

New Day • New Night: Space of Death
*Nouveau jour • Nouvelle nuit : L'espace de la mort*¹

Can the dead relive? Can memories die?

Space of Death is a video installation that consists a montage of cinematic images. Ranging from photographs, video clips, paintings, and sketches, such images portray spaces of violence and death in all stages, preliminary or eradicated over time. The installation concludes with a live body tracing itself through language in a Butoh vocabulary. The piece exhibits a juxtaposition of images and textuality with a living body in performance. A continuous series of segmented Butoh performances weaves itself against another continuum: moving texts that appear on-screen. Ximena Garnica, the Butoh performer then counterpoints against the flat screens as a force of tension, one that is propelled by her body as a site of stored and repressed memories.

Garnica is a well-established Butoh performer who presently resides in New York. Originally from Colombia, she is trained by the legendary Tatsumi Hijikata since the 1980s. As the Director of New York Butoh Festival in 2003, she has also created numerous Butoh experimental pieces in the Americas. Her most recent piece, "Tracing W(rite)," a CAVE Experimental Art project, was staged in New York this March. *Space of Death* will be our first collaboration. It is both my privilege and honour to have Garnica and her Butoh talents as part of what I hope to articulate within a site of memories: a living body.

1. This project was originally conceptualized as a fifteen-minutes final presentation (*Death of Memory Mist*) for Richard Schechner's *Theories of Directing* in New York University, Fall 2003. During the course of expanding it into my final graduation presentation for Tavia Nyong'o's *Final Projects in Performance Studies*, the project is later commissioned as a hybridized performance art of still video installation and live Butoh performance. The actual performance will last a total of 103 minutes. Together with Garnica, the rest of my team include Hiromi Iuchi (Costumes) and Atsuko Miyawaki (Sound/Video).

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the
 spark of hope in the past who is firmly convicted that
 even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.
 And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Quintessentially, my scene portrays memory. I will allow an equation to generalize what I connote as a “scene” in this installation art performance:

physical space (of studio) + visual ² fields (of audience)
 = my spatial & visual portrayals of memory.

I am primarily interested in creating a space within this scene: a sitescape that contains a landscape, soundscape and textscape. Using images and metaphors of separation and death is my means of evoking our memories of pain and violence, which in turn interrogates our understanding of how memory comes into being. I can never approach the ambiguities of memories without serious dilemmas, for I have always felt its existence beset with ironies. Is memory about not forgetting or about remembering? How intimate is memory with its counterpart?

I settled upon a conclusion during my rehearsal processes: memory is divorced from its counterpart by their intimacy. It is multiple, divided, and open. This conclusion is instrumental: it is my Pandora’s box, exposing to me a kaleidoscope of questions that are less meant for answers, more intended as suggestive: when does memory begin? And when does it fade? Can we obliterate memories? Can we choose memories? Or that memory chooses us?

In his book entitled *Realms of Memory*, French historian Pierre Nora laments the loss of the kind of memory he calls *milieux de mémoire*. He maintains that in pre-modern times, the past figured as a constant feature of daily life, attached like a shadow to everyday rituals and community customs.³ Nora believes these *milieux de mémoire* have been swept away, paradoxically, by the very preoccupation with history that has overtaken us. Global economic and cultural changes, as well as the “acceleration of history” have distanced us from memory. Instead of *milieux de mémoire*, we now have *lieux de mémoire*: sites that we seek out for traces of memory, that we invest with meaning: such sites might be locations, memorials, buildings, celebrations or images.

2. Since the video installation and the Butoh performance constitute the bulk of my ten-minutes presentation, I thus consider the entire experience as predominantly visual. However, it is also more accurate to describe it as “sensual,” for the success of the performance also necessitates one’s auditory and olfactory instincts.

3 See Nora, Pierre. “General Introduction, Between Memory and History.” *Realms of Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 1.

