

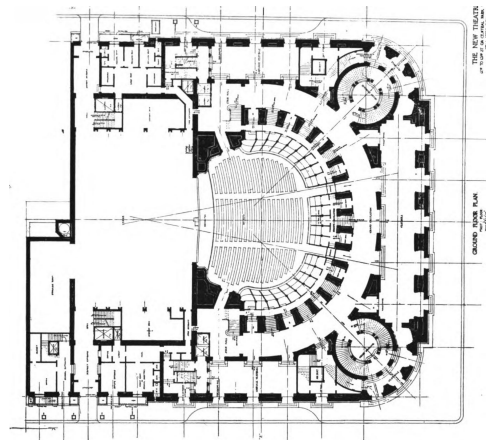


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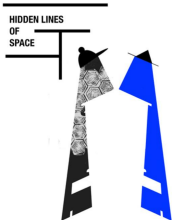
Death of a Salesman 2.

Theatre designers conjure fictional worlds by creating floor plans for performers to inhabit in the rehearsal room. These plans are flat, phantom worlds that hold the possibility of habitation, suggesting fragments of objects, walls and architectures. They are often drawn out in spike tape on rehearsal room floors, 'blocking' the terrain of the stage, serving as a set-up of instructions to the bodies and objects that will eventually occupy the set. The floor plan is the speculative ground of performance, the place in which the action of the work might happen, a set of lines that gesture towards an environment, an evocation of the production and what it might be. It is an architecturally schematic proposal that can be remade and reconstructed throughout the design process. The floor plan is a mode of drawing as thinking, existing between the present and the future, a set of possibilities of 'what might be' but is yet to come.

In June 2017, I presented a performance lecture called *Phantom Stages* at the gallery Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. The lecture formed part of a research programme and group show called *Hidden Lines of Space* that explored the historical developments of the architectural floor plan and their practical implications, readability, effects and desired effects. The project invited artists and researchers to consider the representation of space in the floor plan, both how it operates functionally on the one hand and as a free artistic conception and thus as an expression of future design on the other. The project explored the cross overs between theatrical production, theatre (and non theatre) architecture and visual arts practice. I went armed with magicians' flash paper, a remote control car, the plastic skull of Yorick, neon pink spike tape, a vase of roses and a fully loaded cap gun. I had images of Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*, the original 1949 production of *Death of A Salesman*, John Cassavetes' *Opening Night*, and multiple pictures of Laurence Olivier as Hamlet. The following artist pages attempt to restage fragments of the lecture on the page, to find a place for this material to settle by evoking further speculations about the phantom life of the theatrical floor plan.



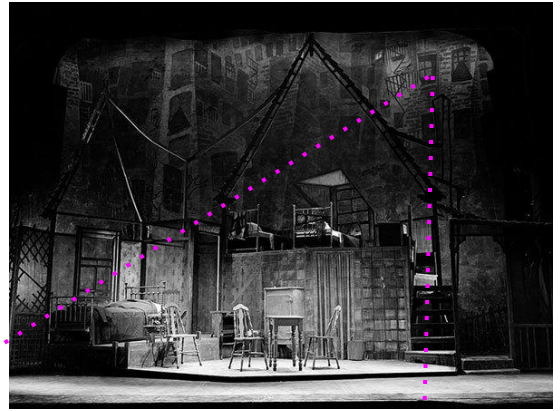
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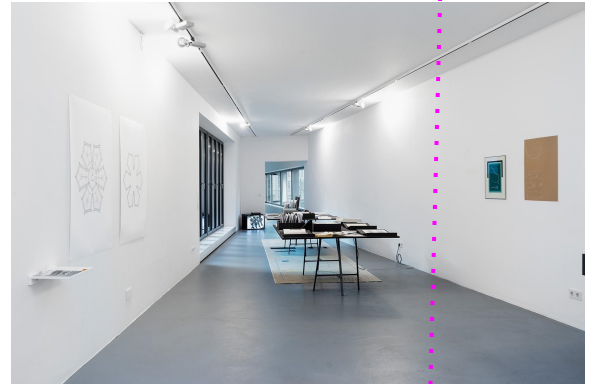
1. *Little Ghosts*: Performance Documentation.
2. Lecture Slide. *Death of a Salesman* title card.
3. Ground floor plan of the New Theatre on Central Park West in New York City.

Traditionally, the stage floor plan provides a map of the space, conceived from the practicalities of the play text: the 'given circumstances' of the plot, providing the director and actors with the tools they need to make sense of the production for the audience. One such example is Jo Mielziner's scenographic design for the original 1949 production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It centres on the Loman's home, a symbol for everything Willy has worked for. His own piece of America. Mielziner's Floor Plan is a blueprint for the mechanics of Willy's dramatic transitions, operating between kitchen sink realism and an expressionist symbolism, including angles, openings, and suggestions of space that physically translate his perspective on the situation. It is a space that enables the scenes of dialogue between Willy Loman and his family as well as flashbacks that haunt him.

