

URBAN (COL)LABORATORY



PUBLIC INTERVENTIONS

If it means how we can re-think the power of the built environment within social, political, economic and emotional infrastructures, then we see social space as a way to expand the definition of architecture.



URBAN (COL)LABORATORY are a collaborative duo comprising architect/theorist Helen Stratford from Cambridgeshire UK and media/performance artist Diana Wesser from Leipzig, Germany. Located between performance art, architecture and writing, our process-led collaborative social practice researches the rhythms and routines by which people negotiate, define and produce everyday spaces. We realise projects that combine performance and architecture, practice and theory, intervention

and lecture. To date, outcomes have included performative walks, lectures, papers and films all produced through site-specific research that uses the body to explore the effects of the built environment; its influences on how people rest, move and live. In analysing the rhythms of daily life our practice investigates how we can rethink the power of the built environment within social, political, economic and emotional infrastructures.



COLLABORATION

Drawing on our individual backgrounds in architecture and performance, we use inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural investigative processes to engage with people and places in different ways and explore commoning practices through recorded conversations, questionnaires, architectural research, intervention and performance. Audience and participants include residents and visitors, but also those who produce and occupy

places through daily routines such as cleaners, construction workers and maintenance people. We do not simply bring something to a place or do just a walk and talk. Rather, we use the opportunities of the place to make visible its theatrical structures; highlighting hidden relationships and overlooked activities. In this way the collaborative aspect of our practice is not only between each other or the people who inhabit a place, but rather it is a collaboration with the place itself.



SITE SPECIFIC

We are interested in site specific working because we see it as an essential way to engage with and make visible different spatial perceptions and different ways of constructing knowledge about place in a very concrete way. Through productive disruptions in established physical relationships and adjacencies we make visible the built environment as stage, performer and director in order to ask how places are performed. Ultimately, through

embodying alternative strategies of using public space our practice offers new manners of acting; producing alternative social processes through spatial interventions.



Extract of the notes taken during the 'Performative Architectures' Discussion at the Showroom, London

PERFORMATIVE ARCHITECTURES

Ongoing research project since 2011

Performative Architectures is a research project by Helen Stratford and Diana Wesser. The project aims to open up possibilities for exchange, dialogues, extend existing networks and develop new practice directions. Kindly supported by Arts Council England and part of the Live Art Escalator programme, the project has funding to make links / build networks with artists working between architecture and performativity to explore alternate practices in public space. It was recently the subject of a discussion event to explore performativity within social, participatory and critical spatial practices. hosted by the Showroom, London with Emily Pethick, Doina, Kathrin Böhm and Jane Rendell. One of the current outcomes is a DIY leaflet which evolved out of the discussion and was launched at Wysing Arts Centre Department of Overlooked Histories event on the 12th November 2011.