It remains my wish throughout the entire working process of conceptualizing and rehearsing that the audience would discover their own *lieux de mémoire* in a magic moment within ten minutes in Studio 636. To do so, I see the urgency in transforming the studio space. The rectangular studio space has to be conquered, harnessed, adapted and translated before it becomes what the Asian-American scenographer, Ming Cho Lee has called “an arena where the great issues — of values, of ethics, of courage, of integrity and of humanism are encountered and wrestled with.”⁴ After all, the question of space lies at the heart of theatre. As Schechner articulates:

The first scenic principle of environmental theater is to create and use whole spaces. Literally spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, which contain, or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and/or the performers perform.⁵

I want to materialize Schechner’s “fullness of space” by first transforming the space into a passageway, and then into a land. I intend the audience to travel a journey before taking their seats and beginning another narrative journey. Such an idea generates from my nostalgic understanding of memory as a lane, in time and in space. The choice of using a large, translucent white silk screen that runs from one end of the studio to the other is appropriate. Creating an illusion of a fog, a mist or simply a partition in the room, its semi-transparency renders itself a successful metaphor for the notion of memory. When audience members walk along the screen at the beginning of the scene, they form their own silhouettes against the fabric. I like to allude to memory as a mist, seemingly penetrable yet impenetrable, seemingly touchable yet untouched, seemingly tangible yet intangible. At times, we may think that we have easy access to some fragments of our memories, but memories lapses beyond our control and anticipation are not alien to us too. Even if we are always positive that we do remember well, our memories are always inevitably an alteration of some past realities.

One preposition that immediately springs to my mind when I first spotted the translucent white fabric is “through.” Theatre is not simply a place you go to but a place you go *through* and *beyond*. I confirm my choice of a white translucent screen when I discovered it, just in the way an architect finds a new material.. I share the passion of architects in my style of directing: perceiving a director as an architect, of text, of bodies (actors and audience), and of space. Architects are often visionaries and innovators, encompassing philosophy, art, music and politics, equipped with an understanding of materials and financial resources, as well as the ability to dream out loud. A fine director needs to possess such qualities too. Furthermore, I believe that a good director must also be a sound scenographer. One of his exciting challenges is to carve a magical space out of unpromising material, or to release a space by excavating and liberating closed or unused areas, making them habitable for both performers and spectators.

4. This is a remark that Ming Cho Lee made in *American Theatre Journal*, 1990.

5. See Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Applause Books, 1994. 2.

In the words of Pamela Howard, a British practicing scenographer and theatre director: “Space is described by its dynamics — the geometry, and its characteristics — the atmosphere.”⁶ More and more, I think of theatre as creating atmosphere. Make people believe. In order to replace the lost ritualization of the channelization of violence with the spectacle of the absence of violence. In this light, the white fabric and the candles are unquestionably the most essential architectural elements in conjuring the transcendent atmosphere in this scene-work. They fabricate a new world: a religious, sacred place almost akin to the nether world. I insist that candles burn throughout the entire scene, for what also intrigues me is the paradox of smelling burnt candles. I want the spectators to sniff occasional wisps of burnt objects, which is all in all evoking strongly imaginations of decay, and of death. Further, the faint illumination by the candles is a natural lighting design that complements the Japanese *wabi-sabi* minimalist aesthetics of the space in general.

One of my colleagues who had attended my open rehearsal approached me with a remark, “It’s all in the air.” I must confess however, that using candles is in fact highly problematic. They require that I use them, not as a banal representation of the “sacred” or the “mystical-mythical.” In essence, candles are risky to use if their use is entirely without irony. I am thus confronted with the difficulty of deconstructing stereotypes. In the case of a conference presentation, I will be able to pull it off — but merely barely — only within the intimate and familiar context of a class. On a “real stage” in the “real life,” my employment of the candles would have to submit to very serious interrogation.

