

interActing with Architecture

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Anna Hohler is co-founder of the Compagnie un tour de Suisse, along with the actress and director H el ene Cattin. Since 2012 she has staged and performed two plays based on texts by architects in non-theatre venues in 28 different buildings and spaces. She has a degree in philosophy from the Universit e de Lausanne and is an architecture journalist and critic.

Abstract

The Compagnie un tour de Suisse was created in 2012 out of the meeting between the actress and director H el ene Cattin and the architecture and dance critic Anna Hohler. Their shared interest in architecture and in travelling theatre provides the framework for their joint work. The aim is to stage texts by architects in non-theatre venues, to put a given place of the city into an immediate relation with the text and theatre action. In other words: unveil the architecture, heritage and social use of a building through its transformation into a stage while expressing a given architectonic thought by fitting it into a real stage.

The first play by the company, * tre un b timent - ein Geb ude sein*, based on writings by Peter Zumthor, was performed from 2012 to 2016 in 17 different locations in Switzerland, Austria, France and Spain. The second creation by the Swiss directors, *La transformation (Umbau)*, focuses on the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, pioneer of the Modern Movement, and was premiered in 2016 in a former chocolate factory on the outskirts of Lausanne. Today, these two plays have been performed in over 28 different architectural spaces, such as a swimming pool, a student's residence (Le Corbusier's in Paris), abandoned industrial warehouses, a former convent and the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona.

Keywords: architecture, performance space, built heritage, travelling theatre, nomadism, city, hospitality

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A book is at the start of our theatre adventure: *Thinking Architecture* by Peter Zumthor (Zumthor, 2010; original 2006). It is a selection of eight lectures delivered by the Swiss architect at different times in his life, before being awarded the prestigious Pritzker Prize in 2009. The oral character of these transcriptions and his easy poetic way of speaking about architecture, within the reach of all, made us consider adapting them to the stage. We wondered: Why do plays usually not speak of architecture? Why does theatre – so closely linked to the space and scenography – not deal more often with something that is one of the bases of our daily life, its “receptacle”, according to Zumthor, i.e. architecture?

Based on the foregoing, given that our characters were going to speak of architecture, what would be the right scenography for them? It was clear that we did not have the resources to build a habitable set that could rival a real building. Neither would we expect the Avignon Festival to contract us for a creation at the Honour Courtyard of the Popes' Palace. But, above all, what we wanted to say, with Peter Zumthor's words, could not be illustrated with just one example of architecture. Of course, for us it was not about exemplifying or representing the architect's words but about *presenting them*, in the sense of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2012; original 1994). And only architecture at a real scale made this possible.

A Nomadic Theatre

This is how in 2012 the first production of the Compagnie un tour de Suisse was born *Être un bâtiment - ein Gebäude sein*.¹ We worked without a curtain, but with costumes, a musical instrument (a small-scale grand piano), props and a minimal lighting and sound team. We rehearsed outside the place of

1. We had already scheduled performing in the German part of Switzerland (hence the bilingual title), but we did not yet know that two years later we would be on tour in Seville and Barcelona and with a version in Spanish, called *Ser un edificio*. <<http://www.cieuntourdesuisse.ch>>

creation, a café-théâtre that held other activities. We imagined the development of the show in the space without being able to experience it and we settled just a few days before the premiere in that small industrial warehouse, in the city of Lausanne. We accommodated up to 60 people per performance but the scarce 150 metres did not allow them to move during the show in order to expand their field of vision. Thus, with the aim of breaking down the frontal viewpoint — of enabling the eyes of the audience to wander through the building — the characters moved: we performed among the audience, we escaped through the window or went up a ladder to make the most of the twilight that came through the skylight. In order to discover the building's architecture, the audience had to turn around to see us perform next to or behind them.

Some months later, after three other productions in very different locations (a library, a museum and an art foundation), we confronted a venue that was three times bigger: we performed on different floors of the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, in Austria, a contemporary art museum designed by Peter Zumthor in the 1990s. There the audience could move: the show began in the goods lift, developed on the second floor and ended on the third. The majestic staircase was incorporated into the show, its ascent forming part of the *mise-en-scène*. We wanted the audience not only to listen to the words that speak of architecture, the texture of the materials or the shape of beauty but also for them to feel and notice the built space with their own senses.