WALKING THROUGH WALLS

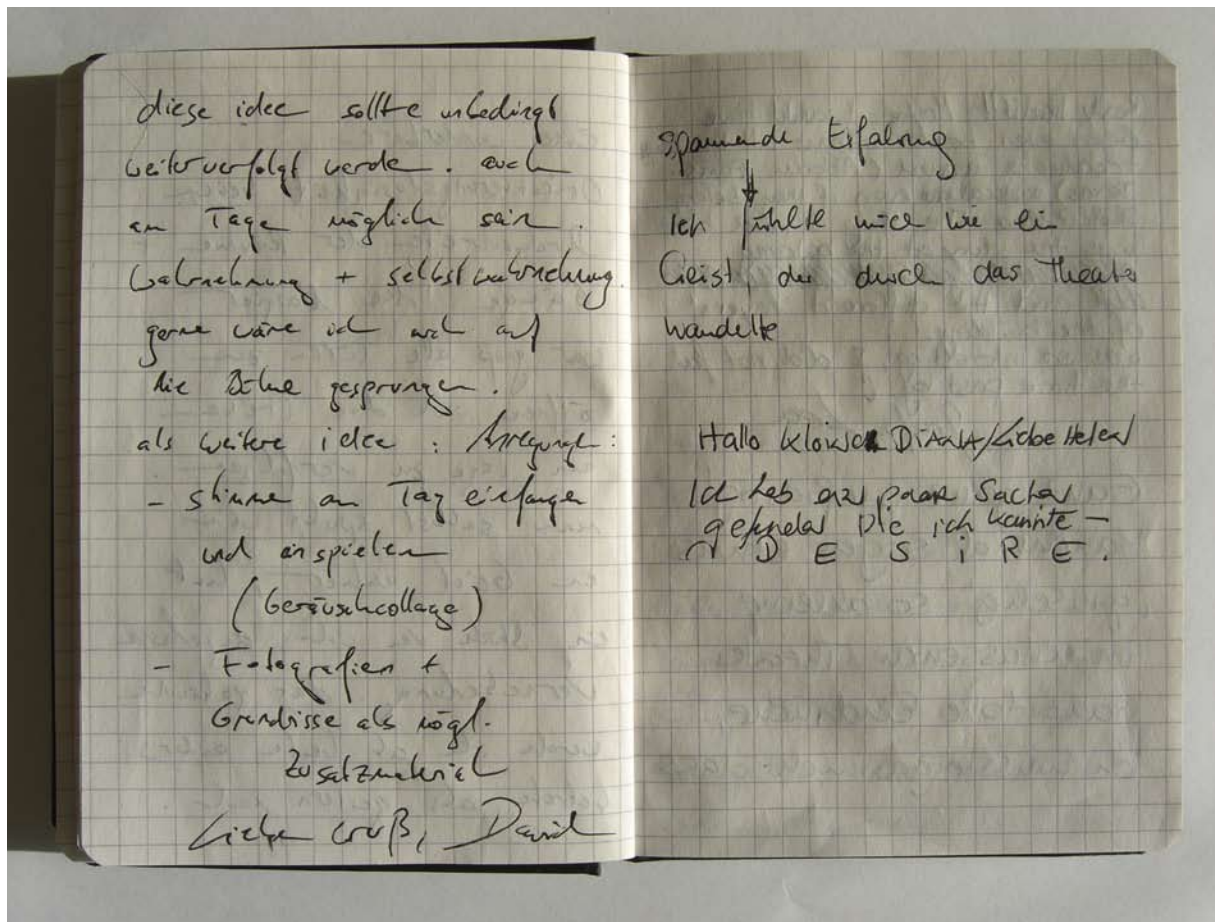
Audio walk-for one at nighttime,

Centraltheater Leipzig (DE), Festival play! LEIPZIG – Movement in Urban Space, 24 – 27 June 2010

Stadttheater Bremerhaven, Premier: 2 October 2011, Season 2011/2012

Exploring some of the more intimate and forgotten spaces of theatres, including tiny back stairs and make up tables the walk contrasts these intimate spaces with larger histories, questioning what lies behind the walls, under the floorboards, and above the ceiling. The walk focuses specifically on people who work in the theatre but who are meant to be invisible. We're spending a week talking to cleaners, ticket sellers, administrative staff, etc. 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 produces the theatre.

The audio walk-for-one walk takes place during the nighttime routines. A member of the theatre's evening services passes the walker an unmarked envelope containing a letter. The letter sets the scene for the walk, which leads the walker, guided by the voice of an actor from the house ensemble, around the darkened corridors of the theatre. It focuses on the position of the walker who becomes a participant, following instructions to move through the theatre, and a performer through the chance meetings they encounter with nighttime workers.



WALKING THROUGH WALLS CENTRALTHEATER LEIPZIG : COMMENTS BOOK

"Walking through Walls' - a wonderful idea - I've seen the well-known rooms old and new!"

"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"

"Very, very brilliant! Sometimes even a bit "scary" so alone in the abandoned theatre. Very amazing impressions, I didn't know the club is that close! Makes me pensive about time, people, coming and going ..."

"Great work to all of us - poetic!!! ... should be repeated."

"A loving work about our house and the 'ghosts' that are working and living here! A present to our theatre."

"A very nice idea to experience the theatre from a very different, personal side."



INTERVALS

A collective audio-led time travel into the past and the future of Copenhagen at three different Metro stations, at the same time. In collaboration with Giraff Graff (DK), Metropolis Biennale Copenhagen, August 2011

Do you believe in time travel?

