Active roles of light in performance design

This article is written in response to the 2015 Prague Quadrennial and considers some of the difficulties inherent in disseminating the active role of light beyond performance. Building on Hannah and Harsløf’s notion of performance design as both ‘a doing and a thing done’, which is drawn from Elin Diamond, I consider the active functions of light in performance, and the challenges in representing these through exhibition. Drawing from my work as both a practitioner and a researcher I offer a definition of ‘scenographic light,’ as light that contributes independently to meaning in performance; listing three formative functions that detail its dramaturgical, rather than strictly aesthetic, affectivity.

# Introduction: defining the role of light in performance design

The 2015 Prague Quadrennial, which took place in June, was the second iteration of the event to use the title “The Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space.” This name change – from the original “The Prague Quadrennial International Exhibition of Stage Design and Theatre Architecture”– marks a shift in focus towards design practices, often beyond the conventional theatre space, in which performance design becomes an active *performative* element in its own right (Lotker, 2015; Herbert, 2012; Rewa, 2012). The term ‘performance design’ moves emphasis away from the craft implied in ‘stage design’ and marks a consideration of scenography as an interdisciplinary performance practice, acknowledging that the interplay between scenographic elements is more significant than the work of an individual aspect. Nevertheless, even within this ethos, the role of light still seems somewhat underrepresented.

Hannah and Harsløf (2008) use the term “performance design” to connect with the interdisciplinary focus of performance studies, and as a means of asserting the dynamic and formative role of design within a performance paradigm. Their account follows Elin Diamond’s conception of performance as both ‘a doing and a thing done’ (Hannah and Harsløf, 2008: 13; Diamond, 1996: 1) to capture the breath and dynamism of performance design. For Diamond, a fundamental aspect of performance is the ‘drift’ between presence and absence; the fact that performance eludes a temporal separation between the ‘doing’ and the ‘thing done.’ In considering the affectivity of performance design, this sense of ‘drift’ –or negotiation between presence and absence– raises questions of what design can do as both practice and production. In what follows I would like to explore light in performance as both a ‘doing and a thing done’, suggesting ways in which light might operate within the complex constructions of contemporary performance design. I mean to demonstrate the ways in which light as both a medium for and a material of performance can be used to fulfill the dynamic promise of performance design. Drawing on my work as both a researcher and a practitioner, I will put forward some suggestions regarding what light *does* in performance, and how this *work* of light might be disseminated through events like the Prague Quadrennial. I will offer a definition of what I call ‘scenographic light,’ and explore ways in which light practice is, and could be, represented through the Prague Quadrennial.

# Scenographic light

There is a growing critical and scholarly appreciation of the role of light in performance. Recent monographs from Yaron Abulafia (2015), Fabrizio Crisafulli (2013) and Scott Palmer (2013) dealing with the poetic and dramaturgical influence of light in performance have begun to redress the balance in scenographic scholarship in which light had previously been largely overlooked. However, particularly in professional theatre practice, there remains a sense that light is a responsive material in performance; supporting other elements within a wider scenographic schema. Such creative marginalisation restricts the ability of light to influence performance; if, as is often the case, a lighting designer begins work on a project after a design concept has been devised the scope for light to influence the composition of performance is reduced. This in turn impacts the representation of light at events like the Prague Quadrennial, where national exhibits often struggle to account for the active role of light within performance design. In furthering the understanding of light as a formative element in the dramaturgical and spatio-temporal construction of performance, it is important to not only increase the prominence of lighting practice, but to also establish a better framework for understanding the influence of light in performance. Such a framework is particularly vital for disseminating the scenographic affectivity of light, an influence which often extends beyond the formal aspects of a design.

