

Original citation:

Haedicke, Susan. (2015) Co-performance of bodies and buildings : Compagnie Willi Dorner's bodies in urban spaces and fitting and Asphalt Piloten's around the block. Theatre Journal, 67 (4). pp. 643-661.

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Publisher's statement:

© 2015 The John Hopkins University Press. The article first appeared in Theatre Journal, Volume 67, Issue 4, December, 2015, pages 643-661.

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Co-Performances of Bodies and Buildings:
Compagnie Willi Dorner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and *fitting*
and Asphalt Piloten's *Around the Block*

Susan Haedicke

Street performance interventions disrupt everyday activities in public spaces and challenge the status quo with propositions of alternative possible worlds. The artists encourage onlookers to break their routines, transgress accepted behavioural norms obeyed out of habit, and reclaim the city's public spaces in performance events that blur the boundaries between actions that the spectators do in the fictional world of the performance and those that they do in the actual world of the public space. What is key in terms of political engagement is that these artists create events in which the public, consciously or unconsciously, can re-view the workings of the city and initiate debate (in words or actions) about the city's priorities, processes and agendas. These alternatives enable the spectator to imagine new models for urban space and civil society and to visualize and viscerally experience previously unimagined possible worlds.

While many street theatre performances rely on urban public spaces and architecture as a way to expose normative behavioural codes, social constructions of seemingly neutral spaces, and ideological operations at work there,ⁱ Compagnie Willi Dorner (Austria) and Asphalt Piloten (Switzerland) focus attention on re-placing the human body in, on and around city buildings to interrogate the complex materiality of urban architecture and imagine an innovative symbiotic link between bodies and buildings that revises normative expectations about city life. Their ephemeral performance installations appear to merge bodies and buildings enabling the artists to dispute notions of architectural solidity and durability, to suggest the possibility of human thing-ness, and thus to question ways of inhabiting the city. As an animate and mortal human body becomes a part of an inanimate building, that permanent structure seems to absorb the breathing body and respond to it. The buildings acquire a liveness in the installations and in the spectators' imaginations, and this embodied text of the city acquires a performative quality that recognizes buildings as evolving stories or riddles. Tim Ingold explains that "[t]he riddle gives the material a voice and allows it to tell its own story: it is up to us, then, to listen, and from the clues it offers, to discover what is speaking."ⁱⁱⁱ The artists' propositions propel spectators to walk through the city finding performance installations that allow us to see the city from new perspectives. These encounters teach us how to think with, rather than about, architecture and so enable joint participation in creative processes that give rise to the surroundings we inhabit. The possible worlds suggested by Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten are not completed projects, but rather stimuli for inquiry into alternative urban futures, and they invite audiences to enter into the evolving (hi)stories of urban edifices and to participate in the city's composing/constructing process. The artists thus propose a reciprocal relationship between bodies and buildings that acknowledges mutual growth, change, and dependence, and they

suggest pathways to possible future urban worlds governed by different rules that challenge politics as usual by expecting citizen and architectural engagement. For me, encountering buildings in *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting*, and *Around the Block* as shape-shifters, as objects-in-process of becoming something else, as stories and riddles in which performers and spectators are key players, was both inspiring and profoundly unsettling. In these performances, the urban architectural structures seemed to develop a voice that commanded my attention in its insistence that it participate in socio-political discourses about city life. The buildings acquired a significance far beyond static objects of architecture.

Two Encounters

Encounter One: Compagnie Willi Dorner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces*ⁱⁱⁱ

Twenty colourfully-clad bodies in sweat pants and hoodies run toward us as we wait for the performance to start, rush through the crowd, and disappear down the street. We follow, catching up at the first piece of "embodied architecture" where several performers have carpeted a long flight of concrete steps with their bodies. They hold their positions for a couple of minutes and then hurry off to a new location. We soon find smaller corporeal architectural features. A clump of performers creates a colourful mosaic-like door with their intertwined bodies. A line of bodies traces the roofline of a house. Two performers kneel in a garden with their faces to the wall of a building as though they are the climbing vines trying to attach themselves to smooth stone. One performer's body is rolled into a tight ball wedged in the gap between a telephone box and a building looking like a child's lost toy. Others wrap themselves around a one-way sign as they whimsically contradict its directional instruction with their heads pointing the opposite way. Several performers balance upside down to fill the forks of trees as their outspread and bent legs form new branches; another connects two pieces of a broken drain pipe by bending his body at right angles in two places. The performers, sometimes alone, sometimes with several others, arrange their bodies to follow, contradict or mock the urban architecture and thus to disrupt its meaning as their bodies fit neatly and intricately together in the building's gaps and seem to become part of the building. Suddenly the colourful urban landscape begins to move, deconstructs, and is off running with us following the pieces of living architecture that were able to break away. It is almost as though we spectators have entered a fantasy book where the bricks and boards come alive and try out different geographic locations and different configurations. The ephemerality and spunkiness of this living architecture challenges the permanence, inanimateness and stability of the city itself.