One of your fellow time travellers believes:

“Time is not passing. YOU are passing through TIME.”

‘INTERVALS’ was an audio-led time travel into the past and the future of Copenhagen that took place in three different metro stations at the same time. Two different audio files (future and past) with stories and instructions were only available for 24 hours before the flashmob began. The audience met up at a metro station with the flashmob performance soundtrack on their own mp3 player or smartphone and started it exactly at 7pm. Both groups were guided individually, keeping them invisible from each other and the general public for most of the time, but occasionally creating visible group images. For participants, it was also an invitation to observe the scene around them in a new light. In the end the two groups were invited to meet, talk and exchange their experiences.

The two texts were written in collaboration with people who have ideas or notions about Copenhagen. Based on interviews with people about their personal memories and future visions of the city the performance walk explored how everyday ways of living in Copenhagen have changed and asked how will it be in the future? What are and were the plans, the desired designs and what spatial identities do they foster? In this flashmob performance, the present is infected by past dreams and future visions.

**HELEN STRATFORD
& DIANA WESSER**

Practising Wysing:

10 ways to misuse a building.

1 PRACTICE: feeling the void

PLACE: low wall at the end of the central courtyard.

CONSTRUCTION: 225mm solid grey engineering brick on strip footings.

ACTIVITY: lie on your back on the wall, arms and feet stretched out into the sky for as long as you can.

2 PRACTICE: facing the future

PLACE: dark grey line in ground between studio building and central courtyard.

CONSTRUCTION: grey engineering bricks laid on edge between grooved timber decking and loose laid gravel.

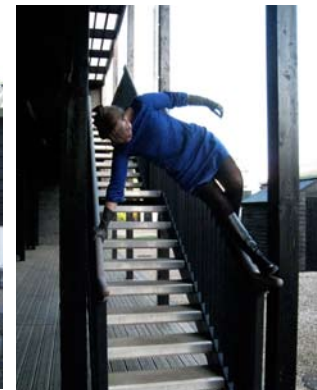
ACTIVITY: walk along the line, towards the gallery. Avoid stepping on the timber decking and / or the gravel. Look straight ahead with a smile.

3 PRACTICE: feeling weightless

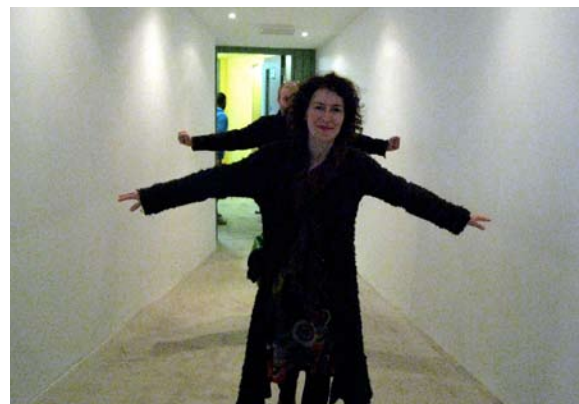
PLACE: in-between handrails at foot of stairs to the studios.

CONSTRUCTION: 40mm diameter timber handrails, supported by steel balustrades painted black to reflect local vernacular found in nearby farmhouse.

ACTIVITY: using the handrails find a position in the air where you don't touch the stairs at all, hold for approximately 10 seconds.



PRACTICE 2: facing the future



PRACTICE 9: losing touch

FLYER / images: left: PRACTICE 5: not taking the easiest way (version 2) / right: PRACTICE 3: feeling weightless

PRACTISING WYSING: 10 WAYS TO MISUSE A BUILDING

10 choreographic instructions to adapt a gallery

WAC: Partnering, Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge (UK), 16 October – 28 November 2010

Practising Wysing is an invitation to an exhibition audience to become part of an exhibition themselves, while experiencing an unusual view of a contemporary arts centre. Architectural information about 10 places in the complex of buildings that make up Wysing Art Centre was combined with instructions for using these places other than intended. A leaflet containing this information was made available in the show, displayed next to an image of children playing on the handrails of the entrance ramp. During the opening the audience were invited to try out the instructions in a collaborative performance.