Having a screen that separates the room into two also highlights the central theme of the scene: separation. Separation lies at the core of death at every level. Not only does the physical presence of a partition reinforce the metaphorical meaning of separation, it actualizes Schechner’s proposal of a “space within space.” Memory in itself is layered, and the fact the screen is like a plane effectively physicalizes such a concept. The bifurcation of the space is further enhanced by my decision of using three — not one — screens. While one provides a passageway for the audience, the other two serves as a backdrop for the projection of images. At the same time, they enclose Garnica as she weaves Butoh movement within them. In this sense, she seems trapped between the two screens, just as we are trapped within our own memories. I would like to think of my work as a “chamber theatre” more than an “environmental theatre,” because the latter suggests too much of “openness.” In this respect, I am working in direct reference to how Grotowski explores the epistemology of “a chamber theatre” as he seeks to abolish barriers between actors-spectators:

There is only one element of which film and television cannot rob the theatre: the closeness of the living organism. Because of this, each challenge from the actor, each of his magical acts (which the audience is incapable of reproducing) becomes something great, something extraordinary, something close to ecstasy. It is therefore necessary to abolish the distance between actor and audience by eliminating the stage, removing all frontiers. Let the most drastic scenes happen

6. See Howard, Pamela. *What is Scenography?* London: Routledge, 2001. 1.

face to face with the spectator so that he is within arm's reach of the actor, can feel his breathing and smell the perspiration. This implies the necessity for a chamber theatre.⁷

Although the white screens set up partition, each of them creates simultaneously a boundary for an enclosed space of audience-actor engagement. The realization of a space within space involves a high level of intimacy, especially when audience members sit in horizontal lines that face Garnica, the screens, and subsequently the plethora of images directly. I toy with the geometry of horizontality by first introducing it to the audience (i.e. the long and empty passageway), before deconstructing it vis-à-vis Garnica who stands tall on an elevated platform at the corner of the room. Such a sharp and sudden contrast in planes creates a tension between horizontality and verticality. Garnica is a vital image in this case: in her statuesque position, she greets every audience member without exposing her face at all. No one spectator can miss her presence out.

The physical proximity of spectators to the screen, on the other hand, is crucial because memories are very intimate to our spiritual existence. Besides, theatre takes place wherever there is a meeting point between actors and a potential audience. The living experience of theatre becomes combustible when actors and spectators, so closely together, produce an organic chemistry. Should I have the chance to redo the scene within such intimate setting, I would like to have Garnica address (in speech and through movement) each and every individual spectator. For the most part, theater has the few address the many. It is my personal and firm conviction that when one violates or challenges that convention, powerful and unanticipated expressions can explode.

Nonetheless, Schechner's expression, "fullness of space" can be deceiving. It tempts one to become so preoccupied with using every nook and corner of a space that there either leaves no room for emptiness, or that too many activities are going on simultaneously. When I experiment with the architectural layout of the room, Schechner's expression appears clearer to me. He does mean that space itself is inherently full. In fact, there is never such a thing as "empty space." Space always carries and projects a meaning born out of its own fullness: its past uses, its connections to social life, etc. Emptiness is not the antithesis of fullness. It is a particular kind of fullness. Zen simplicity and discipline dictates my thinking and governs my life: its conduct, its philosophy and its style. As such, I want simplicity to pronounce distinctly the fullness of emptiness and the emptiness of fullness in this scene. I am keen on using emptiness or "nothingness" to invent "fullness of space." Emptiness is rich, dense and full. I want space that lies silent, empty and inert, waiting for release into the life of drama.

Other than the white screen, I arrange nothing but chairs and candles as my mise-en-scène. Lighting is at its minimal, because I want to rely primarily on natural lighting. Neat rows of candles pave the way for audience members to walk and turn into the other confined space. In a way, the white screen make possible an installation/ performance before an actual theatrical event takes place in the other enclosed space. In searching for

7. See Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 41-42.

the “way” to their seats and noticing the fragile luminosity of the candles, the spectators move through an empty but dynamical space that is itself narrative. In this light, my scene establishes a common ground between architecture, installation and performance: it takes into consideration the interior and exterior spatial potential of the studio space.

