Article:
McKinney, JE and McKechnie, K (2016) Interview with Katrin Brack. Theatre and Performance Design, 2 (1-2). pp. 127-135. ISSN 2332-2551

https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2016.1171602

Interview with Katrin Brack

Joslin McKinney and Kara McKechnie

Katrin Brack is an influential and acclaimed German stage designer who has become known for her minimalist approach to design using single materials; confetti, snow, fog, tinsel, balloons. Her approach to set design represents a new way of thinking about what scenography is. Where many stage designs are solid and often static constructions, Brack's designs are fluid, responsive and ephemeral. And rather than simply offering an environment for performers, her designs seem to be another character on the stage. Her book *Katrin Brack: Bühnenbild/Stages* (2010), which records many of her ground-breaking designs, won the PQ 2015 Best Scenography Publication Award.

Although her work is sometimes described as sculpture or architecture, she says that her work is not autonomous and 'only makes sense in interaction with other agents in a production' (Brack 2010: 179). In this interview with Joslin McKinney and Kara McKechnie she talks about her approach to materials and how their use requires the interaction and imagination of not only the director, but the actors, the technicians and the audience.

Q: *Many of your designs have been based around just one material, for example for Ivanov [Berlin, 2005] there was just fog. Have you always worked in this way or have you gradually moved to reducing the range of materials on stage?*

It wasn't like that from the start. It happened over a period of time. Of course, I always tended to work with reduced materials. But it happened slowly that it kept getting less and that it was reduced more and more to one material. It kept getting less, step-by step.

Q: *What or who has influenced your approach to stage design?*

Of course I knew many wonderful set designers (I didn't know them, I saw their work). But it happened on its own because I think that everyone needs to find their own way of doing it. It wasn't that conscious. I always tried to find ways of reducing the text to its essentials. That wasn't because of role models or inspirations; it was simply desperation sometimes. When you are working you think about it and wonder how to work it out and, by and by, I just arrived at the point where I was trying to reduce it to just one thing. And this thing wasn't abstract, it was always things that were very realistic; things you come across in everyday life. They're really nothing special. They are not expensive or unusual or extraordinary. And very often they are also materials inherent to theatre. For example the fog for *Ivanov* - that was in stage designs before; it's not my invention, the [stage] fog. There was always fog, but nobody before had applied it in the way that I did. It had always been used as an effect. If you didn't know what else to do, then the fog appeared. It was almost

frowned upon because it was just a constant feature (and that seems to be happening again now). With me, it [the fog] was an attempt at trying to know what the text of *Ivanov* was telling me. I thought that the people in the play were constantly wishing they were elsewhere and then I thought – they are all there but they don't really want to be there…so they are elsewhere, so to speak, and I searched for ideas in line with that. What could that be? What could communicate that without simply illustrating it?

Q. *It's as though they want to dissolve into smoke?*

Yes they want to dissolve, but they're forever thinking: "although I'm here, I don't want to be here" so I thought of the fog. That was really difficult. I got a fright at first because fog was overused, frowned upon as a material [imitating a sceptical viewer] "err, fog, theatre fog…" And [the director, Dimiter] Gotscheff also said straight away "that's shit". He thought it was terrible to start with. But I think it's brilliant if the whole of the stage just consists of this fog.

[image – Fog drawing for Ivanov by Katrin Brack]

[image - Ivanov 2005 photo Thomas Aurin]

Q: How did the technical team react to your Ivanov design and how much do you rely on them in general?

Fog is terribly complicated because you can't steer it. Normally you come up with a set design where you say: "that's where this wall is and that's where that is positioned"... With the fog you can't rely on anything. Without the technicians I couldn't have done it at all. I'm completely reliant on the technicians for a lot of things and on them getting excited by the idea. That's important because if they're not keen on it, then they simply won't do it. That's great when they really latch on to the idea, when they realise it's really their thing, then that's just great fun. Really, to this day I don't know how exactly they did it. Of course, I sort of know what they did… but not really because every door you opened at the Volksbühne had an effect on stage so that was highly complicated. Afterwards colleagues from many theatres phoned the Volksbühne and asked "how did you do that?" The nice thing is that it's an empty stage, then the fog arrives and, at the end, the fog disappears and then the actors disappear. So the set design (and I really liked this a lot), arrives on stage as the actors do and disappears as the actors do. And I did that with a few set designs, that sense of arrival, the ephemeral, this entering and exiting and afterwards, it's the same as it was before. And there was something else about the fog; you couldn't rely on it. Normally you build a set and then you know what it looks like. Or even with the confetti, I know that as long as the 'snow

cloths'[mechanism to release theatrical snow or confetti] move, the confetti will trickle down. With the fog, it's just never the same.