I use the term ‘scenographic light’ to describe light that contributes independently to meaning in performance. This is light that moves beyond supplying atmosphere or mood and becomes an active contributor to the complex processes of meaning-making in performance, and therefore aligns with contemporary definitions of performance design. Scenographic light is creative rather than responsive; while it may operate constructively with other elements within performance, it is actively expressive in its own right. This concept of the scenographic is contingent on an understanding of scenography as a transformative and “all-encompassing visual-spatial construct’(Aronson, 2005: 7) and of the Greek *skenographia* as scenic or spatial etching or inscribing (Baugh, 2013; Hann, 2015). To the extent that *skenographia* can be interpreted as “scenic writing” (Aronson, 2005; Collins and Nisbet 2010), it should be understood that this writing is active, temporal, and spatial, and that while ‘writing’ implies producing a distinct text, the particular language of scenography is necessarily unstable, conveying manifold subjective meanings The scenographic describes the performative process of inscribing meaning in both space and time; it is a mode of translating the abstract into aesthetic and sensory experiences. Contained within the scenographic is also the graphic; rendered vivid or explicit. Scenographic light, therefore, is independently expressive of some kind of meaning. The means by which light becomes expressive include its formal and material components, —such as color, shape, and shadow— and the ways in which it interacts with other performance elements. The aesthetic conditions of artificially created lighting environments can have profound dramaturgical effects, and while even static lighting states can be affective in this way, the most striking influence light exerts in performance often lies in its progression through time (Aronson, 2005: 35).

Returning to Hannah and Harsløf then, it may be true that the scenographic is bound more to the ‘doing’ than to the ‘thing done.’ This is not to claim a false binary between the process of making work and the product of performed work. Rather, it is to claim that scenographic light becomes expressive through its active role in performance, and that this expressivity is a process of doing. Diamond’s concept of continual drift is important here; each moment of performance is a kind of thing done that immediately recedes into a doing as the next emerges. Similarly, each complete lighting state, or cue, is both a thing done, and a point in transition to the next. This possibility for continual transition is one of the difficulties inherent in translating light scenography to an exhibition context. Light that is truly scenographic must have an active role in the exchange of meaning through the experience of performance. Yet, many practices for exhibiting performance design fail to account for the transitional progressions of scenographic light. In order to understand light as scenographic, it therefore becomes necessary to understand what it is *doing* in performance. In the following section I will provide three active properties of light that are integral to its meaning-making potential. Considering active, rather than strictly aesthetic, properties I hope to advocate a critically engaged method of understanding light in performance. By elaborating on the underlying activity of light, I aim to combat the fact that, for many audiences, light exists on the threshold of consciousness (Fischer-Lichte, 2008: 119).

# The purposes of light in performance

I consider there to be three formative functions of light in performance; the mediation of visibility, the generation of transient spaces, and the provision of instability. This list excludes aesthetic, or stylistic, aspects of light. Widely acknowledged purposes of performance light –such as coloring the stage picture, shaping space and form; rhythm; style (Palmer, 1998: 4 – 9); compositional arrangement, or mood (McCandless, 1958: 18-19) – are absent because, although significant to the materiality of light in performance, they do not necessarily take into account the active role of light. Through considering light in the context of performance as a *doing* I mean to focus on the “structural, constructive, poetic and dramaturgic” (Crisafulli, 2013: 18) aspects of light, rather than its formal properties. The sensual and visual aspects of light in performance are properties of the *thing done,* which, though integral to the impact of scenography on an audience, provide relatively little information about the performativity of light itself. Indeed, much of the critical language used to appraise the role of light in performance tends to conflate aspects of the doing with the thing done. For instance, light is commonly described as ‘atmospheric’ or ‘moody’ without a thorough consideration of what type of atmosphere is being evoked, or what kind of mood suggested (Fisher, 2015). Within my own practice as a lighting designer, I find that when light creates an atmosphere it is as a by-product of another, more active, function. For example, continuous shifts in light may contribute to an unsettling mood. The activity of lightin this case relates to the provision of instability, and the product of that is a particular mood. Similarly, angles of light that accentuate shadow, or the use of certain colors, can serve to generate an unpleasant atmosphere. In this instance, again, the atmosphere is the thing produced while the actual purpose of light is to mediate –or manipulate– visibility. I will describe each of these functions in more detail in the following section.

