



## *Walking Through Walls*

**intimate nocturnal encounters at the Centraltheater Leipzig  
by urban (col)laboratory – Helen Stratford and Diana Wesser.**

*I'm Lore. You might have seen me before, as I'm working as an actress at this theatre. When you think about theatre, you might generally think about theatre plays and visible people – like me. But tonight, I will enjoy being just a voice. A voice that is guiding you through the walls of the Centraltheater; providing an encounter with the things behind the things.*

A corridor walked over-and-over, an appointment missed night-after-night, so many ghost stories are based on these very particular incidents, and these stories become the ways places are remembered.

*Walking Through Walls* was an audio walk-for-one that took place during the late-night post-performance routines of the Centraltheater, Leipzig as part of the festival play!LEIPZIG, June 2010. The walk asked how the theatre is produced, what defines its boundaries and what hidden gestures and routines happen after dark and out of sight to reconstruct its places everyday.



### **The Centraltheater**

Located in the inner city of Leipzig the Centraltheater inhabits a building that has continually been under reconstruction. Constructed as an entertainment hall and operetta theatre in 1901/1902 and practically demolished in 1943 during world war two, it was reconstructed, rebuilt and converted between 1954 and 1957, during the GDR, into Leipzig's playhouse called 'Schauspielhaus', and has subsequently undergone a number of renovations at the hand of various architects and changes in directorship.



When the theatre re-opened in its latest guise in 2008, with the new director Sebastian Hartmann and predominantly new artistic team of directors, dramaturges and actors, the opening motto, was 'Ende Neu' or 'End New.' Hartman gave the building a new yet old name: Centraltheater to underline a new beginning after a 13 year long era of the former director Wolfgang Engel. In the first monthly programme it is written: "To everyone who can hear us! Everything instead of theater! The building belongs to everyone who wants!" ('An jeden, der uns hört! Alles statt Theater. Das Haus gehört jedem, der will!')



With the new directorship came a series of performances that radically transgressed the auditorium; pushing what a theatre production could be. In several productions including *Publikumsbeschimpfung*<sup>1</sup> and *Maschinenwinter*<sup>2</sup> live video screenings relay to the audience activities that take place behind a wall, curtain or outside of the theatre altogether - the actors leave the stage and even the theater completely while the audience remain.<sup>3</sup> The performance *Germania Songs*, by Danish artist duo SIGNA, took place throughout all the public areas of the Centraltheater building except the stage and auditorium, positioning the audience as participants of a lavish party and witnesses of a bloody crime. In *Schwarztaxi*<sup>4</sup> an audience of three sits on the backseat of a taxicab and is driven through the city. A sound installation, mixing music, sounds and voices, is combined with dialogues and actions, that take place on the front seats and outside the car, allowing the theatre play to take place in the cab and on the streets just beyond the taxi windows, merging reality and fiction.



1 director: Sebastian Hartmann

2 director: Martin Laberenz

3 *Maschinenwinter* didn't take place in the Centraltheater, but in the nearby Skala, the second stage of the playhouse Leipzig.

4 director: Pernille Skansaar and Sebastian Hartmann



As the first monthly programme states, a key aim of the Centraltheater is to dismantle the barriers between the theatre building and the broader urban landscape of the city: the landscape just beyond its walls. Like the performances described above, new technologies of making and conceptualizing theatre play a key role in this dismantling. Informed by wider developments in contemporary theatre practice and responding to what Walter Benjamin might describe as a “desire to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly,”<sup>5</sup> these new technologies of theatre practice combine the biographical, historical and fictional – bringing ‘normal’ under-represented practices and people to the stage.<sup>6</sup> However, while fostering an apparent immediacy, unmediated and even authentic experience, in fact, these new ways of producing theatre make the illusion more complete. In their aim to develop and challenge the past and the classical, contemporary theatre practices continue to rely on traditional relationships of illusion that depend on the visual exclusion of a plethora of hidden practices.