Encounter Two: Asphalt Piloten's *Around the Block*^{iv}

I arrive at the bandstand just after sunset as three separate videos projected on near-by buildings begin. I feel disoriented as I am surrounded by the same solo dancer in multiple places simultaneously. The videos challenge my spectatorial eye to distinguish projected image from actual architecture as they play with the superimposition of an image of one building on the façade of another allowing the dancer to encounter the contrasting spaces simultaneously. Her simple movements highlight the verticality or

horizontality of the projected structure that sometimes mimics and sometimes contradicts the actual building. In one video, she presses her back against the wall (both projected and real) as though trying to move it—side to side, up and down, still and jumping. In others, her body repeats the same action over and over, sometimes realistically, sometimes accomplishing feats possible only in video footage, as she totters on narrow ledges that shape-shift, runs up and down staircases that often appear suspended in space, climbs through windows high above the ground or outlines the shape of a doorframe that becomes more visible as she draws it with her finger (all architectural features which do not exist on the actual building). Her recurring movements seem to animate the building not only through her insistence that the “building parts” play along with her, but also through the apparent transformation of the actual building as projected architectural features come and go. One video projects the dancer’s body onto the corner of an actual building so that it is bent and distorted suggesting to me that the city deforms its inhabitants, but other images offer assurances of a comfortable coexistence between human and building as she stretches her arms and legs to fill both the projected and actual space as though in an embrace. I watch a familiar building fade under an image of a different recognizable architectural structure in the town—the bandstand, the church, the town hall. Sometimes the videos cause the actual façade to appear to be in motion as the image changes my viewing perspective of the structure without my moving; other times, the video image zooms in on a building projected onto its own façade and so changes its scale in relation to my body. Images from nature—clouds moving quickly across the sky or a field of blowing grasses—projected on a wall dislocate me by creating a palimpsest of built and natural environments. This layering of images and things makes me feel as though the buildings are coming to life. They are no longer unchanging objects with a permanence I can rely on, but rather they are dynamic entities creating encounters that make me alert and viscerally aware.

As I strode through residential neighbourhoods and commercial centres in search of the next encounter between bodies and buildings in *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and *Around the Block*, I was startled by my somatic reaction to these fusions of bodies and buildings. When I discovered an installation, I could feel my muscles tighten or my balance wobble. I was not only more attuned to my surroundings than usual, I also felt that I was playing a high-stakes game (or to use Clifford Geertz’s term “deep play”^v) with the city. The installations focused my attention on bodies becoming things and things becoming animated as elements of chaos were inserted into architecture that had seemed immutable moments before. As the solidity of buildings dissolved before my eyes, I began to feel the surety of my urban environment and my place in it slipping away. My desire to understand that strong affective response, shared by many other spectators with whom I spoke, inspired this essay.

Compagnie Willi Dorner’s *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and its companion piece, *fitting*, and Asphalt Piloten’s *Around the Block* perform encounters between bodies and buildings that disrupt a comfortable binary between animate humans and

inanimate architecture to reveal alternative views of a living, breathing city.^{vi} The porous boundaries between bodies and buildings explored in these performance interventions create what Doreen Massey calls an “event of place”^{vii}: a constellation of space-time where the *here* of place is not a fixed location but rather a constantly evolving process revealed through its “simultaneity of stories-so-far.”^{viii} For Massey, this incessant flux of event of place, its simultaneity of multiplicities, and its indeterminacy, is what makes place political: “[w]hat is special about place is precisely that throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman”^{ix} or within and between the city’s architecture and its inhabitants. Massey explains that throwntogetherness “is a politics which pays attention to the fact that entities and identities (be they places, or political constituencies, or mountains) are collectively produced through practices which form relations; and it is on those practices and relations that politics must be focused.”^x To look at the works of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten as co-performances of throwntogetherness assumes not just a co-existence of bodies in/and an urban setting, but rather a collaboration between people and architecture with communication going both ways.

Laura Levin asks “what it would mean to understand the site as a collaborator in the performance process, and to do so without treating this act as a romantic metaphor,”^{xi} and she urges her readers to take “seriously artistic claims that the site is performing, or communicating in a material language particular to itself.”^{xii} I ask the same question as Levin about collaboration of site, performer, and spectator, but my starting point is Tim Ingold’s claims that the cultural practices of humans cannot be disentangled from the processes of nonhumans^{xiii} and that “all creatures, human and nonhuman, are fellow passengers in the one world in which they all live, and through their activities continually create the conditions for each other’s existence.”^{xiv} He argues that this approach does not endow things with agency, but rather creates a “dance of animacy” between bodies and things “in which partners take turns to lead and be led.”^{xv} He offers an example of kite-flying that creates a choreography of kite, wind, and kite-flyer where no one entity alone can complete the activity. Street theatre interventions like *Bodies in Urban Space*, *fitting*, and *Around the Block* perform a similar dance of animacy between bodies and buildings, creating a human-nonhuman ecology displacing the privileged role of the human performer as sole creator. Looking at Kaja Silverman’s *World Spectators*, Levin describes how a site can “engage in a form of self display that operates through visual morphology (color, form, pattern).”^{xvi} This communication, she asserts, does not require a will, intention or consciousness on the part of the site, but rather is a “physical ‘tending toward’ ... [or] acts of spontaneous self-display.”^{xvii} The artist responds to this “sensuous *self-showing*”^{xviii} of architectural structures as things perform alongside the actors to create a duet. The works of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten make visible these co-performances that re-place a sense of order and permanence in the urban structure in an assemblage of ideas around live-ness and indeterminacy suggesting a dynamic environment where place and person are mutually empowered.

Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten do not stand alone in interrogating symbiotic relationships between the city and its inhabitants or in asking questions about the nature and significance of porous boundaries between buildings and bodies. Many street artists perform a multiplicity of dynamic relationships between architecture and the human form, and the narratives that develop from these performance techniques assert a meaningful role for art in debates about cities. Krzysztof Wodiczko's provocative and politically-charged projections on monuments and buildings immediately come to mind. In an interview with art historian Patricia Phillips, he challenges artists to explore the potential of public space to contribute to reformulations of democracy through their works and asserts that "public space is where we [artists and citizens] often explore or enact democracy."^{xix} While Wodiczko may be one of the most familiar artists who blur boundaries between spatial forms and social practices to explore political issues, he is joined by many others who highlight the dynamic interactions between the human form and architectural structures. Camouflage artists like Desiree Palmen and Liu Bolin^{xx} expose erasures and hidden urban agendas through their "invisibility." Some street arts choreographers, like Laure Terrier, Artistic Director of Jeanne Simone,^{xxi} use contact improvisation with the city's architecture and inhabitants to highlight urban anonymity and indifference. Rimini Protokoll's audio-tours enable audience members to imaginatively see inside buildings that are usually off-limits to the general public; Délice Dada's guided tours offer alternate histories for urban landmarks; Forced Entertainment's *Nights in this City* is famous for its faux-guided tours; and Wrights & Sites create "mis-guides" of cities. *Hamlet Attitude-Les Regardeurs*, devised by the art collective, Les Souffleurs-Commandos Poétiques, perch performers high on public buildings to create embodied surveillance cameras that not only watch and but also comment on what happens below. And RaumlaborBerlin and Bureau Detours, collectives of architects, artists, performers, craftsmen, engineers, local historians and ethnographers, help realize many citizen-initiated local urban renovation projects that propose directions for architectural futures by shifting the focus from durable buildings to temporary structures that can host manifold scenarios.

Compagnie Willi Dorner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and *fitting* and Asphalt Piloten's *Around the Block* draw on and expand many of these techniques to disrupt how passers-by see, understand and interact with the city's architecture as buildings become animated or shape-shift and as bodies merge with walls, railings and street furniture before spectators' eyes. This essay thus contributes to the work of many performance studies scholars writing about performance and the city^{xxii} by showing how urban spatial forms can affect social practices of city dwellers and how urban populations can mimic the "self-showing" buildings in which they live and work. Such spatio-temporal stories, as in the performances of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten, offer provocative examples of public art that creates sites of civic engagement and debate about what the city is or should be.

Patricia Phillips tackles the question of a possible causal relationship between public art and active citizenship when she argues that public life is no longer defined by what people share, but rather by "shifting differences that compose and enrich it.

Public life is both startlingly predictable and constantly surprising [...and public art] can provide a visual language to express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective.^{xxiii} Phillips dismisses the notion that public art is just art in public spaces and insists that “it is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address.”^{xxiv} Rejecting the privileging of permanence in public art, Phillips argues strongly for an ephemerality in public art:

the temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of the public. The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens [...]. A conceptualization of the idea of time in public art is a prerequisite for a public life that enables inspired change.^{xxv}

Public art, she insists, thrives on exchange, disagreement, even volatility, and contrary to official goals, it must not seek consensus. When it no longer delights, angers and confuses; when it no longer creates dialogue and debate, it has ceased fulfilling its function and its potential as an aesthetic form of democracy.

The performance interventions of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten, create this disruptive temporary public art to encourage participation in democratic discourse. Rather than providing information and explanations, offering overt political messages, or engaging in a specific city’s urban policies or populations, they intervene “in the visible, sayable and thinkable”^{xxvi} through “*material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.”^{xxvii} The performances are not about external events, situations or issues, but instead create a situation that offers provocations about one’s surroundings and encourages a critical response. These artists eschew what they see as the stasis of *about-ness* and instead pursue *event-ness* that places metaphoric markers along a path that leads to an open “space for generous, open-ended, comparative yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life [...and encourages] speculations about what life *might* or *could* be like, in ways nevertheless grounded in a profound understanding of what life *is* like in particular times and places.”^{xxviii} For Ingold, this

participant observation is a way of knowing *from the inside*.... Only because we are already of the world, only because we are fellow travellers along with the beings and things that command our attention, can we observe them. There is no contradiction, then, between participation and observation; rather, the one depends on the other.^{xxix}

He argues that creating new worlds is impossible without thinking them first—what he calls the “art of inquiry”^{xxx} where thoughts and materials go hand-in-hand. “These materials think in us, as we think through them.”^{xxxi} This art of inquiry is about an event-ness that makes us acutely aware of and responsive to our surroundings. He calls this dialogue with the world “correspondence,”^{xxxii} and that correspondence begins to construct new possible worlds. A correspondence between body and building, a give-and-take that enables one to respond to the other, is evident in *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting*, and *Around the Block*, each of which creates particular performance moments for the specific architecture of the city in which they are performing. The performances

differ from one city to the next as each one responds to and is guided by unique aspects of the city: in this way, urban architecture participates in the creative process of the piece. In *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, for example, a pile of bodies, upside down and contorted, with protruding legs and arms, is often wedged into a dead-end alley echoing images of corpses washed into a tight urban spaces by a flood. In the London production, an identical pile of bodies was placed in the middle of a vacant lot as though it was just the beginning of what will become a much larger pile. The body pile in this space evokes memories of similar piles of gassed concentration camp prisoners and thus provocatively suggests that such inhumanity could also happen here. These changes in the meaning of the same arrangement of bodies in different urban sites show how the city's architecture participates in the creative process not only by helping establish recognizable stories, but also by challenging the spectators to become engaged in the political process to prevent such events from happening in their cities.