CHOREOGRAPHING KNOWLEDGE

Murray Edwards College, Cambridge (UK)

Performative walk. Nightjar & Cambridge University Festival of Ideas October 2009 & October 2011

Murray Edwards / New Hall Cambridge Phases 1 and 2 was built in 1964 by architects: Chamberlain, Powell and Bonn to accommodate the third women's college of Cambridge University, founded in 1954. A weeklong period of research followed by 3 performative walks focused specifically on people working at the edges of the college. **urban (col)laboratory** spent a week talking to Porters, Gardeners, Administrative staff, Caterers, Chefs, Librarians and Maintenance staff to review the college as a stage for everyday performances, rituals and routines from the perspective of those whose functions are academically marginally located, yet whose daily repetition is central to the functioning of the college.

The 3 performative walks for groups of 20 - 30 took place during the evening routines of the college and focused on the position of the audience who became both participants and performers through the locations they were invited to take up in relation to the physical spaces of the college. Staff were invited to take part in the walk, including the Arts Collection Curator who welcomed people and held master keys to all doors en route, the Night Porter who recited the college rules and the Head Gardener who introduced the garden routines while, by torchlight. audience members sipped a hot cup of tea made with garden herbs.



HOME IS WHERE THE PIANO IS – How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?

Participatory project, performative Interventions

CROP MARKS, Contemporary Art Trail, Orchard Park, Cambridge (UK), 28 – 31 August 2009

In the frame of *CROP MARKS* art trail, **urban (col)laboratory** explored ‘at homeness’ for one week in Orchard Park. Orchard Park is a major, mixed use development currently under construction on the northern fringe of Cambridge. The site will eventually include 900 new homes, public open spaces, commercial units and community facilities. Occupied Houses: 508 (July 2009).

Rather than a final work or object, the process, the action of research and the ‘working’ became the work itself. A simple question ‘How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?’ became a key way of meeting as many people as we could in 5 days. We explored the specificity of ‘at homeness’ by asking people who live and work in Orchard Park for instructions regarding what we can do to feel more at home; putting this advice into practice in different locations across the development. For example we borrowed a dog from and went for a walk together with the family. By asking people how we could feel at home and what home means for people in Orchard Park., the place really felt at home to us for a moment, through the connections we made intensively over one week.

The activities: “hang out your washing” / “take a dog for a walk” / “pay someone to make you feel at home” / “invite people round” / “meet as many people as you can” / “have a picnic”



FISSURES IN THE HARBOUR OF KNOWLEDGE

Performative research and walk. Ruhr University, Bochum (DE)

TANZ MACHT RAUM – RAUM MACHT TANZ, Symposium 25 April 2009

For one week **urban (col)laboratory** participated in research involving performative actions and questionnaires with students, alongside official histories of the Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) including the architect's original concept for the masterplan and a published interview with the architect professor Helmut Hentrich. Since its construction in 1962 the image of the RUB has changed from modern to depressive to monumental. Yet there are gaps in this monumental presence. Our performative walk used the spaces of the university to explore the interactions of memories, practices and place alongside inviting the audience to take part in playful and performative gestures that build on existing fissures to find potential moments of play and imagination in order to disrupt, challenge and create new places – new spaces to speak and act from.



BLIND SPOTS

Performative research, walk and lecture video. Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester (UK)

Get Lost! Psychogeography festival, 6 June 2008

Manchester Piccadilly Gardens is a public park in the centre of Manchester that was renovated in 2001, winning multiple architecture and landscape awards. Based on a 5 day long period of research including interviews with passerbys, participant observation and performative disruptions Blind Spots was a performance lecture at Piccadilly Gardens, that combined performance and architecture, practice and theory, intervention and lecture to explore the city as a stage for every day performances which construct reality. We investigated the architectural design of the Gardens, its history, the legislation that controlled the space and how these elements sometimes contrasted with and sometimes reinforced the formal and the informal actions that took place there. The lecture walk highlighted the conventions and rules that organise the 'social character' of Piccadilly Gardens, focused on what can be done and where and offered a socio-spatial critique of these structures, alongside inviting the audience to playfully intervene in the routines of Piccadilly Gardens.