Like contemporary theatre productions, *Walking through Walls* explores the production of theatre beyond the space of the auditorium. However, instead of hiding those who produce these spaces or incorporating them into a theatre production, it explores how an audio-walk-for-one might overlay these hidden structures with the space of theatre; making present the ghosts that continue to haunt contemporary theatre practice in order to challenge traditional relationships and extend the potential for experiencing the theatre otherwise.



### Ghost Walking

The most recent tenants of the Centraltheater depend on people whose presence in the building bears witness to the passing of many directors and shifts in theatre productions. For these people the current ‘New’ is but one in an apparently never-ending succession, in opposition to their position in the theatre which remains constant and enduring.



Rather than a theatre piece – expected in the context of a theatre building – for *Walking Through Walls* we decided to make a walk that focused specifically on people who work in the theatre but who are meant to be invisible. We spent 10 days talking to cleaners, ticket sellers, administrative staff, dressers, service engineers, evening services, technicians and maintenance staff – recording their stories in order to review the theatre as a stage for everyday performances, rituals and routines from the perspective of those whose functions are hidden from view of the audience, yet whose daily repetition is central to the functioning of the theatre. Ghosts that creep in out of the corner of an eye “through the squint glance of a nervous stare,” but which viewed straight on “vanish, disappear and cease to exist.”<sup>7</sup>



In contemporary artists’ work the introduction of another layer and another voice in combination with walking is nothing new. Artists like Janet Cardiff combine precise spatial descriptions with invented characters to evoke imagined stories and spaces. At the same time, the work of LIGNA draws on more clearly historically and/or sociopolitically related descriptions of buildings and places; giving instructions to subversively engage/intervene in the everyday of the specific site.

Janet Cardiff’s audio-walk *The Missing Voice: Case Study B* (1999) is an ongoing social sculpture, installed at Whitechapel Gallery London, that guides participants on a physical and psychological journey through the streets of Spitalfields, east London. In his paper on *The Missing Voice: Case Study B*, urban and cultural geographer David Pinder refers to Cardiff’s work as “ghostly footsteps.” He describes how through the walk Cardiff “directs attention to the significance of dreams and ghostly matters for

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1988, p.223

<sup>6</sup> e.g. ‘Karl-May-Festspiele Leipzig’ by Rainald Grebe

<sup>7</sup>Jane Graves: *Clutter*, in *Issues in Architecture and Design*, University of East London, Vol.5 No.2 1998, p. 63



thinking about the real and imagined spaces of the city” and “activates the imagination in the production of a different sense of space and time.”<sup>8</sup> It is this notion of a ghost, or rather the idea of haunting which troubles fixed notions of buildings and places, that is expanded in this retelling of *Walking Through Walls*.



In *The Missing Voice: Case Study B* the stories told during the audio-walk are elusive and fragmentary, constructing scenarios and narratives in the mind of the walker. Similarly, in Cardiff's video walk *Ghost Machine* (2005) at HAU Theatre Berlin, the narrative is not clear, taking the walker through a maze of staircases and backrooms parallel to a story of a woman's journey to visit a man in an apartment, feared to be hiding somewhere in the theatre. Similarly, Hans-Peter Litscher's *Die Tausend Tode der Maria Magdalena Brettschneider* (2001 at Schauspielhaus Hamburg) is a live guided walk that focuses on fictional traces. In this case the walk's narrator adopts the role of someone who happens upon the diary of a woman who has been secretly living behind the scenes of the theatre, collecting deaths of theatre plays. The narrator retells her story whilst walking with participants, showing them many objects that prove her existence. Both *Ghost Machine* and *Die Tausend Tode der Maria Magdalena Brettschneider* invent characters and fictive stories to bring attention to the ghostly side of a theatre, however there are 'real' theatre ghosts behind the stages that have their own stories to tell. Rather than constructed narratives, in the sense of coming from elsewhere or introducing a mysterious plot, the narratives in *Walking Through Walls* are comprised entirely of those that exist in the theatre through the actions, presence and voices of its ghostly inhabitants



