

## **Propositions for a stage ...**

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*Propositions for a stage: 24 frames of a beautiful heaven* centres around ideas of time, and time's relationship to the body, to technology and to spaces of performance. The individual artworks in *Propositions for a stage* are presented within the gallery as a series of discrete worlds—spaces, times and hermeneutic logics constructed by the works themselves. When entering the gallery, the viewer encounters a constellation of micro-theatres created by illumination, video projection, sculptural and architectural elements. Each work proposes its own 'thinking' about time and creates its own space, and these various approaches are highlighted within the exhibition.

The various space-times are theatrical in the manner in which they make possible an immersion into their world and create a space apart from which to reflect upon the everyday. As philosopher Samuel Weber has noted in his book *Theatricality as medium* (2004), the theatre is a place and a time where something takes place but it is also a place from which to reflect and think differently. The philosopher Alain Badiou similarly suggests that 'theatre is an assemblage ... of extremely disparate components' that are drawn together and made visible through the space of performance.<sup>1</sup> Both highlight the theatre—or stage—as a defined but temporary space in which something very particular takes place. In this way, *Propositions for a stage* is a constellation of proposals for reconsidering the relationship between space, time and the body.

## **Rethinking time as 'stages'**

In his essay 'The paradoxes of time travel' published in the *American Philosophical Quarterly* in the late 1970s, David Lewis suggests that we should consider space-time as a whole divided into stages. This, he contends, means that time travel is possible as the movement between these different stages, and thus 'the paradoxes of time-travel are oddities, not impossibilities'.<sup>2</sup> This spatialization of time, the division of time into stages (spaces that we might inhabit), means that it is possible to consider time travel as simply an unevenness between stages, or as Lewis puts it: 'the discrepancy between time and time' or between different orders of time.<sup>3</sup> This could be a discrepancy between the time of departure and arrival such as we see in most versions of time travel (in science fiction, for example), in which there is an uneven interval or space between different measures of time. It could also be a mismatch between a personal experience of time and an external one, as Lewis suggests. This brings us back to the way in which the standardization of time—clock time—can be likened to the movement of the projector, which rotates the film strip through the projector gate at an interval of 24 frames per second. If we think of each film frame as a stage in time, then time is intrinsically connected to (or dependent upon) the mechanics of the projector itself. A very simple form of time travel might then be the variation of time between film frames as events separated by 'unequal amounts of time', that is time as it exists outside of the regulation that we impose upon it.<sup>4</sup> Following this line of thinking, we might also consider time travel as entering into the different spatial and temporal frameworks of individual artworks. While Lewis does not make this connection, there is much literature to

suggest this link between the advent of film (particularly the experience of early film projection) and the possibilities of time travel.<sup>5</sup> This is highlighted by the exhibition title *24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, which refers to the novel *24 ge mei miao tian tang* [格每秒天堂] (2009) by the Chinese writer Pan Haitian. Haitian's book, like much science fiction, plays with the idea of time travel through film and by jumping through the different temporalities suggested by different film narratives. *24 ge mei miao tian tang* [格每秒天堂], which can also be translated as '24-second paradise' therefore plays with the contingency and manipulability of time in relation to technology.<sup>6</sup>

*Propositions for a stage* extends Lewis's ideas in relation to art practice in order to propose that time is not continuous, but broken into a series of platforms or stages. Here the stage is considered a temporal space or limit, and a place of speculation. This spatialization of time is suggested by the title of the exhibition, which both highlights the temporality of the stage and its contingency: the possibility that time might be chopped up into pieces rather than run continuously in a linear manner. The second part of the title alludes to this idea by referring to the singularity of the film frame, which is set in movement by the apparatus of the projector. *24 frames of a beautiful heaven*, therefore, emphasizes the arbitrary standardization of time that is suggested by the movement of film through the projector at the speed of 24 frames per second. If we think of the film strip as a collection of discrete frames that can be chopped up, rearranged and layered, then we have an alternative to this standardization, where time might not always run forward but could jump backwards, forwards, and move at a faster or slower pace. If we think of time also as space or as having 'space-like dimensions' (as Lewis does) then time itself becomes a question rather than a fact. We might then think of the stage as both a temporal and spatial proposition that explores (and proposes) differing approaches to time both within the artwork and more broadly.