## The mediation of visibility

The primary purpose of light in performance is not quite to provide visibility, as is often thought, but to provide the possibility for a *mediated visibility*. This is sometimes referred to as “selective visibility” (McCandless, 1958; Pilbrow, 1997), however the word ‘mediated’ suggests more comprehensively the action of light, as it can simultaneously select and transform the visible. The practice of lighting for performance relies on the interplay of light and dark; it is as much about designing darkness as it is about designing light. In fact, the art of lighting design in the theatre can be said to have its genesis in the darkening of the auditorium (Bergman, 1977: 92; Palmer, 2013: 7) and Baugh identifies the possibility for control, or the ability to manage darkness, as the significant characteristic which marked electric lighting as a “radically new ingredient” in performance (Baugh, 2013: 94). Through managing darkness, light can select discrete areas within a performance space and thus direct the attention of the audience. However, light is not only directing the eye but also dictating the quality of vision that occurs. Factors such as color, angle, and intensity, which are a lighting designer’s stock-in-trade, can radically transform the appearance of a person, space, or object. The mediated visibility generated through light involves both determining what can be seen and, crucially, how things are seen.

The dramaturgical significance of this mediated visibility lies, primarily, in the ability of light to structure moments in performance. A visual organization of space is made possible by the physiological principle that the eye will naturally be drawn to the brightest object in its field of vision. This device is commonly used to attribute significance to a particular moment, and can also be used as a counterpoint to the text to add further layers of meaning. Palmer describes this phenomenon in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie,* where, contrary to the apparent focus on the conversation between Tom and Amanda, the lighting focuses instead on the figure of Laura, silently playing with her collection (Palmer, 2013: 140). In this example, mediating visibility involves both managing the attention of the audience and providing a visual commentary on what is seen. This is an active function that governs a large proportion of light practice in performance.

## Transient architecture

The second active function of light that I have suggested here is the creation of transient spaces, or transient architecture. By this, I mean the ability of light to make definable, distinct spaces within given physical environments. In much the same way that it can draw the eye towards a particular point, light can also create smaller spaces within the built environment. Focus on a particular area will tend to draw the eye, occasionally to the extent that the surrounding space is temporarily forgotten. Frequent examples of this include the usage of pools or boxes of light to isolate a moment or action within the larger performance environment. This type of light is frequently seen in dance productions or in theatre plays where multiple locations are required without setting changes, but it is also used in more abstract ways to convey psychic spaces, or to divide performance areas for other, non-narrative reasons. I consider these spaces to be architectural because, like solid structures, they work to define landscape –albeit on a generally smaller scale. When the space available to the body of a performer, or to the eye of an audience member, is limited to a certain area, the edges insinuated by light mimic a physical border. However, unlike solid structures, spaces created by light can be dissolved instantly, and their boundaries can be physically transgressed.

This transient architecture of light recalls McLuhan’s (1964) assertion that the electric light provides “space without walls.” The properties of light in performance are profoundly spatial, not only regarding the ability to radically alter the apparent dimensions or shape of a given space, but also in this ability to carve out new spaces or locations. The liminality of these ephemeral spaces is a crucial ingredient in performances governed, or influenced, by the presence of light. Shifting the boundaries of available space and confining a performer to a given space with light are expressions of control in performance. They indicate the presence of an external force, revising and reforming the physical space. The mutability of these spaces also points to the liminality of performance, creating a spatial as well as temporal instance of what Victor Turner describes as “pure potentiality when everything […] trembles in the balance” (Turner, 1982: 75). The transient architecture of light provides fluctuating potential spaces within the solid structure of the performance environment, and this is the active principle that often motivates the management of space in performance.

## The provision of instability

The final active purpose that I will discuss here is the provision of instability. Changes in light, both subtle and conspicuous, create a sense of atmospheric volatility. Again, this is often considered to be an expression of mood but the active role here is not the expression of a particular mood but the ability of light to shift between moods. Similarly to the previous function of ephemeral space, instability in light highlights the liminality of performance. There is an instability involved in the spatial transitions of transient architecture, but an instability that has a distinct function. Transient architecture relates to the shifting spatial dynamics expressed through light. Instability, on the other hand, is primarily related to perceptual flux in performance. Borrowing from the theme of this year’s Prague Quadrennial, instability can be considered the *weather* of performance. Expressions of instability include shifts in the intensity or color of light, or changes in the angles from which an object is lit. The objective of light in these expressions is often more complex than it might appear. The active function of light here is not to ‘become more bright’ or to ‘appear more blue’ but to demonstrate the possibility for transformation within performance.