The notion of haunting, by hidden practices, places and people, has been variously theorised by geographers and spatial theorists. Cultural and social geographers, such as Avery Gordon and John Wylie, have explored how the ghostly destabilizes the familiar while evoking shared histories; providing a different sort of knowledge of place that confounds settled orders of past and present.<sup>9</sup> This challenge to static assumptions of spatial environments that haunting offers, forms the starting point of the five sections of the following retelling of *Walking Through Walls*. Positioning excerpts of the walk alongside selected spectral theories, the five sections retrace the ghostly paths of five hidden fragments in the theatre: routines, practices, voices, technologies and places. As they progress these fragments explore how *Walking Through Walls* activated an expanded idea of the production of theatre. The walk itself concluded with the handover of a small book in which people could leave us a message and an envelope containing a photograph of a hidden place within the theatre building. This retelling also concludes with a selection of these comments, providing a remnant of thoughts and observations that describe how the walk fostered a different sort of knowledge of the theatre building; an intimate encounter with the wider material, symbolic and emotional parameters that haunt it everyday.



### 1. Hidden Routines



*Do you feel the presence of people passing, meeting, waiting? Haunting this place everyday, retracing their steps? There is one woman who has been passing here nearly everyday since 1962. In fact, it is said that between 120 and 500 people work here, and nearly all enter through the very doorway you just entered.*

*Walking Through Walls* took place during the night time routines of the theatre. A member of the theatre's evening services passed the lone walker an unmarked envelope containing a letter. The letter set the scene for the walk, which led the walker, guided by the voice of an actor from the house ensemble, around the darkened and nearly abandoned theatre. The solitary nature of the walk provoked a personal,

<sup>8</sup> David Pinder: *Ghostly Footsteps: Voices, Memories and Walks in the City*, in *Ecumene*, 8 (1) 2001, p. 1 & 7.

<sup>9</sup> See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996 and John Wiley, *The Spectral Geographies of W.G. Sebald*, in *Cultural Geographies* 2007 14,p. 171-188.



private and intimate experience. It focused on the position of the walker who became a participant, through the locations they were instructed to take up in relation to the physical spaces of the theatre, and a performer through the chance meetings they encountered with night time workers.

*Here you might hear a gentle click, when the cloakroom disc is taken and an article of clothing is hung up. Some people think the spirit of the petit bourgeoisie haunt this place. Like a ghost repeating the same path over and over, you only start to know the audience when you see the same people again and again, and some have been coming for years, attached to the events, things and places that shaped their lives. However, these ghosts are troubled, there is a gap between old and new, the old audience arrives almost one hour before the show and the new - one minute before or 10 minutes late, always in a big group and casually dressed.*

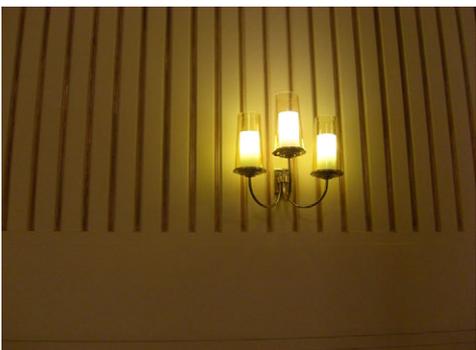


In *Ghosts in the City*, Michel de Certeau describes how ghosts are characteristically attached to places, events and things that produced them, routines repeated night after night, day after day. For de Certeau, “wordless histories,” including walking and dressing, shape places. He describes how they “trace out memories that no longer have a place ... insinuate different spaces ... [and] create another dimension.” For him “they are the keys to the city; they give access to what it is: mythical.”<sup>10</sup> In *Walking Through Walls* the clearly-directed walker embodied both the highly controlled and hierarchical structure of the theatre but also the idea of a place produced by the repetitive actions of those working there – like ghosts walking a repeated path – sometimes interacting with others and sometimes alone. The walker is like a ghost but at the same time encounters are different for each walker – each haunting is different because it concerns different walkers and produces different relationships.