In his new work *The bamboo spaceship* (2017), produced especially for *Propositions for a stage*, Ming Wong takes up questions of time and futurity in relation to Chinese modernity. *The bamboo spaceship* brings together a number of works that traverse different genres, forms and spaces of fiction, including elements that draw upon spaces of cinema and performance. These include images referencing the bamboo theatre structures used by Cantonese opera, a ruined Chinese cinema in Malaysia, the backstage of a *wayang* (Chinese street opera in Singapore), as well as images documenting Wong's own efforts to construct the scenery for a Chinese opera. Alongside these still images, which are displayed on temporary walls suggesting stage flats (the moveable scenography of European theatre) and digital screens, are videos documenting Wong's performances that explore the possibilities of producing a Cantonese sci-fi opera. These works, such as *Windows on the world (parts I and II)* (2012–14), and *Blast off into the sinosphere* (2014), fold together the ritualized form of Chinese opera with the futurity and speculation inherent to science fiction. There are precedents for this interweaving of historical and contemporary forms in both Chinese opera and science fiction. As the Chinese science-fiction scholar Wu Yan notes, 'contemporary China mixes a lot of pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial factors' that are explored through science fiction, and which run concurrent with a need to re-examine the past and question the future.<sup>7</sup> We see this in effect today particularly through the rise in

the number of science or speculative fiction narratives written by Chinese authors that deal with questions of climate change and science. For example, Liu Cixin's very popular trilogy *The three-body problem san ti wen ti* [三体问题] (2006) explores environmental concerns and human avarice within a narrative that also engages with virtual gaming, the denial of fundamental laws of physics, and, of course, time travel. What is significant about *The three-body problem* is again the arrangement of the world into a series of discrete stages—portals through which one arrives and departs from a series of unrelated temporal zones.

Ming Wong's interest in science fiction from China and the non-Western world (exemplified by his repeated reference to Tarkovsky's 1972 film, *Solaris*) is precisely the manner in which this popular form reflects the present and opens up a space for questioning both the past and future. Thus he emphasizes the importance of science fiction in creating a space to 'reimagine societies and identities, and extend an idea or the repercussions of that idea on a society ...'<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the transience of this space–time is important for Wong, in particular a transience that is echoed in the temporary and transportable space of the Cantonese opera's bamboo theatres: a form characterized by its mutable and fugitive nature. This is particularly emphasized by the *wayang*, a Singaporean form of Chinese street opera that was brought to Singapore by Chinese migrants in the nineteenth century but which also refers to Indonesian and Malaysian forms of street theatre. The Malay word *wayang* refers to a form of street theatre that involves puppets and human actors, though in its Indonesian form (*wayang kulit*) it is most commonly a puppet show. In Singapore, however, the Chinese *wayang* involves all sorts of performance, from musical performance to acrobatics, and it takes different forms according to the region from which it originates. The Cantonese form of *wayang*, which is known in Chinese as *yueju*, is known for its reference to history as well as myths and legends, and relating them to everyday life. This is the form of Cantonese opera that has the closest relationship to Wong's work.<sup>9</sup> Yet what *The bamboo spaceship* highlights in its reference to the *wayang* is the manner in which these temporary structures intervene in daily life and create a space that is both inside and outside at the same time: in the street but also in the fictional space it creates on and through its stage. The fragility of this gesture should be noted, as the *wayang* might be performed on a simple wooden stage, suggesting that the threshold between the daily life of the street and the fictional spaces of the stage are similarly fragile.

Wong's photographic images of the backstage area of a contemporary Singaporean *wayang* highlight the transformative power of the threshold in creating the space of the stage. Indeed, we are drawn into the space of *The bamboo spaceship* through a series of thresholds or portals. As suggested earlier, these are created through elements that act like stage sets, and include a large freestanding photographic image of a traditional bamboo theatre that could be a backdrop to a stage, but which stands at the forefront of the installation. The image, printed in large scale, beckons us into its space—a vast, cavernous space with a cathedral-like arched ceiling. These portals proliferate in *The bamboo spaceship*, acting as constant invitations to cross a threshold into another world. They both construct a sense of a world apart (which we're invited to enter) and present us with a border to be crossed.