In *Ubu Roi* [Berlin, 2008], there were these great big balloons that were filled with helium. I wanted them to move like those lava lamps they had in the 60s, but I had no idea how that would work. I thought we'd just fill them with helium and they'd just stay floating, but it didn't work at all and the technicians came up with the idea that they floated up, and then would be brought down by squirting them with water pistols from above. Those are things that I would never have thought of. They thought of it and if they hadn't it wouldn't have worked. They would have just risen up and out of sight. Because of the water they went down, then the water evaporated and gradually they rose again. Things like that only work if technicians take them on, and that's why I'm always very dependent on them. That's lovely if they're up for it; it's great.

[image - Confetti drawing for Black Battles with Dogs by Katrin Brack]

[image - Black Battles with Dogs 2003 photo Thomas Aurin]

Q: In your book Wolfram Koch talks about your designs as like having another actor on stage? An unpredictable and stubborn actor. Do you agree with that description?

For the actors, it was even more unpredictable than a new performer. You can't rely on anything: [imitating an actor] "yesterday at this point I was covered up by the fog and today I am totally in the open" so they had to orient themselves according to the fog. But at the same time they were free to say "I want to be seen for this bit" or "I don't want to be seen and I'll take a step backwards and I won't be seen" that's why Wolfram said [the fog] is like another performer. And it got on people's nerves, of course, it got in their eyes etc. The fog is not a very nice collaborator. Six months ago I was at the Volksbühne and saw [the production of *Ivanov*] again for the first time in seven years and they had far too little fog so I ran down and said "that doesn't work, you have to have more". Then at the next performance they [the technical team] really did much more [fog] and afterwards the actors said that was so good because they were more challenged. They had got used to the [small amount of] fog and arranged themselves accordingly. Then all of a sudden there was loads, so they had to react to it; it was like back at the beginning where they had to keep thinking "what do I do now if the fog arrives and wraps itself over me and I can't be seen? But I want to be seen?" Or vice versa.

Q. Do actors ever find your designs intimidating?

There were occasions where they were grumpy or dismissive, but they don't do it anymore.

Q. Is that because they know you well or is it another generation or…?

No it naturally…is quite daft…they noticed that it was a success, if that hadn't been the case they'd have kept on grumbling.

Q. And how can actors work with your designs?

In *Death of a Salesman* [Antwerp, 2004] I had real [tall and dense] shrubs filling the stage. An actor would come on suddenly, and I don't mean enter through a door or from the back or similar, but just suddenly appear and be in the middle of the stage without any to do with stage tricks or faff like that. So there was [imitating noise of bushes] "rustle, rustle, rustle" in the undergrowth and there he was! And those are things that happen time and again. The rain is another example. For *Prince Friedrich of Homburg* [Berlin, 2006] the rain is so intense it's the same [as the bushes and the fog] you can't see and then the performer is suddenly there. Those are things that I think can hold you in suspense and you can achieve without any magic trick.

Q: Are the actors able to develop their own ideas of how to work with your stages?

Yes, of course. It's not that I think of everything myself. No, no. It's definitely the actors too. I also need directors who are really keen to work with stages [designs] like that and the actors have to…well they just invent an awful lot. I've just done a production [*John Gabriel Borkman*, Vienna, 2015] where I used snow again but completely differently this time. It's very, very deep and the snow is there from the beginning. It reaches up over the actors knees and they are there before the performance starts (people like Birgit Minichmayr, really very, very good actors) and they're buried in the snow [from the beginning] and surface much later. One of the actors only comes out after an hour. You don't see them and then they just appear. But those are things that have to come from the actors. I didn't think of that. They do it. It's fun because they just try out all sorts of things. You can play with snow it goes "whoosh" and you've vanished. It's that appearing and suddenly being gone again. In *John Gabriel Borkman* an actor fell over, somebody shovelled snow on top of them and he was gone. And a girl playing the electric guitar; at first you only saw her hands and the guitar and then they come out of the snow. Those are things that are shaped, that come into existence, in rehearsals.