## 2. Hidden Practices



*Take the stairs beside you, and come with me to the next level. ... Look at the wall with the golden stripes. Do you see the lamps? There are four lamps with three lights each - one on the right, two in the middle and one on the left side. The person who opens thousands of doors everyday has a small room inside the walls behind the left lights. Inside her room there are three chairs where she sits everyday with two colleagues. They have a radio, a small coffee table, and the pictures on the inner side of the door tell you they have a heart for animals and children. Have you any idea what they do there? I've heard that the theatre renders them invisible and ghostly. During the twice-daily performance of the Christmas Fairytale, they wait in their room, hiding when the audience are in the foyer, and cleaning up once they are gone.*

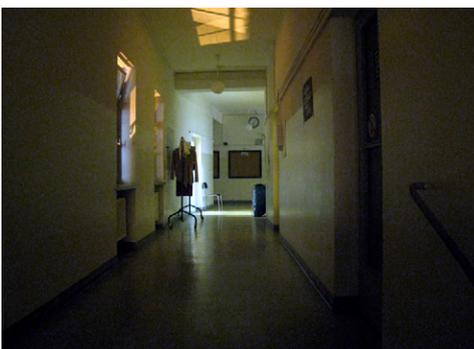


Throughout the walk the walker encountered spaces and practices usually excluded from public experience of the theatre. Exploring some of the theatre's more intimate and forgotten spaces, including tiny back stairs, smoking balconies and the cleaner's room the walk used anecdotes and directions to contrast these intimate spaces with larger histories, questioning what lies behind the walls, under the floorboards, and above the ceiling.



*And now look beneath your feet. Can you see something? Recently [the cleaners] helped in the reconstruction of a performance taking place everywhere throughout the entire building – except the auditorium. They carefully extricated sequins and confetti from vomit, blood and party balloons re-placing them around remaining pools of blood to re-create the impression of an ongoing party. Conserving one special moment for 10 days. After the performance, all the walls had to be painted over again, to cover the blood stains, as if nothing happened, as if no one had been there.*

<sup>10</sup> Michel De Certeau, *Ghosts in the City in The Practice of Everyday Life*, Volume 2: Living and Cooking, Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, Minneapolis, MN Minnesota Press 1988, p. 142.



In *Locating Haunting: a Ghost Hunters Guide*, Julian Holloway and James Kneale describe how ghosts disrupt the normalized spatiality of things through the “disordering of how space and its object relations come to be known through practice.” They describe how “this making strange of the affordance of the object and its attendant spatiality is arguably unsettling: no longer in their place, no longer offering their normal course of practicable action, dislocated ghostly materialities disrupt our senses of space.”<sup>11</sup> Through the anecdotes and detailed re-viewing of hitherto unknown hidden practices the walker in *Walking through Walls* was exposed to unfamiliar and out of place actions. The retelling of these particular experiences of the theatre provided a ghostly defamiliarising presence of the “things behind the things,” disrupting and dislocating practiced senses of space.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Hidden Voices

*Let's go on. Take the 5 steps forwards. We are now passing room number 20. So many names... Behind some of these doors are other actors, being dressed or just waiting for the invisible voice to call them or maybe they are sleeping. Behind others you could find those who wait for the actors and actresses, care for them, and in one room alone you might find:*

- 8 boxes of chocolates*
- 15 boxes of cookies*
- a crown made from crocheted wool*
- a pair of fake glasses*
- 17 tights of different colors*
- a rubber bat*
- a paper fig leaf*
- a pot of coffee on the go*
- 2 living gold fish*
- 6 silver bells*
- 128 photographs from bygone days*
- 62 best wishes for toi toi toi*
- a small toy horse caked in dust*

*(...)*

Half-way through *Walking Through Walls* the walker was lead through darkened corridors outside dressing, wardrobe and props rooms. The only light came from the semi-translucent windows of the locked doors to the rooms, hinting at the colours, shapes and forms of things that lay within. At the same time the audio track described the intense activities and relationships that unfolded behind these doors everyday; describing the remnants of repeated rituals and souvenirs hoarded from years of performances.

