms and legs were attached to bean-bag bodies so that they would flop and dangle. Although expressionless, their heads, with small boot-buttons for eyes, tended to lean to one side suggesting an attitude resignation or helplessness.

Other objects, too, had the capacity to arouse empathy. Referring to a coat left lying on the floor a participant commented: 'a costume alone on the floor that had a human configuration touched me emotionally'. The costumes in *Forest Floor* were all 'found' items rather than specially designed and constructed for the performance. On several occasions participants got into the costumes and could feel the weight and movement of the fabric for themselves. They were all clothes with signs of previous use and ownership – a slightly crumpled net skirt, worn shoes, a battered top hat – and this, I think, added to the empathetic effect reported. Looking at the coat may have reminded this participant of a living person wearing something similar or they perhaps recall wearing something like that themselves. Or perhaps this participant was responding to the way the coat had fallen in a frozen gesture, crumpled and with one arm outstretched, through an empathetic process of 'indwelling'.

Attention and empathy

During the second half of *Forest Floor* there were usually multiple and competing images and actions being generated simultaneously with people doing things in twos or threes and on their own. Only once was there a moment where everyone in the room seemed to be focused on the development of the same idea.⁷ But perhaps the apparent lack of order was in itself productive. Theatre maker Tim Etchells observes that ceding responsibility to audiences means that as well as trusting they will go to 'useful' places, it may also mean 'trusting that a trip through the ostensibly not so useful places (boredom, drifting, free-association) can be more than useful or constructive in the longer run' (Etchells in Brine and Keidan 2007: 29). Frustration at what they judged to be a lack of development in the performance led to one participant initiating the creation of a swinging 'hammock' from a silk sheet and filling it full of objects: 'I purposefully changed the dynamic at one point because I was getting a bit...losing concentration'.

Lack of attention has often been seen as disruptive and yet diverted attention might also be associated with 'creative, intensive states of deep absorption and daydreaming' (Crary 1999: 4). It appeared that *Forest Floor* participants generally found themselves oscillating between speculative and playful engagement, often between two or more people and states of focused purposeful concentration on a particular object or image. This suggests two different modes of kinesthetic empathy.

One was characterised by a concern to connect with other people (participants or performers) through the objects. Often small groups of participants could be seen collectively developing a scenario using a combination of materials. For example, a pair of participants gathered a group of puppets and balancing red heart shaped petals on their heads. Without talking they responded to each other's interventions to create an image together.

Another type of kinesthetic empathy was principally between the participant and the objects themselves in ways that reflect both Polanyi and Vischer. What participants said about the puppets and the coat seemed to reflect a tacit understanding of the objects. However, on a few occasions a more conscious merging with objects was reported: 'I was looking at my own hand in a white glove with this little heart...generating its own image'. The speaker here seems to be reporting on the process of thinking their way into the object as Vischer describes, placing himself 'within its inner structure' (Vischer 1994: 104) and mobilising empathy of the sort which arises from an sensorial experience of the qualities of the object.

As discussed earlier, the materials utilised scenographically were intended to stimulate the audience's sensitivity to colours, patterns, qualities of objects and the juxtapositions of objects. Several reported being caught up in a kind of reverie where they were focusing on the details and material qualities of the objects. This participant is talking about the petal confetti:

I was looking at these things and felt, oh; they're all cut in the shape of hearts. I didn't do anything with the thought, but I just thought it. I was kind of purposeful. Purposeful and thinking oh, they're all in hearts. I liked it for its own sake, not a narrative. There were pleasing things that didn't come together as a narrative at all.

Connections with other images and ideas beyond the performance were often evident, even if these links were fleeting: 'I chucked the top hat, I just felt curious about what it might mean to people so I thought, oh, I'll try that, it reminded me of an expressionist movie, but I didn't quite know what it was'. Objects seemed to arouse

imaginative speculation through their material qualities. This process often stopped short of making clear sense, arrested at the point where multiple possible meanings are generated but always deferred.