For local inhabitants, such “co-performances” offer a starting point to contextualize specific locations and their meanings within their city's politics and social practices whereas for visitors who are unfamiliar with the city's specificities, the body/building structures offer an opportunity to compose spatial stories about sites with more universally understood resonances—dead-end alleys, long staircases, commercial buildings, places of worship, or private homes—and to relate these stories to their own urban interests. Jacques Rancière calls the audience member who can interpret the art through his or her own experience an “emancipated spectator.” The artwork, Rancière argues, “is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator.”^{xxxiii} Rather, it remains separate from the spectator and the artist but links the two: what he calls “a third thing.”^{xxxiv} A spectator does not achieve emancipation or critical awareness through physical participation in the performance, but rather by translating the “third thing” into his or her own experience, by linking it to what he or she already knows and, through that association, creating new knowledge. While the notion of “emancipated spectator” offers a way to understand the potential for efficacy of all art, Rancière restricts its usefulness by limiting art to completed artefacts. The ongoing dialogues between bodies and buildings activated in the dynamic interventions of *Compagnie Willi Dorner* and *Asphalt Piloten* focus instead on processes of construction. The artists do not present completed artefacts of possible worlds, but rather begin inquiries into imagined alternatives.

The inquiries, theatricalizing throwntogetherness of place, are crucial to understanding not only how these interventions create such an unsettling visceral response, but also how they link to a progressive politics and active citizenry. The performances address questions about the significance and meanings of encounters between human beings and the urban landscape here-and-now, but the interventions also evoke the past as audiences, like Rancière's “emancipated spectators,” seek to interpret what they are seeing by placing it in the context of their own knowledge and experience of the site or similar sites and socio-spatial practices. Performers in these interventions stand in for the city's inhabitants as they perform recognizable social practices, albeit in highly stylized or exaggerated forms. And audiences are quick to see and interpret their own familiar activities in a revised context. So the question must be asked whether these

encounters can affect social change by altering people's assumptions and understandings of active citizenship in interactions with their urban environments and thus explore varied possibilities for revising urban life. The next two sections offer an adaptation of Geertzian "thick descriptions"^{xxxv} that begin to answer that question.

Compagnie Willi Dorner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces and fitting*

Choreographer Willi Dorner and photographer Lisa Rastl initiated a photography project in 2004 that interrogated varied and unexpected relationships between architecture and people. Trying to understand the place of the human body in the urban landscape, they photographed colourfully-clad individuals whom they had squeezed into small architectural voids in the cityscape. The images played with contrasting messages of urban overcrowding and tightly-knit communities. During a residency in Barcelona in 2006, Dorner and Rastl transformed the photographic project into a live performance where dancers, climbers, and circus artists assemble and disassemble a series of embodied building parts. Dorner uses local artists to create this ephemeral living architecture as their bodies literally (albeit temporarily) become parts of their own city buildings, but simultaneously the city's architecture becomes an extension of its inhabitants' bodies.

The dynamic, embodied architectural features built and demolished by the performers' bodies offer spectators an unexpected experience of *détournement* as defined by the Situationists.^{xxxvi} As a tactic for social transformation, *détournement* uses disorientation and defamiliarization to propel an individual into a sense of confusion and uncertainty that, in turn, causes an altered view and understanding of the "event of place." The underlying assumption is that every aspect needed for a new society exists within the current society, so the way to achieve societal transformation is essentially to change how one sees the world in which one lives. *Détournement* is a process of that revision; it represents a transformation where ordinary, recognizable images are reassembled into new and startling creations. It does not rely on unique or original ideas or images, but rather re-uses familiar elements from daily life to modify their meaning. For the Situationists, this strategy "clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, [...] cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle."^{xxxvii} Rancière's concept of collage bears a close resemblance to the Situationist strategy of *détournement* since both reassemble, juxtapose or superimpose incongruous images, ideas or logics to construct new interpretations. For Rancière, "collage can be seen as evidence of the hidden link between two apparently opposed worlds."^{xxxviii} It is necessarily political because its *détournement* hovers at the spatio-temporal point of tension where a comfortable comprehension of a logical reality coexists with an unsettling disorientation caused by a nonsensical possibility and can shock a spectator into critical reflection that seeks to understand what had seemed natural moments before and is now unfamiliar.

Compagnie Willi Dorner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces and fitting* construct interventions that manipulate and subvert familiar, pre-existing urban landmarks to produce new forms, meanings and functions. In so doing, the artists suggest that occupying public spaces can be a political act, a democratic act of resistance. These

artists trespass into other people's spaces and bring the public with them as when they add embodied architectural elements to private homes in urban neighbourhood like the embodied door in Figure 1. Together artists and audiences infiltrate and reclaim urban territories and, in the process, change them, albeit temporarily. And, the memory of the experience of *détournement*, inserted into the bodies of the spectators and often remaining after the performance ends, can initiate a re-imagining or re-writing of the city: possible urban worlds offering new perspectives on human-nonhuman relationships. Juhani Pallasmaa applauds such an embodied engagement with the city. He argues that interaction primarily through vision creates “a public and distant detachment”^{xxxix} among passive inhabitants and thus discourages democratic participation. He reminds us that “[t]he door handle is the handshake of the building,”^{xl} and such an understanding of living architecture inevitably changes our engagement with the city as we need to answer this welcoming gesture. Our response, in turn, acknowledges the building's liveness, its animacy.



Fig. 1. The mosaic-like door in Compagnie Willi Dorner, *Bodies in Urban Spaces* (VivaCité Festival, Sotteville-lès-Rouen, France, June 2009). Photograph by Susan Haedicke.