*Behind one of these doors lives a woman from make up – for 48 years she has been making ‘problems disappear below her hands.’ In other rooms four women from Wardrobe continually repair, re clean and re prepare costumes for every performance, reclaiming time by deleting all traces from the night before. One actress has been eating breakfast here with them for 40 years (for a while the cleaners came too) sharing coffee with the goddesses of chocolate and cookies who keep away stage fright and bad emotions. Some of the theatre people think they are the real ghosts of the theatre and others think that any knowledge of their ghostly presence threatens to ruin the illusion.*

<sup>11</sup> Julian Holloway and James Kneale, *Locating Haunting: a Ghost Hunter's Guide*, in *Cultural Geographies* 2008 15, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 164.



In *Mundane Hauntings*, geographer Tim Edensor has written how “while ghosts can be unsettling and scary, they can also be rooted, friendly and affirming ... provoking a homely recognition of that which was supposedly over and done with.” In its exploration of everyday collections of repeated and unaddressed actions and activities, *Walking Through Walls* explored the traces of old habits and routines that refuse to move on. Despite the extensive changes of people and rooms under the different directors, several rooms have endured uninterrupted for about 50 years, each containing an unofficial archive of personal memories growing daily through the practices of its inhabitants. Friendly and affirming, embedded in familiar, lingering fixtures and features, this archive of people and practices, recorded by the endless souvenirs of performances amongst piles of washed towels, are what Edensor might describe as “ubiquitous remnants of a shared history of the everyday,” that, “pervade everyday space, and are etched onto its material fabric,” providing a living trace of the past in the present.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Hidden technologies



*Now look down the corridor, there is another door in the distance at the end. Can you see the square hole above it, covered by a gold lattice?*

*From a space between two walls and through this hole flow around two million cubic metres of air everyday. It is coming in from the two holes on the floor either side of the door and going out above you. It began downstairs at Bosestrasse. On its journey here it has already changed its name twice, from fresh air to supply air. After you have been breathing it, it will become exhaust air, then go on to be outgoing air before leaving the building.*



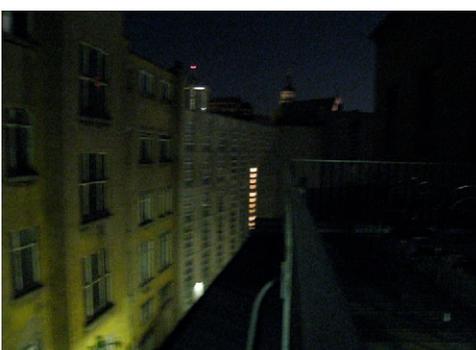
In the retelling of the everyday and hidden gestures of the Centraltheater those made present by the building itself were also brought into focus. Not only did *Walking Through Walls* explore the unaddressed practices of those working directly with actors, actresses and the Centraltheater's public spaces it also explored technical accomplishments of the building whose presence habitually went unnoticed.



*In the switch room in the basement, with no daylight or air, you can meet one woman who for 28 years has been circulating and modifying the temperature of the air, re-naming it with a system, parts of which remain unchanged from 1956. Soon the time will come when these parts will be obsolete and so will have to be re-constructed by-hand. She says that if she is imperceptible then she is doing a good job.*

Edensor describes how cities contain “traces of the past” that “linger in mundane” and “unspectacular realms,” haunting the idealistic visions of the present.<sup>14</sup> While making visible that which has been consigned to the basement, the tracing of soon-to-be outmoded technical visions recast the theatre as a palimpsest composed of different temporal elements. At the same time through the endlessly re-circulated air that travels between them, the city and the theatre are brought together - challenging the idea that the theatre has somehow become separated from that which lies beyond its walls.