Mielziner's plan includes viewpoints for simultaneous action as well as the outlines of objects and furniture: windows, beds, a table and chairs, raised floors, trees. It contains contours and suggestions of elevation. There are no physical barriers. All the structures are transparent. The plan suggests walls that will be built and walls that will be literally transparent, walls that will be painted and walls that move. The plan thinks through how it will open itself for sightlines, and conduct the relationship between offstage and onstage through folding screens, access stairs, disguised lighting, and theatre flats. The plan contains the notes of text that describe and extend the drawing for production to suggest how the design will spatially embody the story by placing the characters at the centre of the image of the house, whilst simultaneously opening spaces for flashbacks - fading between recognisable rooms and symbolic zones that can be adapted to become a restaurant or a sports field.

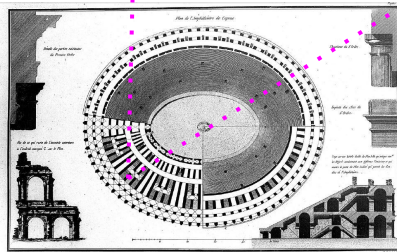


5.



6.

In this traditional process, the production team translates a spike tape drawing of the floor plan onto the rehearsal room floor in actual size. The designer, dramaturg, director, actors and production team can enter into an invisible space. To look down upon but also to 'be in'. A space for visualization. In this production structure it serves as the first mechanism of realisation. The whole bag of theatre's tricks is held within it. This is what makes stage floor plans implicitly theatrical: they quietly pretend to be the world they evoke. They withhold the world of the play - allowing only a glimpse of its possibility. This action of withholding has a theatrical tension that the director, performers, designers, and dramaturgs can coax out. Theatre floor plans are therefore paradoxical, they are theatrical because of their absences rather than their excesses and therefore hold a unique relationship with the possibilities of theatrical representation.



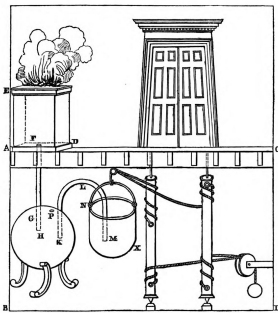
4.

[ACTION] The neon pink spike tape is taken from the table and a rectangle is drawn upon the floor.

4. General plan of the amphitheater of Capua
5. Jo Mielziner's stage design for Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.
6. Hidden Lines of Space Exhibition: Image Julia Hortsmann.

PHANTOM STAGES

FLOOR PLANS AS AFFECT MACHINES



7.

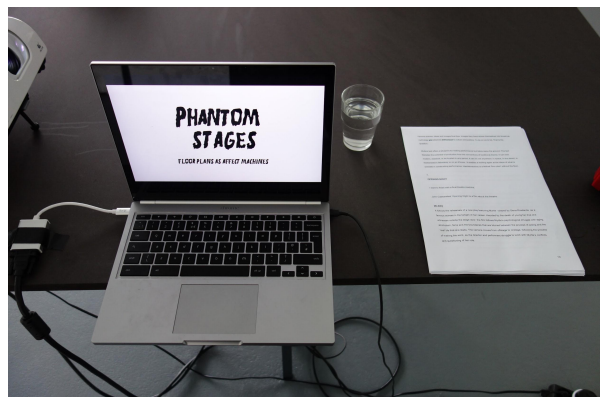
Contemporary design practice has diversified considerably from these traditional conventions of the floor plan, yet it's principles as a phantom speculation of a theatrical world exemplifies a key metaphor of the theatre: the theatre as ghost machine. The theatre as a 'haunted' medium is well explored (See Carson, (2003) and Rayner (2006)). Watching theatre is watching something that has gone before, it is full of doubles: rehearsal, repetition, reappearance. It thrives on things *coming back*. How many Hamlets? How many 'to be or not to be's'? How Many ophelia's fall from the willow tree?

Offering an aerial perspective, the floor plans of stage architectures reveal the mechanics of the machine: the wings and fly tower, the lighting rig and sound system, the auditorium, seating, objects, ropes, scenery, lights, speakers, microphones orientations and configurations of the stage. Built into these structures are hydraulics and sub stages that can rise, fall and rotate, play tricks and effects. Platforms can be wheeled in to make rooms and levels, sets expand to reveal secret spaces, walls move, doors appear. The devices of the theatre machine are not only for the support or adornment of dramatic action but become part of a dramatic imperative themselves. The theatre machine gives life to the Deus ex machina - the god from the machine - the mechanism that makes interventions and offers resolutions in the way that only theatre and film can. A set of stairs descends, literary from the 'the heavens' to lift the protagonist from their predicament. The function of the story telling machine of the theatre has an ancient impulse: from the candlelit shadows flickering in Plato's cave; to the elaborate temple machines of Heron of Alexandria who created devices to awe his public, lighting a fire on an altar sets off a system of steam powered hydraulics that opens the temple door to an inner chamber.