The on-site research and the performance lecture formed the base for a lecture video of the same title:

<http://www.vimeo.com/8611770>

URBAN (COL)LABORATORY SELECTED PROJECTS & SCREENINGS (SINCE 2008)

- 2012 **Intervals** film-screening, Hotbed: Cambridge New Theatre Writing Festival: The Junction (UK)
- 2011 **Walking Through Walls**, audio walk at Stadttheater Bremerhaven (DE) (Season 2011/2012)
Performative Architectures - ACE funded development grant via Escalator Live Art.
PSi #17 Conference – Camillo 2.0: Technology, Memory, Experience, Utrecht (NL)
Performative Architectures, talk at The Showroom, London (UK)
Intervals, audio walk flashmob, Metropolis Biennale Copenhagen (DK)
MirrorLens: Women in Film: Film Making Women exhibition, NewHall Art collection Cambridge (UK)
Please Wait Here: Instructions for performing a queue for a pleasure pier train:
 Artside: Pause festival, Southend-on-Sea (UK)
- 2010 **CUBEopen**, Exhibition, CUBE Centre ForThe Urban Built Environment Manchester (UK)
Walking Through Walls, audio walk, Centraltheater Leipzig, Festival 'Movement in Urban Space' (DE)
Metropolis LAB, Work Presentation, Copenhagen (DK)
Practicing Wysing: 10 Ways to misuse a Building, WAC: Partnering, Group Show,
 Wysing Arts Centre Cambridge (UK)
- 2009 **Home is, where the piano is (How can you feel at home in Orchard Park?)**,
 participatory project/intervention, CROP MARKS art trail, Cambridge (UK)
Choreographing Knowledge, performative walk and talk around Murray Edwards College
 Nightjar Festival & Festival of Ideas, Cambridge (UK) (2011 invited repeat performance)
Fissures in the Harbour of Knowledge, Lecture Performance Walk, TANZ MACHT RAUM – RAUM
 MACHT TANZ, Symposium at the Ruhr University Bochum (DE)
Choreographing Knowledge, poster presentation, Symposium Constructing Knowledge –
 Das Wissen der Architektur, Faculty of Architecture, RWTH Aachen (DE)
Blind Spots, video screening, Subvert Surveillance Festival, The Britons Protection, Manchester (UK)
- 2008 **Blind Spots**, Lecture Performance Walk, get lost psychogeography festival, Manchester (UK)
Blind Spots, video screening, TRIP psychogeography festival, Manchester (UK)



HELEN STRATFORD is an artist & architect based in Cambridgeshire (UK). Qualified to postgraduate level in Architecture & Critical Theory, in 2004/5 she was resident fellow at Akademie Solitude, Germany. Member of 'taking place' feminist group of architects & artists, her practice draws on architecture, writing & performance to explore the role everyday objects/activities play in supporting certain ways of being or placing. Selected

Visual & Live Art Escalator artist 2010/11, her work & research has been presented as papers, performances, exhibitions and presentations at international conferences/events, including ICA & Tate Modern: London, Opera House: Leipzig, Škuc Gallery: Ljubljana, Akademie Solitude: Stuttgart, Barnard College: New York, École des Beaux Arts: Paris and Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, www.wysingartscentre.org | www.takingplace.org.uk



DIANA WESSER is a performer and media artist, based in Leipzig (Germany). After taking courses in classical Ballet & Modern Dance, she studied media art at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig/Germany to postgraduate level, gaining further qualifications in contemporary dance and improvisation practice. In 2006/2007 she held a teaching position at the Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig and founded the "Werkstattmacher"

program to encourage young performance artists at LOFFT Theatre Leipzig. She is a curator for several site-specific performance festivals including most recently the conference & performance festival 'play! LEIPZIG – Movement in Public Space' in collaboration with Centraltheater & Dance Archive Leipzig, 2010. Her works provide a critique of performativity and theatrical aspects of everyday life. Through videos, performances and participatory projects she investigates social and cultural codes, how they become apparent in the body and its relation to space. She received several project grants and travel grants from different Goethe Institutes and the German Institut of Foreign Affaires (ifa) and was invited to residencies in the UK and Bangladesh amongst others. Her dance films are screened in festivals around the world. www.dianawesser.de | www.playLEIPZIG.de



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Diana Wesser (performer and media artist Leipzig, DE)

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