In their quest to define dramatic space, the white screen and candles create suggestive space, associating space with dramatic time. Theatre is a measured space, and space is also measured by time. Schechner emphasizes:

Space can be organized according to time, so that sequence in space = progression in time.⁸

Upon entering the passageway, each spectator invents his own space-time relationship. Within limits, one can take as long as one wishes to walk down the aisle, or enjoy every liberty of scrutinizing Garnica being posited in stillness before sitting down. In this respect, the horizontality of the candles, white screens, passageway and the arrangement of the chairs generate a well-demarcated space-time field. The space between the screens articulates theatrical time and space, because this is where images would be projected upon, where Garnica articulates her Butoh vocabulary. It is within these spaces that the narrative unfolds. Every other space outside the two rows of candles before the chairs constitutes space-time-fields of our everyday life (i.e. real space-time fields). The placement of the white screens within the sphere of real space-time fields becomes contested, underlining the ambiguity of how memories exist. The fact that one can get so close to a fictitious space-field/time field, only to be separated from it by a white screen or a row of candles further highlights the apparent proximity between a psyche and its ability to access memories. Are we closer or further from our memories, memories of pain and violence?

Because of the physical intimacy with the white screens, the spectators may find the subsequent video presentation of images imposing. The visual experience may seem uncomfortable and almost dictatorial. “Heavy” is a more sensual description. I had asked myself: will my audience members breathe when they see the images? Or will they simply choose to leave? The truth is I would like to give my audience members the space to exit the room at any moment they wish, though I am guided by an innate instincts that most, if not all, would just stay on. The visual allusions to death assimilate Freud’s conviction that “consciousness comes into being at the site of a memory trace.” One tends to linger on the pain of memories before moving on. And when one does move on, one should never turn back. This explains why music for the video presentation must stop abruptly the moment the last image fades. The rupture that ensues (re)jolts one to his senses. It arrests the audience. They must experience a “shock” effect. They must hear the silence. They must feel the discomfort of being in a vacuum. It is almost as if the “shock” effect provides some force to propel Garnica into moving and executing her Butoh performance. And it is almost as if memories bleed and tear us before they strengthen us to regroup, recuperate and regenerate.

8. See Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Applause Books, 1994. 20.

I am not challenged by the philosophical and psychoanalytical discourses of memories as an inevitable alteration of past or present realities. Rather, I want to demonstrate such a discourse within a spatial framework. The intimacy between the screens and the audience, coupled with the translucent nature of the screens enable me to put into reality an “auratic” distance, hence experimenting with Todorov’s dynamics of alterity. Epistemically, the audience members have no valuable or enviable knowledge of death. Praxeologically, they are alienated from death such that it is a subject that reveals no dynamic historical movement. It remains for them the fictional counters that they are. Axiologically, the auratic distance objectifies death when it is simultaneously isolated.

In one of the texts for the video installation, I write to my audience, “You just experienced a visual space that demarcated dark corners of humanity, hidden recesses of cultural negligence, and crippled forms of artistic practices.” I describe my scene, above all things, as visual. It is a space that perceives life and memories as a precise interactive mechanism. It is a process of emanating, distributing, and circulating. It returns and re-circulates the gaze, revisits and re-selects the traumatic memories. Memories are fluid when our gaze moves. In a way, *Space of Death* becomes an exploration of the difference between the real and the fictitious, the authentic and the artificial, the mediated and the non-mediated. The screens cease to offer the translucent surface as Baudrillard argues, the reflexive depth of a mirror but rather a non-reflective, smooth operational surface of communication, where both the public and the private collide or integrate, and consequently, the spectacle ceases to be a purely public domain. The private is neither merely enigmatic too. Memories are never always personal when spaces of commemorating their violence are public, no?

Confronted by an empty vertical passageway, I hope that audience members would first feel lost when the door opens for their entrance. Yet, it is the essence of this emptiness that one becomes acutely aware of the space. Being lost does not imply losing the way; when we cry aloud that we are lost, we often mean that we cannot find the way. The lighting of the candles, however feeble they are, aid in illuminating the place, thus guiding the spectators towards their “destination.” In this light, they are what I regard as hope. Although my piece speaks about death and separation, hope is always alive. It is life that matters in this performance and space. The candles thus symbolize and celebrate the spirit of optimism. Short-lived as they are, they glow. Any space of death — translated or translatable — contains breath, an essence of life. Time punctuates: it arrives, it sustains... it stops. Landscapes breathe. Memories renew. Bodies move.