The mechanistic nature of theatre makes it an efficient affect machine, a theatrical apparatus that forms and generates encounters to tell stories and share collective experience. It represents the notion of the apparatus as conceived by Michel Foucault as a form of *dispositif*, a setup that captures and orientates the activity of human life. An apparatus can be anything that holds the capacity to capture existence, from the internet to a motorway, a park or a stage. Giorgio Agamben extends this by defining an apparatus as a mechanism that has the "capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (2009, 14). The theatrical floor plan, as phantom space, exposes how theatre design, objects and architecture 'sets up' the operation of theatre as an apparatus of representational possibility to capture and model human experience, a setup that enables artists to intervene, disrupt and subvert encounters with reality.

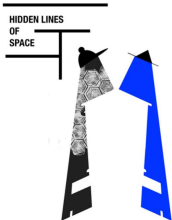


8.



9.

[ACTION] The flash paper is lit.



7. "Automatic temple doors" as described by Heron of Alexandria.
8. Performance space, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz.
9. Research Table, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz.

[ACTION] The cap gun is loaded and placed upon the table.

ELM ST.

Lars Von Trier's film *Dogville* (2003) takes the dynamic of theatrical absences in the floor plan and turns it into the centre of his machine. *Dogville* is filmed entirely on a large black soundstage. Drawn onto the stage in chalk lines is a floor plan of the main street - Elm St. - in the small American town of Dogville. The houses, school room, abandoned mine, and side streets are economically presented, suggesting the exact spaces that will be of service to the story: Ben's Garage, the 'Dog', three bushes and so on, locations that are signed posted in the chapters and episodes in the narrative that is to follow. The studio is black, but surrounded by large cycloramas can be lit with bright white light to depict day and night. There is no elaboration. Von Trier is referencing theatre history. The staging of *Dogville* functions much like the economy of Mielziner's plan for *Death of a Salesman*: the exact spaces designed for 'scenes'; the contrivance of sightlines and presentation for the spectator (or in this case the eye of Von Trier's camera); the faded 'black' spaces that sit around anything that is not highlighted by light or plot. Furthermore, Von Trier appears to be citing the aesthetic of Brecht's production design: the use of text to label or frame space; the bare exposure of the mechanics of production, constantly reminding the viewing that they are watching an artifice. The floor plan offers the actors - and ultimately the audience - the precise permatimeters of the story and deliberately reminds the viewer of the filmmaking process as a storytelling machine. Von Trier uses the theatrical conceit of the floor plan as a form of radical reduction.

Into this set up Von Trier tells the story of Grace, played by Nicole Kidman, who finds herself as an outsider in the town, which is literally at 'the end of the road' in the mountains. She is being pursued by a gang of criminals and asks for refuge to hide out amongst the community. Through a series of chapters, Grace's story is told through how the townspeople of Dogville offer her protection through an increasing number of tasks and favours that reveals conflicted kindness and abuse within the town.

Part of the emotional effect of the film is created by how the absences in the floor plan frame the conventionally naturalistic acting style and realistic sound design. The absences are only seen by the audience so that the actors perform as if all of the walls, doors, windows and objects are present, they treat the stage as if they are acting in a fully realised 'realistic' space. The sound design and fragments of architectures and objects are key to this effect. The floor plan alone - with nothing else - is not enough. Von Trier fills in aspects of the wider world to support and accompany the acting. Some objects are included, the beds, school benches and church bell for example. It is as if they appear through the absence in the space to serve the story, to give the viewer and the actors a premonition, supported by 'fake' sounds of doors being opened, footsteps on gravel and the dog barking in the absence of any animal, just a chalk outline in a kennel.

The result is a doubling of the actors pretence. They are not only 'pretending' to be the characters (Grace or the various townspeople of Dogville) but they are also pretending they they cannot see through walls. As they go about their daily lives as meters away from abuse - they simply pretend they cannot see or hear it. This creates a theatrical effect that is made possible through the tension of the absence in the floor plan and the fragments of sound and objects that can be seen. It enables Von Trier to use the gaps and spaces that are left within the plan to become the centre point, the exposing of the artifice of theatre (or film) itself as well as the conflicted pretence at the heart of his characters in his story, characters that choose to 'look away' and not see what it right in front of them.