#### 5. Hidden Places



*Do you remember how you got here?*

*Somewhere in the auditorium, in the Circle is a special seat that is always empty because they say that in the 60s during a performance a guest died there.*

<sup>13</sup> Tim Edensor: *Mundane Hauntings: Communiting through the Phantasmagoric working-class spaces of Manchester, England*, in: *Cultural Geographies* 2008 15, p. 315.

<sup>14</sup> Edensor: *Mundane Hauntings*, p. 314



*Above the auditorium are thousands and thousands of small wires from which the ceiling is suspended.*

*Somewhere beneath us are the foundations from a building built in 1901*

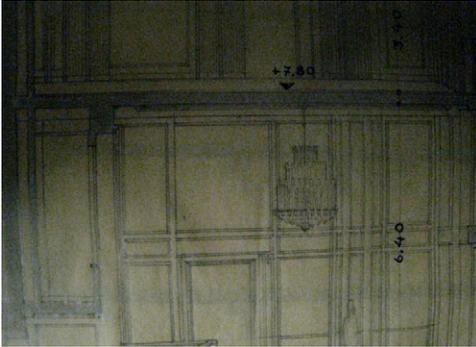
*Somewhere in the basement is a long corridor where shoes were once stored*

*The same corridor is said to be a bowling alley*

*Somewhere in the basement are names of rooms that no longer exist*

*Somewhere in the building reside the plans of a building that was never constructed*

*The 'new' theatre building that 'rose from the ruins' in 1957 contained and built on the old foundations. Yet it failed to be built according to the plans. The discrepancy was revealed during the 2002 renovations when the latest architects aim to 'get as close as possible to the thinking of our forefathers and uncover a piece of history' resulted in a puzzle of improvements out of which only the auditorium and foyers were 'made new' while the rest of the building remained.*



Like the City around it the walk focused on how the theatre retains traces of failed plans, visionary projects, and sites of collective endeavour and pleasure that have been superseded. In making these fragments present it explored how they disrupt the conventional viewing of the production of theatre by bringing into question notions of clearly separated realms of past and present, classical and contemporary, city and theatre.

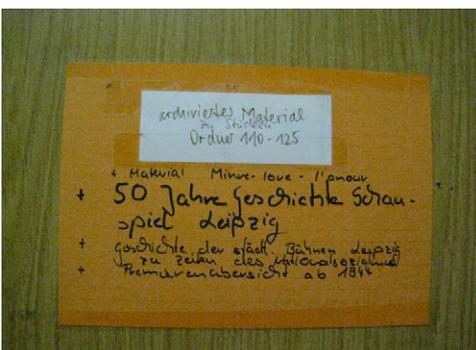


*But wait! Do you hear something? Is there music somewhere? Have a look out of the window. This little 'hole', this tiny yard, surrounded by theatre, is part of an immense nightclub that occupies several floors of the building beneath your feet. The theatre plans to increase its connection with the broader urban landscape beyond its walls, to 'open itself up to the city,' but perhaps the city already dances within its walls, permeating and infiltrating its very core with the base rhythm of the city. They say on Fridays they have the loudest party in town.*



De Certeau describes how the apparent order of urban space is "everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts and leaks of meaning." "Things extra and other ... insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order."<sup>15</sup> Likewise Edensor describes how "such excessive scraps (remnants), inconsistencies, peculiarities, incongruities, traces and conspicuous absences can contribute to the stories and legends that haunt urban space, like superfluous or additional inhabitants and extend the potential for reading and experiencing the city otherwise."<sup>16</sup> While the theatre wants to open itself into the city, the walk explored how the city is already inside the theatre in the presence of the nightclub. However, rather than acknowledge this already present connection, there are plans to close the club and to rebuild it as a new part of the theatre.