As a director, I embrace the directorial concepts of Grotowski and Suzuki: to focus on the actor and the actor’s art. Both their directorial philosophies speak closely to me because I like a practice that places high demands on the actor and relies on minimal resources. In my mind, there is nothing more interesting than the human body and the human voice. My “obsession” is pushing the body beyond certain boundaries, to use the body to its maximum potential. Technology on stage leaves me cold, for it is merely a fulfillment of machinery. This explains why I need a live body in this installation art, one that moves in, within and out of it.

Having Garnica as a still body standing on an elevated platform, looming from above at the outset of the performance is a deliberate choice: I mean to hang the audience in the air, tempting them into anticipating what Garnica would do next. I must say that even this simple act of standing still for a prolonged duration of five minutes demands much investment from Garnica in terms of physical movement and energies, as well as emotional concentration. Sustaining this position of confinement, in Butoh epistemology, is to work through the inherent tension within a body. Unfolding herself, searching her body down the platform, journeying a path across the ends of the room... all of these require precision, patience and perseverance. She has to exercise each movement with exactitude, such that each movement became a physical action. Grotowski's conscientious differentiation between movements and physical actions serves as my source of inspiration:

It is easy to confuse physical actions with movements. If I am walking toward the door, it is not an action but a movement. But if I am walking toward the door to contest 'your stupid questions,' to threaten you that I will break up the conference, there will be a cycle of little actions and not just movement. This cycle of little actions will be related to my contact with you, my way of perceiving your reactions; when walking toward the door, I will still keep some 'controlling look' toward you (or I will listen) to know if my threat is working. So it will not be walk as movement, but something much more complex around the fact of walking.⁹

Every Butoh movement that Garnica performs is a physical action that belongs to a series of narrative actions. Vis-à-vis moving, stopping and positioning, she narrates the metaphors evoked by images and texts of the video presentation. Because she moves with the text, one can feel more acutely the juxtaposition of a body moving in space against the two-dimensional still images and text on the screens. I had instructed Garnica not to lift her feet from the ground when she resumes a standing posture from stillness, not to release the touch of one part of her body with another until it becomes a necessary (and thus violent) breaking point of separating and alienating the next nearest body. I want the spectators to watch her process of struggling, and how she works her body against the force of gravity. It is part of the aesthetics in this scene that she manifests the inherent tension of such actions, and harnesses it into an aesthetical quality. I want her struggle to be beautiful. Says who that cruelty or pain lacks beauty? Can one not feel the bliss of nostalgia too?

Much of my choreography for Garnica is planned specifically not to conceal her embarrassment, fatigue or resistance: Rather, it provides her outlets of struggling or working through each action thoroughly, while experiencing its sensation within its every minute. Her practice of resisting the impulse to lift her feet (or body) from the ground expounds upon Suzuki's way of acting: the use of feet as the basis of a stage performance. As the Japanese avant-garde theatre director points out:

9. See Richards, Thomas. *At Work with Grotowski on Physical Actions*. New York & London: Routledge, 2001. 76

A performance begins when the actor's feet touch the ground, a wooden floor, a surface, when he first has the sensation of putting down roots; it begins in another sense when he lifts himself lightly from that spot. The actor composes himself on the basis of his sense of contact with the ground, by the way in which his body makes contact with the floor.¹⁰

Suzuki's note is subtly particular for the themes conveyed in this scene, because much of what we would interpret as emotional anguish and physical agony from the images of the slides are afflicted by historical experiences (for instance: the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the 1976 Tang Shan Earthquake, and the 1989 Tiananmen Incident) that have literally uprooted individuals and communities, from their homelands, loved ones, and consequently their own memories. Having Garnica rooted to the elevated platform at the beginning of the performance is thus an allegorical form of resistance. In ordinary life, we have little consciousness of our feet, and hence very limited experiential understanding of "rootedness." Through witnessing the actors' attempt at resisting the force of gravity, it is my hope that we can come to understand how the body establishes its relation to the ground through its feet, that the ground and the floor are not disjoint entities. We are part of the ground. Our very beings will return to the earth when we die.