Nick Hunt (2011) describes the value of instability in controlling performance lighting — detailing the heightened engagement that becomes possible in what he calls a ‘thread/impulse’ model of light control, as opposed to the more conventional ‘state/cue’ standard. Hunt argues that conventional lighting control software is founded on the succession of static light images, the state/cue model. He advocates instead for a method in which a lighting artist, combining roles of designer and operator, can have truly live control over light, rather than selecting pre-populated light states. While he identifies the technological stasis of lighting consoles, in which light progresses from one pre-recorded static state to another, this model can still produce a high degree of instability for the viewer. The fact that the possibility for change is always present in an artificially created light environment generates profound instability, as created light is transient and unpredictable to an audience.

These functions describe the active role of light in performance; between them they account for the underlying processes of *doing* that light performs. Crucial to all three of these functions is a sense of fluidity, and transience. The temporal dimension is critical to the expressivity of light within performance, yet this is an aspect that is often excluded from subsequent dissemination. Temporality is naturally more a feature of the process –the doing– than the product –the thing done. As a ‘thing done’ light is perhaps better understood in terms of its aesthetic dimension, however this is to risk excluding the dramaturgical action of light as indicated in these functions. Appraisal of light after a performance is most often reliant on photographic documentation, and this can also be problematic for reasons I will outline below.

# Exhibition and documentation

There are many, widely acknowledged, difficulties of documenting light in performance (Palmer, 2013: xv). The variances in color and light levels presented in performance are extremely difficult for the camera to capture, and photographs often distort color temperatures or relative brightness. Additionally, many production photographs are taken for publicity purposes, with emphasis on close up shots of the actors’ faces.

Perhaps the most significant issue for production photography in terms of light, is that there is a profound overlap between the active role of light –the doing– and the role of the camera itself. When we encounter a record of performance through a production photograph, the camera has captured the active properties that would have operated through light in performance. Firstly, the camera lens has mediated visibility in its focus and its treatment of the image; the craft of photography involves manipulating what can be seen, and how it is seen through manipulating light levels, color and focus. Secondly, the photograph provides us with a selection of space, negating the spatial, architectural role light plays in performance. Finally, the camera removes the sense of instability by providing an image of a static moment. A photograph offers a glimpse of a particular moment, but we cannot, through a photograph determine how –or if– light has curated attention. As Matthew Reason emphasizes, photography is a transformative medium; a photograph not only records a performance for posterity but also “fundamentally transforms it into a different artifact” (2006: 113). The photograph is itself a response to performance, and while compositional choices can make a photograph distinct from an audience’s view of performance, the sense of proximity in a photograph can indicate an audience’s ‘*imagined* perspective’ (ibid: 120). The framing of a photograph, such as a close-up shot of an actor’s face, is part of a photographer’s response to the performance, and this may be influenced by the curatorial presence of light. In this way, the photograph remains an essential tool for sharing images of work at events such as the Prague Quadrennial. It is through documentation, such as production photographs, that we can come into contact with expressions of scenography beyond our immediate experience as audience members. A well-taken photograph can detail the aesthetic sensation created by light, and can demonstrate the range of colors used and the balance of light and dark. However, it can only begin to suggest the active role that light may play in directing attention, redefining space, and modulating the environment. Taken in isolation, then, the photograph is a record of a thing done and not of the doing. What light is *doing* in performance lies in its transitory nature, the fact that it can shift perception from one area to another, or from one impression to another. A photograph will show an image of a point in a production; a snapshot of the ‘thing done’ in that moment. What it cannot show is the process of doing, with a static image the sense of active, transitory light is, to a large extent, lost. This makes the production photograph an unreliable method for viewing the role of light in performance.