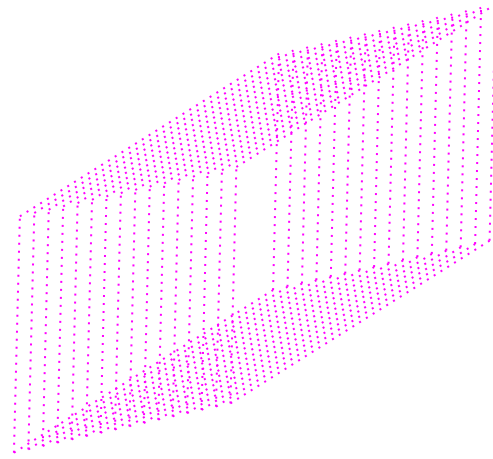
[ACTION] The cap gun is fired.

PHANTOM STAGES

FLOOR PLANS AS AFFECT MACHINES

So far I have proposed how the floor plan embodies the action of the theatre machine through the speculation of theatrical worlds, and in the case of *Dogville*, becomes central to the concept of the film itself as an engagement with the nature of theatrical 'performance' and representations of characters and space. I now want to suggest how a text might function as a floor plan itself, performing the action of absence as theatricality. [ACTION] *The remote control car is driven around the gallery.* [SPOKEN] *Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him Horatio: A fellow of infinite jest.*

Muller's text offers a partial blueprint for making performance but takes away the ground. The text liberates the potential of production from the conventions of traditional drama. It can look modern, classical, or be located in any period. It can be set anywhere: in space, in the desert, in Dr Frankenstein's laboratory or on an iPhone. It enables looking again at the ideas of what is possible in constructing performance. *Hamletmachine* is a textual 'floor plan' without the floor.



Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* (1977) disconnects Shakespeare's text from locations, scenes and conventional notions of character. The text is divided into 5 sections and is approximately 9 pages long. There are no clear voices just figures from Shakespeare's play, broad stage directions, or suggestions for images such as 'University of the Dead'. There are no living rooms, no walls, no furniture or objects. The text combines Shakespeare's characters, moments from the plot and potential landscapes, and combines them with cultural and historic ideas from East German history, feminism and ecology. It builds the ghosts of collective memory into itself.

The text is groundless: it stands as an invitation to directors, performers and production designers to dream the world of what the performance might be. In *Hamletmachine*, the text operates conceptually like a floor plan; a road map of possibility that works with absences as much as with certainty. Hamlets we have know, histories we have witnessed, politics we contest. Famous scenes, ideas and images float free. Images that have woven themselves into theatrical mythology and attached themselves to culture and politics. To be or not to be. That is the question.





11.

I want to finish with a final theatre machine. John Cassavetes' *Opening Night* (1977) is a film about the theatre. It follows the rehearsals of a new play featuring Myrtle - played by Gena Rowlands - a famous actress in the twilight of her career. Haunted by the death of young fan that she witnesses outside the stage door, the film follows Myrtle's psychological struggle with aging, alcoholism, fame and the boundaries that are blurred between the process of acting and the 'real' life that she leads. The camera moves from offstage to onstage, following the process of making the work, as the director and performers struggle to work with Myrtle's conflicts and questioning of her role.

The set and theatre space is exposed - the audience see the cue lights, pulley systems, costume changes and props master. They see an entourage trying to keep Myrtle calm and focused between scenes. The two spaces, the off stage and the onstage become irrevocably joined, extending even into her apartment so that her own sense of what it is to be 'performing' dissolves, she is trapped in the theatre, trapped in the machine, simultaneously needing to be fed from the thrill of performing, whilst breaking down through the oddness of living a life of such pretences. A double life: the phantom stage haunts the actress.

The boundaries of the artificial and the real is complicated further by the fact that Cassavetes and Rowlands play husband and wife in the play they are rehearsing and are husband and wife in reality. Their scenes are charged with this intimacy with slippages between their lines. *Opening Night* is a perfect portrait of the complex relations of representation - the tensions of pretence - that the theatre, and ultimately film embody. It reminds us of why humans build these great storytelling machines to work through the messy and conflicted states of 'being in the world'. The theatre floor plan reveals something of the nature of these machines, the mechanisms of what makes them work, and how such machines continue to be a model, like Plato's Cave, Heron's temple, the dionysian amphitheatre, the proscenium arch, the studio theatre, the gallery, and the film set to be uniquely human venues. In the final moments of *Opening Night*, Myrtle is momentarily released from her own conflict with her double life at the conclusion of the first performance. She falls, like ophelia falling from the willow tree, into the arms of her public, smiling with adoration, showered with bouquets of flowers.

[ACTION] An individual flower is given to each member of the audience.

11. Performance Objects.

PHANTOM STAGES

FLOOR PLANS AS AFFECT MACHINES