During my collaboration with Garnica, it intimidated me initially to push an actor into areas of denial, to find locked room inside her body and compel her to enter it. Memory is a matter of temporal continuity. It configures the past, the present and the future in synch with our bodies. It locates in the flesh a site of cultural and political maneuver. Realization dawned on me during the rehearsals that I was constantly astonished by the amount of grief that people carry inside them. I read Wilhelm Reich's work vividly; he theorizes that the body retains suppressed emotion and memories, and that pain is an expression of these. A living body is a sophisticated net of instincts, intensities, energetic points and currents through which sensational and motor processes collaborate with saved bodily memory, and a code operates with shocks. Witnessing Garnica unfold, create resistance between herself and the ground, and walk across a pathway in painstakingly slow motion is excruciating for me. I find no other explanation for my sensibility, except to see our bodies as being far more powerful instruments of emotions than we would have imagined them to be. What haunts me most is that even though we are our own owners, we never truly know the limits of our bodies in retaining suppressed emotional or physical pain. We are at our own mercy: our bodies and our memories.

The notion of music as a tool to disturb and titillate intrigues me. Although music pleases me spiritually, I find it difficult to discover new music that sustains my excitement for a prolonged period of time,. Aesthetically beautiful music is too common, yet aesthetically purposeful music is so rare. Personally, I direct and curate with a strong sense of rhythm and sound: I hear the musicality of a piece of work. In this scene, I need

10. See Suzuki, Tadashi. *The Way of Acting*. Trans. J. Thomas Rimer. United States of America: Theatre Communications Group, 2000. 8.

background music as part of creating an atmosphere: one for real space-time-field (when audience members enter and sit) and another for theatrical space-time field (when Garnica performs her Butoh piece). Bulgarian composer, Arvo Pärt's violin and piano music (*Spiegel Im Spiegel* and *Für Alina*) is an accidental blessing. Minimalist and almost identical in tonal variations, both pieces produce a hypnotic effect that fit the atmosphere evoked in the piece. One becomes equally interested in hearing the "in-between" emptiness of each tone, while being attracted to their unsophisticated melodic progression. The essential principle of Pärt's poetics — that even the most minimal means suffice to effect a difference — informs once again, the Zen-like aesthetics of this scene.

Garnica had asked me during one rehearsal, "Why choose death?" Coincidentally, someone also asked the same question when I was staging *Death of Memory Mist* last fall. I have always loved stories about the end of things. Perhaps they confirm some inner understanding we all have that nothing lasts forever. Each material being is a fleeting moment, in time and space. It is as if there is something comforting, restful even, in an ineluctable march toward a fated end. Such is the axiom of Zen teachings. Simple and straightforward as the philosophy may seem, it is just so difficult as a practice in reality.

Conceptualizing this scene contains profound personal meanings for me. I am arriving at a stage in my life with much sadness within me. I am grieving. My energy level is comparatively low, though my intensity still maintains its height. I recently discover from our society, that it generally handles a personality of both high energy level and intensity better than one with low but highly intense energy. I take it as my responsibility as an artist to make this work speak through me so that it resonates for others. I have little respect for artists who claim to create art that necessitates a demarcation of professional and personal contexts. Such processes of constructing art are neither honest nor truthful: they are at best politically accurate, at worst self-protective. Art must be about maintaining the fragile line between one's personal world and its social context, addressing the inherent tension that surrounds this boundary. The more I grieve, the harder I ought to work at ensuring my project to be less than self-obsessive, lest it becomes a selfish art. For a long time, I have worried and feared that my effort will ultimately offer no more than commodifying the horrors of death. I now cope with such ambivalence, seeking comfort during the revisits of my fears that we mourn the dead not as much as the meaning of their death. Nor as much as the effect of a fixation on the past that inhibits our exit and entrance to and from somewhere. Our repression of memories constitutes human society's deeply embedded inclination of avowing personal and cultural damages inflicted upon its people by their past and present. It is our repression that expresses an ironic truth: we learn to grieve so as to heal.