While many of the corporeal architectural structures created in *Bodies in Urban Spaces* are delightful, humorous, and whimsical (such as the ones described in the opening encounter), others reveal a darker side of urban life. The performers' faces are rarely visible in the living architecture and thus comment on urban anonymity or urban populations as faceless statistics. The bodies are often upside down or contorted in some way, suggesting discomfort or dislocation in the urban landscape (actually experienced by the performers, vicariously experienced by the spectator). The more sinister images of tangled bodies often elicit a silent response as they evoke impressions of urban violence and environmental disaster—familiar (although stylized) images easily linked

to known stories of actual events, as with the pile of bodies described earlier. Many of the embodied architectural images portray human beings in the urban environment as the detritus of contemporary society. Bodies are flattened against a chain-link fence or against the railing of a balcony on a block of flats as though they are rubbish blown into the corner. Others seem to be oozing over a brick wall into the street and down into the gutter as in Figure 2.



Fig.2. Compagnie Willi Dorner, *Bodies in Urban Spaces* (VivaCité Festival, Sotteville-lès-Rouen, France, June 2009). Photograph by Susan Haedicke.

As we pass what seems to be a dead-end alley, we see legs protruding about two feet above the ground from the edge of a building far down the narrow alley. It looks as though the body has dived into the space to get away from something terrifying or has been hurled with great force and is wedged into a tight spot. In a laundromat, the bodies are thrown in the corner as though they are abandoned clothing. In the London production, a body is flattened around the corner of a building (held in place by a tall pole) about two meters above the pavement with arms and legs splayed out so that the body makes something like a large X. A sign to the left and the right of the body reads “Underground. This way to the air raid shelter.”^{xli} The resonance of a nuclear attack with the body now fused with the wall is disturbing and complicates the indeterminacy of place with a superimposition of stories-so-far that warn of a dire future.

The “throwntogetherness” of bodies and the city depicted in these images is striking as it proposes a dynamic ambivalence about the interconnection between urban inhabitants and their environment and challenges the “emancipated spectator” with a simultaneous vision of past, present, and future in a de-familiarized, yet recognizable and quite ordinary, place. This throwntogetherness poses questions, in a visual form, about how we all (humans and nonhumans) navigate living together as we compose multiple stories-so-far and negotiate conflicting agendas. That navigation is a key issue of the political and creates many contrasting narratives. The insertion of living bodies with concealed faces into the architectural gaps offers a haunting testimony to the existence of groups of anonymous city dwellers conveniently erased from historical records or excluded from urban spaces. The living architecture suggests a hidden text of the labour involved in the construction of the city although the details of that text are not

obvious. And the temporary nature of the installations seems to imply waves of people who had a brief presence, but are then forgotten. While in some of the living architecture in *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, the city seems to embrace or protect the human bodies, the interventions often expose a troubled, even confrontational, relationship between the organic and inorganic parts of the urban body. *Bodies in Urban Spaces* asks urban residents not only to see the city with new eyes, but also to reflect on the impact of the environment on the people and the people on the environment, to consider who or what fills the gaps, and to understand the symbiotic relationships between constructed urban practices and affective urban landscapes.

The company's subsequent performance intervention, *fitting* (2012), reuses many of the strategies in *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, but it forces together the human body and the building more aggressively, seeming to insist that these two must *fit* together. In so doing, it creates a more sinister narrative for the co-performance of bodies and buildings that raises questions about rapid urban expansion and its dehumanization of city inhabitants. Like *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting* starts with a series of body-building installations, but here, each installation is constructed with a single human being, a long narrow plank of wood, and a wall, ceiling, door, or railing. The human body is *built* into the urban landscape with the plank holding a body into place. In Fig. 3, it is possible to see the male body rigid and straight as though glued to the ceiling of the balcony, but the only supporting point is the end of the plank wedged between the body and the floor.



Fig. 3. Compagnie Willi Dorner, *fitting* (Paris, France, October 2013). Photograph by Susan Haedicke.

Sometimes, the bodies look like an additional brace seamlessly becoming part of the building, but sometimes the feet of the body protrude giving the impression of a gargoyle facing the wrong way or a piece of the structure that is falling out. Watching the performers get into or out of the position, helped by one or more technicians, reveals the careful balancing and precise positioning of the plank and the body needed to achieve a result that can be held for several minutes. As bodies become pieces of the

architecture, these building parts seem to evoke ghosts of anonymous and invisible construction workers, human labour involved in construction of the city's buildings. While it is difficult to read the narrative of labour in detail by looking at the installations, the presence of demanding work needed to build and rebuild the city is very clear.

Unlike *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting* has a second part where the act of assembling, taking apart, and reassembling a multi-story "tatami house" is performed by four actors, four wooden chairs, wood planks, several large pieces of wood of varying sizes, and a tall background supporting wall. Here the labour of construction is performed as the actors explore stability, symmetry and aesthetics. They are in constant motion arranging and rearranging their building blocks, including their bodies. The shapes change, and the structure's fragility is tested. At various points in the constructions, the "tatami house" is inhabited by families as each performer holds a sheet of paper printed with a face in front of his or her own face. There are many different paper faces, so identities change along with the transformations in the structure. In one scene, the stationary actors keep changing their paper faces, discarding one after another as though representing a single house that saw multiple generations or families. This production explores the act of construction in more detail than *Bodies in Urban Spaces*. Yet both productions perform the act of building where, as Ingold argues, constructing or "making" is not a completed project, but "a process of growth" where the maker is "a participant in amongst a world of active materials. These materials are what he has to work with, and in the process of making he 'joins forces' with them, bringing them together or splitting them apart, synthesizing and distilling, in anticipation of what might emerge."^{xliii} The maker may be the impetus, but "the essence of matter, or the material, [exists in its] *form-taking activity*."^{xliiii} It is this collaboration of making between bodies and buildings that the artists in *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and *fitting* vividly perform, thus offering challenging pathways to creating new cityscapes. *Asphalt Piloten* shifts the focus from constructing buildings with bodies to placing the body in dizzying exploratory encounters with buildings that encourage the emancipated spectator to re-write urban spatial stories.