[image - John Gabriel Borkman 2015 photo Reinhard M. Werner 1]

[image - John Gabriel Borkman 2015 photo Reinhard M. Werner 2]

Q. When does the material arrive in the rehearsal studio (process)?

Gotscheff had a little fog machine with a little device which he could use [in early rehearsals]…but it's normally not available until it arrives for stage rehearsals at the start of the production period. That's when the actual material comes into play. What's nice too is that most of it can be swept up. And then you can use it again. Snow is expensive but confetti is cheap, materials are cheap and you can just sweep them up and reuse.

Q. How do audiences respond to the invasive properties of some of your designs (their smell, the way the obscure vision or move off the stage and into the auditorium)?

Yes, for example with *Moliere* [Berlin, 2007] that was 5 hrs of snow, and lots and lots of people said afterwards, "goodness, how did you make the walls move" and I said "nothing was moving"…and at the same time there were older audience members that had to leave after half an hour because they had problems with their balance and felt dizzy. The constant…it causes shifts in perception and you feel a bit "crazy" in the head, disoriented, because you keep seeing things that are not there. Somebody once wrote, it was Peter Laudenbach [German theatre critic], that it was LSD for the eyes. It's very confusing. In *Ubu Roi* the balloons flew into the auditorium and some people just threw them back. Ivanov, too, there was one performance where all the fog shifted into the auditorium – that wasn't funny. We were invited to Athens and it was so hot that absolutely nothing worked. The fog was in the auditorium and there was nothing on stage at all. That was a complete disaster. And audiences can sometimes react sensitively to fog. It's not always terribly funny and we don't always think it's marvellous

[image - Snow drawing for John Gabriel Borkman by Katrin Brack]

Q. How much agency do you think your designs have? Are they capable of performing all by themselves?

I hope so…the materials are not abstract but often the effect can come across as abstract at first; what I'm seeing, that's what it is. I'm seeing fog, I'm seeing confetti, I'm seeing balloons. But I hope that beyond that, they have a different or greater form of expression, but all I can do is hope that that's going to work. And if it works, I'll often hear from audience members who tell me what they have just seen; things that I didn't think about. I think that's lovely because that means it's got a degree of abstraction. [The materials] don't appear in the ways in which they appear in our everyday life and it gives a new level of expression, if it works. I like that because it suggests that there isn't just one meaning.

Q. What we might call 'open signifiers'?

Yes, but in the first instance they are not signifiers, they just are what they are. It doesn't stand for anything else, it just stands for itself. It doesn't purport to be anything else than what it is. In the course of the play and with the text and the performances, something else may suggest itself, an association, and it's very nice when that happens.

Q. Although you often use just one material, your designs are often luxurious in that the materials are present in abundance and even excess (the gradual build-up of snow in Moliere, the way the foam in Blow Out [Berlin, 2006] eventually pushes the actors off the stage). Can you say something about this? Why is an excess of material so productive, do you think?

The reason for that is that there is such an abundance of it, but it's also to do with the space again. Because I'm trying to fill the space with the material and to a certain extent to define the space. Because I reduce it to just one material, anything that is added to it, even if it's tiny, acquires a huge amount of significance. That's why I try and avoid adding anything else to it, so it's not subject to weird 'meaningful' interpretations. At the same time the dominant material, if it really fills the space, has a completely different kind of power. And a whole space is much more potent…not potent… much more powerful

Acknowledgment

This interview and its translation into English was made possible by the generous contribution of Kara McKechnie.

Dr Kara McKechnie, Lecturer in Dramaturgy and Literary Management in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds is an Anglo-German academic with a research focus in opera studies. Her most recent book is *Opera North: Historical and Dramaturgical Perspectives on Opera Studies* ***published*** in 2014 by Emerald Books. Her monograph, *Alan Bennett,* on the playwright's television work was published by Manchester University Press in 2007.

Dr Joslin McKinney, Associate Professor in Scenography in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds researches and writes about contemporary scenography. She is lead author of the *Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (2009). She is currently working with Scott Palmer on an edited volume *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design* for Bloomsbury Methuen and on a monograph, *Construction: Readings in Theatre Practice,* for Palgrave.

Reference:

Brack, Katrin. 2010. *Katrin Brack: Bühnenbild/Stages*. Verlag Theater der Zeit