Filmed sequences can, accordingly, provide a more thorough glimpse of the active and dynamic role of light in performance. The screen was certainly a prevalent mode of display at this year’s Prague Quadrennial, with many exhibits including multiple tablets showing continuous filmed excerpts from performances. However, while a filmed sequence accords importance to the temporal dimension, and allows a viewer to understand the emergence of scenography from the interplay of multiple performance elements, this remains a selection, rather than a complete record. As in static photography, the camera in film will alter and adapt the performance image to suit its own medium, in this case the screen. The problematic issues of color balance and light rendering that make photography an unreliable source for accurately examining light are equally relevant here. It is also the case that while the camera can capture the progression of light across time it cannot register the speed of a fade with the same sophistication as the human eye. For this reason lighting changes on film often appear to be more abrupt than they are in performance, or are accompanied by a flare where the camera adjusts to a new level of brightness. Crucially, film as a medium also removes the phenomenal and sensual dimensions of scenography. In consequence, although extremely useful, film remains only a partial record of light’s role within a given performance. These issues have been described by Sodja Lotker, artistic director of the 2015 Prague Quadrennial, as a “paradox of exhibiting scenography” (2015: 7). Records of performance, or artifacts from performance, are removed in exhibition from their original performance context. Scenography, as such, can only be truly experienced in the performance from which it emerges. Nevertheless, exhibitions of performance design practice are an invaluable resource for artists and performance makers to share work and ideas.

In this vein the exhibition culture of the Prague Quadrennial provides a number of other avenues for disseminating practice, which may prove more valuable for furthering understanding of how scenographic light performs. In addition to the national exhibits, the Prague Quadrennial delivers a diverse series of performances, talks, and workshops. These workshops, especially in the field of light, have often been used predominantly to share techniques associated with rapidly changing technology, or to share methods of practice with students. This year however, the program included light workshops with a more explicitly dramaturgical tone, notably Aedín Cosgrove’s session entitled *Listen to the Light Now*, which set out to explore the elemental energy of light and its role within performance design, with particular reference to the stage and radio drama of Samuel Beckett. Artists’ talks also provide a fecund space for the sharing of ideas around what light can achieve in performance. The public program of the Prague Quadrennial also included this year, for the first time, a symposium of the Scenography Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research. These events, in which the sharing of ideas and research come to the fore, perhaps help to achieve for scenographic practice that which Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist calls a “protest against forgetting” (2010: 130). The shared collective memory of the Prague Quadrennial is an opportunity to gather and recall affective experiences of performance. If we accept Peggy Phelan’s assertion that performance ‘disappears into memory’ (1993: 148), then curating an exhibition in protest of forgetting performance design becomes a means of accessing past performances. Rather than a space of representation, the Prague Quadrennial provides a space of provocation and reflection, one in which models of practice can be interrogated, discussed, shared, and ultimately, progressed.

# In conclusion

The shifting focus of the Prague Quadrennial towards formative spatial practices encourages the consideration of performance design as “mobile, dynamic and affective” (Hannah and Harsløf, 2008: 13). Certainly, the success of this ethos can be seen in the work of Golden Triga winners Estonia in their exhibit of Theatre NO99’s *Unified Estonia* project, which was recognized for its integration of narrative and performance design. Yet none of the exhibits successfully foregrounded the affective role of light within the experience of performance, and it is significant that no award was granted for lighting design. The principal method for exhibiting practices of light tended to be through production photographs of work in conventional theatre spaces, with limited acknowledgement of how light influenced the performance. There are likely to be many practical reasons for this, not least, the issues surrounding documentation discussed earlier. Yet it seems that the experimentation happening in disseminating other scenographic forms is still not being attempted with light. There was no equivalent, in light, of the fluidity seen in the Tribes Project, where masked groups walked the streets of Prague, or in the Swiss national exhibit which took performance into the public space of Wenceslas Square

There remains, then, a dual challenge regarding the dissemination of light practice at the Prague Quadrennial. Firstly, for exhibitors to experiment with curatorial practices to explore means of presenting the scenographic operation of ephemeral elements such as light, and for artists in light to find more dynamic and flexible ways to distribute their work. Perhaps the strongest examples of harnessing the affective power of ephemeral performance elements at the Prague Quadrennial were not in light but in sound. The Polish exhibit, *Post-Apocalypsis,* (which was awarded a gold medal for sound design) and the Finnish *Weather Station,* (which received a gold medal for its use of media in performance design) each demonstrated the affective potential of sound through engaging with its distinct material and experiential qualities. Future exhibitors could consider equivalent ways of communicating the dynamic and transformative experience of light, offering a sense of affective encounter rather than, or in addition to, recalling the content of past work. Scenographic light is a potent and formative element of performance, and demands exhibition practices that focus on experience; to show how light manifests in performance not only as aesthetic form but also through its dramaturgical processes of *doing.*

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