Another piece of scenography suggests that we are entering the space of Wong's installation through the backstage area, proceeding through the reverse side of a stage set onto the stage itself. Yet another screen, this one a video projection, shows a figure leading us through an endless silver tunnel. The video is an extract from Wong's work *Windows on the world (part 1)*, in which he presented the tunnel in the space of a gallery (Para Site, Hong Kong) for visitors to walk through while an aria from the opera *Princess Zhaojun crosses the border* is played. In the aria, the beautiful concubine Princess Zhaojun laments her departure from the Han court to exile in central Asia after she is overlooked by the Emperor Yuan. The aria speaks of exile and transformation; these are states that are echoed in the work itself—Wong has remade the work to show a silver cosmonaut leading us through the tunnel towards the threshold to another space-time. Here not only is there a change in state from the work taking a materially tangible form to being an image projected (and therefore spectral in nature), but also an invitation to us—the viewer—to cross a border, beckoned by Zhaojun's lament. This transposition of states from the live scenario to its documentation, and from the material form to the projected image, speaks to Wong's interest in the transient spaces of the stage.

Uriel Orlow's work similarly deals with thresholds between space-times and their layering or projection upon one another. *The Reconnaissance (With Paused Prospect and Paused Retrospect)* (2012–13), part of a larger body of work titled *Unmade Film*, addresses place, memory and futurity in relation to the site of Deir Yassin. The work comprises a number of different elements, it is an assemblage of disparate parts.<sup>10</sup> Time is constantly unfinished in *The Reconnaissance*; it is unpicked and unravelled (Orlow says, 'I see particles' (but we could also say that he sees ghosts) and is as continuous and unresolved as the conflict that forms its basis.<sup>11</sup> As a voice in *The Reconnaissance* suggests, highlighting the porous relationship between different temporal spaces: 'The future is a planet that had a map of this place drawn over it, a rather imperfect map at that'.<sup>12</sup> The Palestinian village of Deir Yassin overshadows the work in every way, but aside from the large photographic image of the site that adorns an entire wall of the gallery, it is strangely ungraspable and constantly slips from view. Its presence suggests the 'unsaid and the unsayable', as Orlow has observed, as well as announcing a temporality that is always also slippery—continuous and unfinished but also porous and indivisible into the categories of past, present, future.<sup>13</sup>

For Orlow, Deir Yassin is a place that is unknown but also familiar. It is a place he visited as a child not knowing that it was the site of the 1948 brutal massacre of Palestinian villagers. Deir Yassin subsequently became Kfar Sha'ul and the site of a mental hospital built to house survivors of the Holocaust, the site thus subject to the 'superimposition of multiple traumas'.<sup>14</sup> Here space—or place—is intimately tied to time as *The Reconnaissance* (and *Unmade Film* as a whole) seeks to trace the landscape of Deir Yassin while declaring it unrepresentable and manifesting 'an abandoned set of futures'.<sup>15</sup> *Unmade Film* therefore shows Orlow's attempt to represent the unrepresentable (as suggested earlier) not simply because the events are unfinished but also because they are being constantly remade. As cultural historian Hanan Toukan notes, representation is made 'perilous' by the constant rewriting of history by the dominant, occupying power (somewhat similar to what has become familiar to us recently as 'fake news'). As a result, place, memory and image become fraught by their inconceivability and by trauma. *Unmade Film* therefore brings

together a huge body of research and art practice (including sound, performance, photography) as a series of proposals for a potential film: it is 'a pretext for something that has yet to occur. It points to the potential of a film, a future film.'<sup>16</sup>

### **Embodied spaces**

Exhibited alongside *The Reconnaissance*, is a single-screen video taken from another of Orlow's large multipart projects. This work, *The Fairest Heritage*, forms part of *Theatrum Botanicum* (2016), a project that explores the botanical world as a stage for politics. *The Fairest Heritage* uses a film that Orlow found while conducting research in South Africa. This archival film documents the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of Kirstenbosch, the national botanical garden, and shows the country at the height of the Apartheid era. Yet rather than simply presenting the film as a document of a past, Orlow problematizes temporal boundaries by reinhabiting and remaking the image of apartheid with the actor Lindiwe Matshikiza imposing herself upon the image and into the film. Matshikiza's presence remakes the film, projecting it into a possible future made anew. Thus, in *The Fairest Heritage*, time is a complex, porous and unfinished business. Exhibited in a large empty space and projected on a wall dissecting the space, *The Fairest Heritage* restages and repeats Matshikiza's re-embodiment of the image at each viewing; its size and presence, and the echo of the image across the reflective floor of the gallery draws the viewer into its world. This immersion into the theatre-world of the image is not an act of relationality or equivalence but instead produces an embodied questioning of the politics of race, through the staging of acts of inclusion and exclusion, and activity and passivity, as we consider our potential role within the film itself.