Asphalt Piloten, *Around the Block*

The artists in *Asphalt Piloten*, founded in 2010 by Anna Anderegg, rely on an interdisciplinary approach combining dance, music, and video to create artistic disruptions that complicate awareness of one's surroundings. Similar to *Bodies in Urban Spaces* and *fitting*, *Around the Block* unites bodies and buildings, but rather than inserting live bodies into the architecture, they superimpose black-and-white moving images of a dancing body who is urgently exploring the details of an urban architectural location onto the exterior walls of a different city building. In many ways, this strategy of palimpsest offers a complex theatrical language of throwntogetherness as each installation presents a three-way conversation among the projected dancing human body, the building visible in the video and the different one that becomes the projection surface, a conversation that we spectators delight in overhearing (and often commenting on). Not being limited by gravity and safety, the projected dancing body can interact

with the building in ways impossible in actual life. And, the two-dimensionality of the image so blurs the boundaries between building and body that it gives a paradoxical impression of the building coming to life and of a body becoming one with the building. Since the building in the video is not the building on which it is projected, the double image creates a palimpsest of places or “stories-so-far.” In addition, each building, acting as projection screen, hosts several different videos of the dancing body in a range of locations to create a complex, multi-layered location for spectators that both draws attention to the actual city around them and simultaneously creates a confusing mirage of the city. The most blatant examples are in the videos of the dancer clearly in an indoor space in an outdoor location, as in Figure 4 where she seems to inhabit a liminal space, both private and public.



Fig. 4. Asphalt Piloten, Around the Block. Chalon-sur-Saône, France. July 2014. Photograph by Danilo Rasori.

Here *fiction* does not work in opposition to the physical cityscape; rather it re-frames, re-interprets, confuses, subverts or challenges what moments before was a familiar location and, in so doing, draws attention to what is often overlooked. Place thus becomes fluid and multiple, and it shakes our sense of security as we metaphorically get lost walking “around the block” or even standing in one place as each installation is linked to a specific geographic site, *détourned* by the projection of a dancing body animating yet another location: a palimpsest of here-and-now and there-and-thens.

Around the Block is a site-specific performance that changes with each city in which it is presented. Each iteration of the piece starts with the “city under observation”^{xliiv} when the artists scour the city for varied and evocative projection surfaces as well as for objects and locations in the city’s landscape that lend themselves to dance interpretations: stairs, abstract sculptures, narrow alleys, balconies, windows, long corridors, fire escapes. Anderegg then choreographs and dances a dialogue between her body and the architecture in short pieces of about five minutes. The dance interpretation sites and the projection surfaces must be linked so that when the dances are projected on the buildings’ surfaces, the superimposition of the video of one site in

the city on the actual building in a different location proposes a new perspective that alters the viewers' understanding of the city. When these choreographies of a moving body defying gravity and animated architecture are presented on an actual building, the palimpsest troubles a sense of stability and fixity of place as it performs throwntogetherness. The videos are often accompanied by sounds of the city distorted into a subtle atmospheric soundscape as speakers are mounted on streetlights or in bubble-like structures. Sometimes, the city objects become sound equipment as bus shelters turn into sound boxes or benches transform into vibraphones.

The dancer's movements sometimes evoke encounters between the architecture and the human body that suggest actions or possible uses of the building. In one video, she stands between two windows, not actual ones, but images of windows from the dance interpretation site. Her body expresses indecision as to which path (window) to take, but finally she turns as though to enter one of the non-existent windows. This contradictory story tells of decision and agency, on the one hand, as she decides which way to go, and futility and frustration, on the other, as her actions are in response to things not really there. Another projected moment seems to portray urban isolation and alienation as the dancer sits still before a bare wall (projected and actual, so doubled). Suddenly, she gets up and moves quickly toward us, but then disappears. Has she been swallowed by a crowd oblivious to her presence (a crowd that is actually the audience)? In some videos, we are led inside a building to see the dancer moving almost realistically through a recognizable space. In one projected on a blank wall, she climbs up and down many flights of an industrial metal staircase seemingly suspended in space. The image evokes a contemporary Sisyphus in the urban landscape as it suggests gendered forms of menial labour. In another, the building seems to reflect the dancer's interior life as she faces herself, one image clearly outside the building, but the other trapped inside. One visually stunning video shows the dancer surrounded by a thick black circle (a stone sculpture found at the entrance to a school) that she explores walking sometimes upright and other times upside down, but she cannot get out. Is she running in circles in the urban rat-race, trapped in a city with no possibility of escape, or protected in a cocoon or womb?



Fig. 5. Asphalt Piloten, Around the Block. Chalon-sur-Saône, France. July 2014. Photograph by Danilo Rasori.