### Conclusion – Hidden Memories



*Do you see the sign on the right hand side, the orange one taped to the door with clear sticky tape? Do you see the text written with an ordinary black felt-tip pen. These lines describe the eternal history of the theatre. In these inconspicuous cupboards materials from over 70 years are kept safe. Reviews, stories and lists, not only about this building, but also about the one on the foundations of which it was built. Behind these doors lie names of people and plays. You are surrounded by them in alphabetical order. But these names are only the surface. Behind them lie all the 'things behind the things,'. People, machines, objects, memories and voices, all working together invisibly to create ephemeral moments.*

<sup>15</sup> Michel De Certeau, *Walking in the City in The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Edensor: *Mundane Hauntings*, p. 325.



In *Walking Through Walls* new places were found through reassembling ghostly fragments that overlaid the audio and the spatial, the past and the present, the hidden and the visible; provoking the walker into seeing and imagining otherwise. The presence of the hidden routines and practices productively disrupted the way the theatre was habitually experienced; the hidden voices and memories of the everyday in the collected remnants of shared histories shattered the illusion of timelessness, erupting into the present with evidence of old habits and relationships; the hidden technologies lingering in mundane and unspectacular realms, which “do their job well when they are invisible,” haunted the idealistic visions of the present; finally, the reconstruction of spatial remnants explored how the theatre is in fact already permeated by the City.



In *Walking Through Walls* the audio walk actively changed the experience of the present by allowing people to conceptualise and spatially experience the presence of the past. People strolled across a pattern of different time-moments while moving through spaces, fostering an idea of the past that is not simply visual and auditory but also spatial. In its layering of different stories, fragments and practices, this evoked a non-linear experience of time and an experience of place as an ongoing product of different consciousnesses. At the same time, in its exploration of the ‘real theatre ghosts’ *Walking Through Walls* provided space for the walker to reflect on the performativity of places in a place that claims stability to serve the production of many different places in one; acknowledging that everything is ‘produced’ while denying being produced itself.



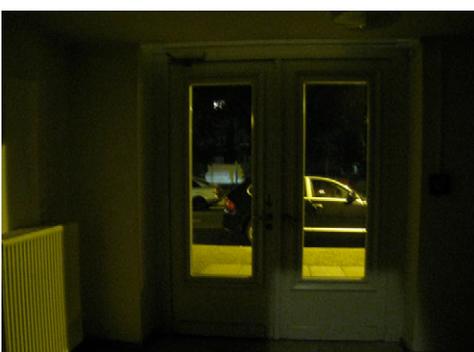
*A floor swept again and again, air re-circulated over and over, outfits re-laundered, performances re-inscribed and a building repeatedly re-constructed.*

*The Centraltheatre has always been under re-construction – continually re-emerging; assuming traces of former and future selves that, like ghosts, are neither entirely present nor completely absent.*



*But when we speak of ghosts we are often talking about apparitions that emerge from walls or the mist that takes the form of memory, or the bumps in the night that we hear. And so, if ghosts can materialise on the routes that they travel what materialises out of the traces that we have uncovered tonight – what do we make of the remnants of spaces – how do we stitch these incidences together?*

One can imagine a whole city subsumed under the perpetual memory of a singular journey repeated night after night, day after day, year after year. These are the traces that we find in a place; across a city, and maybe for this walk – and this retelling – charting these ghosts is also a form of reconstruction.



“A wonderful disorientation of rooms and doorways. There was a great curiosity to open all the doors to see what happened behind them during the day. Oneself is haunting this place like a ghost and has left a piece of oneself there. It’s shrouded in fog.”

“From today on I’ll enter the building differently than even yesterday.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> urban (coll)aboratory, *Walking Through Walls*, comments book 2010

*Walking Through Walls* will be retold and remade through the walls of Stadttheater Bremerhaven in October 2011 as part of the centenary celebrations of the theatre. [www.stadttheaterbremerhaven.de](http://www.stadttheaterbremerhaven.de)