Presenting the play in Bregenz, in this prestigious building by the architect whose texts we perform, was a unique opportunity but also an exception: our aim was not, and has never been, to present the texts of an architect in his or her own architecture, a requirement that would limit us too much when choosing the location for the next performance.

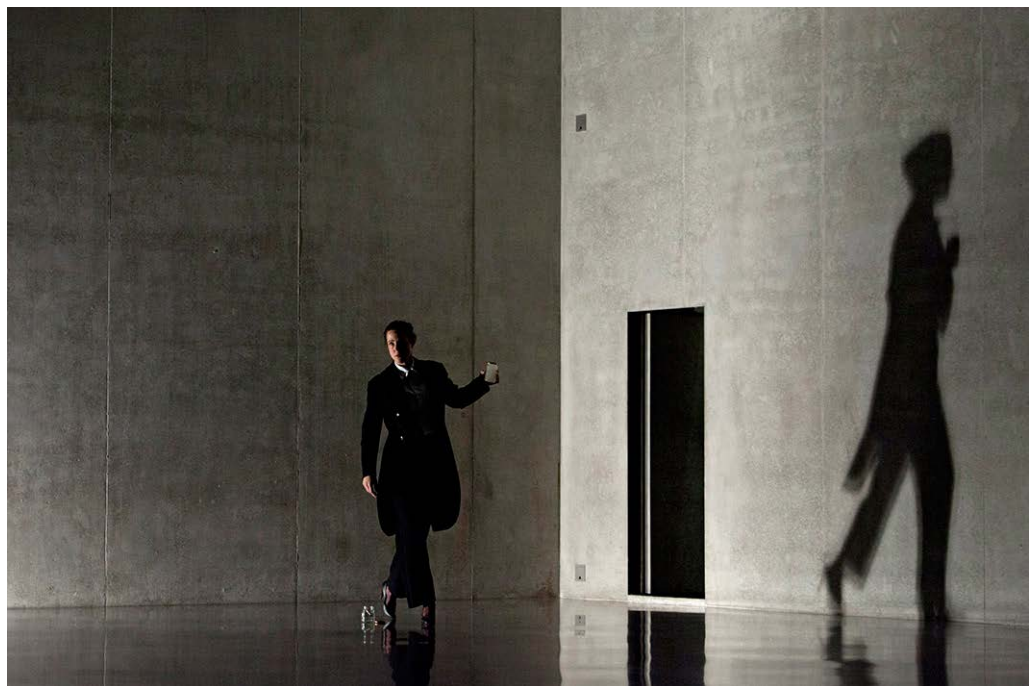


Photo 1. *Ein Gebäude sein*, Kunsthhaus Bregenz, Austria, 2012. © Philipp Ottendoerfer.



Photo 2. *Ein Gebäude sein*, Seebad Luzern, Switzerland, 2014.
© Philipp Ottendoerfer.



Photo 3. *Être un bâtiment*, Ancien Manège de La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, 2013.
© Philipp Ottendoerfer.



Photo 4. *Ser un edificio*, former convent of Santa María de los Reyes, Seville, 2014. © Francesco Della Casa.

Being nomadic in our case means that in seven years and with two productions — in 2016 we premiered the company's second play based on Adolf Loos' texts — we have performed in 28 different places, in three languages (French, German and Spanish) and in four countries. They are 28 buildings of very different type, size and style. We have performed for instance in a students' residence (Le Corbusier's in Paris), a railway depot, a furniture shop, a foundation (the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona), a church, a former convent or a swimming pool.

This nomadism also means that at each stop the architecture not only suggests a new framework, a unique setting for the same text and the same characters, but also provides us with new dramaturgic resources. And, to



Photo 5. *Ser un edificio*, Mies van der Rohe Pavilion, Barcelona, 2015. © Philipp Ottendoerfer.

some extent, architecture itself becomes the third character of the show. But given that most of the audience only attend one performance, in a single place, they do not always realise this potential. For instance, a spectator asked us, after the performance in a swimming pool by the lake, how we would perform the same play without a boat and without a lake.