Although a continuity of the solitary dancer inhabits each video, it is the audience who must write the story of the place. Like Rancière's "emancipated spectator," each viewer must interpret the videos through his or her own experiences to create an urban narrative that waivers between possible worlds: one offering a sense of hope and the other, a sense of futility for the city of the future. Here, the art resides in the symbolic interaction with the public, but also in the creation of voids between spectator and actual building, between spectator and projected buildings, between spectator and dancer, between dancer and the multiple sites, and so on—spaces that seem to vibrate with meaning even if the details of that meaning are not clear, even if the "material language"^{xlv} is incomprehensible. And that confusion propels the emancipated spectator to reflect critically on the complexity of the surrounding city and to imagine how it should be altered. This "event of place" is social, relational, iterative and paradoxical; it is a collage of geographic, imagined and discursive spaces that resembles geographer Gillian Rose's notion of space as "the articulation of collisions between discourse, fantasy and corporeality."^{xlvi}

One striking video projects a grassy, hilly field onto a building façade that has a single window near the centre. This actual window gives the impression of a hole in the earth that is pulling the dancer to its depths. She fights against its powerful suction, struggling to get away as though she is walking into a gale-force wind, being pulled back so that her body is bent backwards, losing her balance, trying to crawl and then, suddenly, she disappears. Here the image plays with architectural features of the actual building as the dancer struggles with both projected image and actual façade in a story of human defeat and disappearance in a voracious and hostile city. The actual presence of the window gives the imagined story an eerie resonance of reality. Ingold links story-telling and place by arguing that story-telling is less a way to represent and depict a place, and rather a way to enter into it, to experience it from within. Story-telling offers a path into a place and locates the teller and the listener in that place so that its place-meanings may be discovered. Stories "serve to conduct the attention of the performers *into* the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement. At its most intense, the boundaries between person and place, or between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether."^{xlvii} The provocative and disturbing palimpsest in the story of the hole, while very different from the stories discussed by Ingold, creates a visual narrative that dissolves "boundaries between person and place" quite literally, and it draws (sucks) the spectator in as well by causing a strong somatic response. It is impossible to watch the dancing body sucked into the enigmatic hole without having a sharp intake of breath. Like the stories Ingold describes where the listener completes the story by learning the landscape, this one must be finished by the emancipated spectator. The story of the hole has, adopting Ingold's words, "transparency and depth: transparency because one can see into it; depth, because the more one looks the further on sees."^{xlviii} While Ingold emphasizes the person-place stories revealing historical traces, the artists in *Asphalt Piloten* encourage their audiences to seek out correspondences between bodies and buildings that narrate

stories not only recognizing the past and present of the urban place, but also imagining a new future, whether a utopian dream or a dystopian nightmare.

In May 2015, the artists led a three-week residency in Astrakhan, Russia, to develop the next stage of *Around the Block*. The project, in partnership with the Goethe Institute, Robert Bosch Kultur Programme and a local theatre, built on the body/architecture explorations in *Around the Block*, but here, Anderegg and her team worked with local dancers in the creation of their own solo dance responses to the architecture of their cities. These solo dances were filmed by Asphalt Piloten and then projected on exterior façades in the city that inspired the movement. The unannounced video locations challenged surprised passers-by with a sense of place that was no longer a stable geographic location, but rather constantly changing and multiple spatial stories.

Possible worlds

The possible worlds created by *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting*, and *Around the Block* are grounded in the familiar everyday world, but have *détourned* that world to suggest alternative urban experiences, some optimistic, some exceedingly pessimistic. These models of possible worlds are not fully formed or completed projects, but rather indistinct paths that guide us to spaces of inquiry and experimentation. They show us that there are no easy answers or how-to manuals to develop the city of the future. The alternative geographies that Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten create originate in our shared experiences of a vibrant and responsive city and our unique compositions of stories-so-far that link place to each spectator's individual experiences and emotions. The artists perform urban places with us, not for us, as we and the city buildings become a vital part of an urban ecology with open and multiple futures offering possibilities for reimagining a politics that can make a difference. While the artists offer signposts and warnings, they do not provide a clear narrative with any kind of closure. Instead, they rely on those who see the installations to develop the stories that can be put into practice with the help of the city itself. Each spectator must interpret the various theatrical provocations, compose coeval stories-so-far that re-shape the built environment, and rehearse possible co-creations between spatial forms and social practices previously unimagined. We "emancipated spectators" are the ones who propose those possible architectural futures through our embodied responses. Spatial Agency, one of the projects in RaumlaborBerlin (mentioned earlier) explains that we must develop "a new understanding of what architecture can be. Instead of being static, everlasting, inflexible and expensive, it can be removable, mobile, a stage for all kinds of scenarios."^{xlix} The ambiguities of possible futures for the cities of tomorrow, made visible in the performances of Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten, suggest the existence of this mobile architecture that, in turn, introduces varied interpretations of democracy and places the decisions about imminent urban prospects in the hands of the audiences.