Conclusions: Empathy and exchange

In immersive scenographic performance there is often an invitation to engage in an open-ended experience of sensing and feeling through imaginative engagement with the material qualities of the environment. The experience of scenography in this context is one which appeals to the whole body through a spectator's awareness of the material qualities of the environment. Kinesthetic awareness of the 'flux' of energies (Gibson 1968: 319) is the means by which spectators sense changes in sound and light, the movement of costumes and objects, the implied movement in the shifting composition of the environment (through noticing rhythm or pattern) and themselves, through their spatial positioning, as part of the scenography. It is not simply placement within the environment that allows spectator/participants to become creative agents. It is also the nature of the environment itself. The 'obtuse' nature of the images, suggests an active role for the audience which works at the level of the individual spectator. In *Forest Floor* spectator/participants were able to engage physically with these images and speculatively suggest new images of their own in response.

From *Forest Floor*, the following account refers to a group of three people using puppets and red petals. It shows that the original images that I and the performers had created were reconfigured through an engagement with the materials and transformed into a new image:

We were playing with the puppets [...] I know this sounds really stupid, but I was seeing domestic violence, like when a man hits a woman but then I kept blowing her kisses afterwards. I kept hitting her and blowing her kisses.

This appears to be a spontaneous act ('this sounds really stupid') arising from the group playing with the objects. These participants seem to be in the process of developing the themes of the performance into significant images of their own

through the medium of scenographic materials. What begins as improvised and playful is on the point of becoming a more serious, socially situated image. This could be a reflection of the violence inherent in the fairy stories or it may be drawing on other bodily and psychic experiences of space, objects in the everyday. Either way, it is shaped by the quality of the materials that they have to hand. It is not clear to the speaker whether this was a game, an emblematic scene or something rooted in real experience. The underlying theme of *Forest Floor* facilitated a productive ambiguity around this exchange between the original scenography and the contribution of these participants.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty says 'no painting completes painting' (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 149) by which he means that artworks are a beginning of something, not a definitive event; they 'open up onto a perspective that will never again be closed' (Johnson 1993: 209). Merleau-Ponty proposes that there is a reciprocity at work between ourselves and the things we perceive: 'between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is an overlapping or encroachment, so we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 123). A 'strange system' of exchanges occurs through the correspondences between things looking and the thing being looked at. In the case of paintings, for example, 'Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 125). It is this reciprocal relationship between spectators and objects that I believe forms the basis of a scenographic exchange. The theatrical frame of scenographic objects – that is the fact that they have been carefully selected to be looked at, and the spectator is conscious of this selection – makes doubly sure that a system of exchange is set in motion.

Kinesthetic empathy in the context of scenography emphasises the body as a means of detecting and locating ourselves in relation to an environment, to other objects and to other bodies. In immersive participatory performance this active role can be extended so that participants can contribute to and affect the outcomes of the performance. Conducted through the sensuous medium of objects and environments, this kind of performance can bring about a creative exchange between the scenography and the participants so that the participants become co-

creators, augmenting and extending the original work as they take up images which have resonance for them and develop them further.

Notes

¹ Foundational texts such as Denis Bablet (1975) and Donald Oenslager (1976) deal with scenography as a visual art and emphasise the links between the work of key scenographers and stylistic movements in art history.

²For example, Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007) at the Battersea Arts Centre. Other examples of companies working in this vein include Shunt, dreamthinkspeak, wilson+wilson and Fevered Sleep.

³ In Homesick (2005) spectator/participants produced drawings straight after the performance. This method was developed as a way of eliciting responses in a form that has some affinity scenography and also in an effort to access immediate, individual response before any verbal discussion took place. See McKinney (2005) .

⁴ They consisted of arts professionals and students and scholars of theatre, and it must be acknowledged that they were likely to be pre-disposed to joining in. Furthermore the emails inviting them to take part and the pre-performance introduction made it clear that some degree of participation on their part would be sought. Therefore the *Forest Floor* audiences were, even before the performance, prepared as participants.

⁵ Because this was to be a performance that was repeated several times in different venues (Leeds and Hull) it was decided that a fixed time frame was a practical necessity.

⁶ There was no script but we found it helpful in inducting the participants to use a few simple, if slightly enigmatic, requests. For example in the Bluebeard sequence a performer would offer a participant the end of a long piece of silk cloth and ask such as 'Will you help me make a marble hall' ?

⁷ The puppets were perched perilously in shoes as fragile boats on a silk cloth river with the net skirt as a kind of Niagara Falls and ever increasing flurries of snow.

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