Recovering the Democratic Function

But there is more: in each place, in each performance, we invite the audience to come to a building that usually does not function as a theatre. And this – calling a public meeting in a given place – always has a political meaning. The French playwright Denis Guénoun notes:

L'acte, politique, de convoquer une représentation peut appeler le public dans une rue, ou un édifice – dans un champ, c'est rare. Dans la rue, c'est un attrouplement : est politique le choix de la place, de l'heure, ainsi que la composition et la forme de l'assemblée. Chacun de ces caractères traduit un rapport très précis à l'organisation de la cité, et formule une sorte de discours par rapport à elle [...]. Dans un édifice, il reste quelque chose de ces déterminations. Le site du bâtiment (banlieue ou vieille ville ?), sa forme et le système de ses fonctions internes, ce qu'il suppose de choix quant à l'heure, la durée, le déroulement des représentations : voilà les premières inscriptions de la politique. L'instance politique qui commande le théâtre, c'est d'abord l'architecture. (Guénoun, 1998: 11)

The political agency that first governs theatre is architecture, Denis Guénoun points out. In the case of our nomadism, this means that through the place chosen for each performance we necessarily add a new layer of meaning to it, which will resonate with the text performed. Before continuing to speak of architecture in theatre buildings – this is our other purpose – Denis Guénoun suggests that the choice of any building as an ephemeral performance space gives the performance a political tone: the location of the building in the city, its shape and functions, translate a precise link with the urban, social and political arrangement of the city. Moreover, each building (or its function) imposes limits concerning the times and development of the performance: in a library or a museum we must perform – and rehearse! – outside opening hours, and sometimes we must negotiate to get permission to use one part or another of the building. In Porrentruy, for instance, a small town in the canton of Jura, we performed in a 16th century stately home, uninhabited and being reformed. The locals knew about it but could never enter. In this case, the theatre performance enabled the building to be open to the public for two afternoons.

Sometimes the socio-political dimension becomes subtler. In general, our best allies are the caretakers. They know “their building” better than anyone, lend us a key, allow us to rehearse yet another hour and are proud of seeing the building transformed into a stage for a few days.

Since our company was founded, one of our objectives has been to encourage the residents in a town or building to rediscover its architectonic

heritage and offer its inhabitants or users the opportunity to get to know it better. In this respect, our nomadism is for us a way of recovering the basic democratic function of theatre.

The Political Implication of the Text

In our second play, the relationship with the audience becomes even closer. We perform writings by the Viennese architect Adolf Loos (1870-1933) (Loos, 1993; original 1897-1933). He was a pioneer of the Modern Movement and had contacts with the artistic avant-garde of his time: he was a friend of Arnold Schönberg, Oskar Kokoschka and Karl Kraus. Loos published articles and pamphlets in the press almost daily and even founded his own magazine (although only two issues were released). He greatly enjoyed discussing in the cafés and his home was always open at lunch. Our show – called *La transformation (Umbau)* or, in the event of performing it in Spanish, *La transformación* – translates this desire to chat and share a table on the stage, at which we invite some members of the audience to sit with the two characters – the two actresses personifying two men, Adolf Loos and Karl Kraus – and to eat a few spoonfuls of stew.

Moreover, while Peter Zumthor's lectures mainly deal with aesthetic issues and the philosophical component of the notion of inhabiting, Adolf Loos's writings have a stronger controversial or even political character. This significantly intensifies the resonance between the words of the actresses and the spaces or the architecture surrounding them. Adolf Loos does not hesitate to apostrophise the figure of the architect-creator: his or her works “dishonour” the lake, are not like the houses built by country people and their great-great-grandfathers, “as beautiful as a rose or a thistle, as a horse or a cow” (Loos, 1993 (II): 23-24). Neither does he hesitate to ridicule the



Photo 6. *La transformation (Umbau)*, Johanneskirche Luzern, Switzerland, 2018. © Philipp Ottendoerfer.



Photo 7. *La transformation (Umbau)*, Monte Verità, Ascona, Switzerland, 2018. © Philipp Ottendoerfer.

Swiss authorities, who reproached him for not ornamenting a porter's lodge enough on the shore of the Geneva Lake. Finally, in his fable "The Poor Little Rich Man", Loos mocks the client's misfortune, a "poor rich man" victim of the authoritarianism and arrogance of his architect. In this way, Loos constantly challenges the architect's authority as a creator but also the role of the users and their way of making the city and its architectures their own. Perhaps the essence of the show *La transformation (Umbau)* lies in challenging, in this case from the stage: it challenges the resources of the theatre, the role of the audience and how they make the theatre space their own. It is, in short, an invitation to turn our public buildings and spaces into places of hospitality.



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