Bodies in Urban Spaces, *fitting*, and *Around the Block* remind us that the human body is an integral part of the buildings and that architecture can reflect our interior world back to us, stimulate visceral memories and imaginings, inspire our movement through space, and influence our sense of self as city dweller and citizen. David Harvey

cautions that: “[i]f we experience architecture as communication, [...] then we ought to pay close attention to what is being said.”ⁱ Compagnie Willi Dorner and Asphalt Piloten help us to *see* the possible *voices* of the architecture around us as they suggest a visual language for possible conversations with buildings: conversations that can explore alternative ways of inhabiting the city, foreshadow ominous developments, and act as a catalyst for social change. *Bodies in Urban Spaces*, *fitting*, and *Around the Block* each guide us on both a visceral walk through a cityscape of correspondences of bodies and buildings and a reflective walk past depictions of our throwntogetherness, visual stories that stimulate a critical response. And as we walk, we experience a heavy burden of responsibility for the city of the future since we begin to understand that we must discover bridges between utopian dreams and practical realities now that we have seen and felt such possible futures. But we also experience a feeling of empowerment that allows us to imagine participating in radical democratic change by writing urban spatial stories in which we want to dwell.

ⁱ Two recent anthologies, D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr and Kim Solga, ed. *Performance and the City* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Nicolas Whybrow, ed. *Performance and the Contemporary City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), interrogate the role of performance and/in the city. The introductions to each book draw attention to statistics revealing that more than half of the world’s population now live in cities and ask not only what role performance can play in the inevitable growth of urban centres, but also how performance can influence inhabitants’ understanding and reimagining of city life.

ⁱⁱ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Compagnie Willi Dorner website for photographs and videos of the performances: <http://www.ciewdorner.at>.

^{iv} See Asphalt Piloten’s website for images and videos: <http://www.asphaltpiloten.net/Around-the-Block>.

^v The phrase “deep play” is analysed in Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” in *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essay by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-53.

^{vi} The phrase “breathing cities” comes from the title of Nick Barley’s book that offers examples of art-based projects exploring cities in movement. Nick Barley, ed., *Breathing Cities: The Architecture of Movement* (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhäuser-Publishers for Architecture, 2000).

^{vii} Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, D.C.: Sage, 2005), 138-42.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 9.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 140.

^x*Ibid.*, 148.

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- ^{xi} Laura Levin, “Can the City Speak? Site-Specific Art after Poststructuralism” in *Performance and the City*, ed. D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr and Kim Solga. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 240-61, quotation on 241.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 241.
- ^{xiii} Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). See also Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004) and *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005). Jane Bennett claims a vibrant materiality of things able to “impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), vii. For a vital materialist approach to theatre studies, see Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy, ed., *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). A detailed analysis of the vital materiality of architecture and the subsequent impact on political action, however, is outside the scope of this essay.
- ^{xiv} Tim Ingold, “Epilogue: Towards a Politics of Dwelling,” *Conservation and Society* 3, no. 2 (2005), 501-508, quotation on 503.
- ^{xv} Ingold, *Making*, 101.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 245.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 245.
- ^{xviii} Levin, 245. Italics in original.
- ^{xix} Patricia C. Phillips, “Creating Democracy: A Dialogue with Krzysztof Wodiczko,” *Art Journal* 62, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 32-47, quotation on p. 32. See also analyses of Wodiczko’s work in Rosalynn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
- ^{xx} See Susan Haedicke, *Contemporary Street Arts in Europe: Aesthetics and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2013) and Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- ^{xxi} See Susan Haedicke, “Street Arts, Radical Democratic Citizenship and a Grammar of Storytelling” in *The Grammar of Politics and Performance*, ed. Shirin Rai and Janelle Reinelt (New York: Routledge, 2014), 106-120 and “Breaking Down the Walls: Interventionist Performance Strategies in French Street Theatre” in *Contemporary French Theatre and Performance*, ed. Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 162-73.
- ^{xxii} Many contemporary scholars in performance studies investigate various links between performance and the city and its architecture. See, for example: Jen Harvie, *Fair Play—Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), especially chapter 3; D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr and Kim Solga, ed. *Performance and the City* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alan Read, ed. *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Nicolas Whybrow, *Art and the City* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); and Nicolas Whybrow, ed. *Performance and the Contemporary City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ^{xxiii} Patricia C. Phillips, “Temporality and Public Art” in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*, ed. Harriet Senie and Sally Webster (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 295-304, quotation on 296-7.

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- xxiv Ibid., 298.
- xxv Ibid., 304.
- xxvi Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 63. Italics in original.
- xxvii Ibid., 39. Italics in original.
- xxviii Ingold, *Making*, 4. Italics in original.
- xxix Ibid., 5. Italics in original.
- xxx Ibid., 6.
- xxxi Ibid., 6.
- xxxii Ibid., 7.
- xxxiii Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso, 2009), 15.
- xxxiv Ibid., 14.
- xxxv The phrase “thick description” is analysed in Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.
- xxxvi Sadie Plant, *The Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); and Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999) explain and develop these Situationist tactics and ideas in great depth.
- xxxvii Ibid., 18.
- xxxviii Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art, 2004” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 83-93, quotation on 84.
- xxxix Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2005; rev.ed.), 49.
- xl Ibid., 56.
- xli The image is available at <http://www.ciewdorner.at/index.php?page=photos&anode=18#album18>.
- xlii Ingold, *Making*, 21.
- xliiii Ibid., 25. Italics in original.
- xliv The information provided here on *Around the Block* is gleaned from the production I saw in Chalon-sur-Saône, France in 2014, the unpublished Artistic Dossier sent to me by the company, and an interview with Anna Anderegg on 5 May 2015.
- xlv Levin, 241.
- xlvi Gillian Rose, “Performing Space” in *Human Geography Today*, ed. Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 247-59, quotation on 247.
- xlvii Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*, 56. Italics in original.
- xlviii Ibid., 56.
- xlix RaumlaborBerlin, *Acting in Public*, ed. Julia Maier and Matthias Rick (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008), 5.
- ¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990), 67.