This notion of entering into the world of the image (whether that world is actual or imagined) is a key aspect of Rabih Mroué's work. His 2009 performance lecture (what he prefers to term 'a non-academic lecture'), *The inhabitants of images*, muses on the question of what happens to photographic subjects after death.<sup>17</sup> Through the weaving of an elaborate scenario, Mroué develops the idea of a world in which the inhabitants of images choose which image they might inhabit and with whom they might cohabit after death. Rather than being simple flights of fancy, Mroué's conjectures are based in the very real conditions of a country still reeling from the effects of civil war as well as its situation in a region mired in uncertainty and conflict; through them he seeks to create possibilities for other, unrealized futures. In this way, Mroué's work seeks to open a space from which to question actual events and histories by confronting them with fictions that shock or jolt the certainty of existing knowledge. As philosopher Gilles Deleuze suggests of the idea of 'fabulation': it is a form of storytelling that is opposed to straightforward fiction because it has an import in the real but is not real (yet is equally not *not* real). Mroué observes this also when he describes his intention to 'put the world of the real and the world of fiction together'. 'For me', he says, 'this shock or clash will produce a reaction from the audience in terms of creating a kind of distance' from real events and allowing a space of questioning, or reconsidering or of not-knowing to emerge.<sup>18</sup> In the context of *Duo for two missing persons* (2013), exhibited as part of *Propositions for a stage*, these fictions—or fabulations—that Mroué presents have a complex relationship with ongoing and unanswered questions of war, principally the

unrecorded or undeclared dead, who exist in a liminal zone as neither officially recorded 'deceased' but missing and missed by their friends and families.

Mroué's single-screen video *Duo for two missing persons* is an elegiac meditation on the constituency of the body and its absence. It confronts the body as both material and spectral such that it is alternately parts of a puzzle to be assembled, data to be recorded or choreographed, and an intangible haunting form. Centred upon the discovery of mass burials and the constitution of the dismembered bodies contained in these sites, *Duo for two missing persons* begins with Mroué and his mathematician father discussing the 'percentage of error and confusion' that arises in the attempted reassembly of these bodies.<sup>19</sup> Ideas of assembly and re-assembly, as well as stillness and movement, go on to be the main preoccupations of the film as Mroué consults with his father and, later, a choreographer regarding the possible reconfigurations of the body. Creating a tangle of fact and fiction, *Duo for two missing bodies* moves through a range of possibilities from mathematical formulae to diagrams of Baroque dance, and then to a personal narrative in which Mroué tells of the collective experience of haunting at BO18, a Beirut nightclub that we are told is situated on the site of a mass grave. This nightclub always seems over-full even when it is not, and the doorman keeps a tally on the numbers of people that enter but they always seem to be fewer than those inside. In recounting this story, Mroué further creates a narrative in which there is a porous relation between the past and present, and between the worlds of the living and the 'not living'.

The manner in which *Duo for two missing persons* simultaneously creates and speaks about a liminal other space—a space apart from but within the everyday—is echoed in the manner of its exhibition. *Duo for two missing persons* is exhibited within a space that mimics the publicness of an auditorium yet is at the same time nestled behind a large barricade wall that dissects the entire gallery. On its front face, this wall displays works from Amanda Beech's *Cause and Effect series*. The rear side of this wall is open, showing its struts and supporting sandbags. It is a backstage area—a place of ghosts and uncertain happenings—and it is here that we find Mroué's video. Beech's *Cause and Effect series* is unassailable in its presence. Comprising nine of a series of large-scale works on paper, it is unequivocally present; it simply *is* and announces that this is so, and in this way it contrasts with the 'fabulations' inherent to Mroué's work. As the philosopher Robin Mackay has written of another of Beech's works: 'Image-force, word-force. It pinned you down like a nail gun. After a while you're just registering it blindly, feeling the impact'.<sup>20</sup>

Beech is well known for her video works. These are often long-form and multiscreen, and exhibited within specially designed environments. These specifically constructed spaces, along with the rapid imagery, fast-paced dialogue and music that Beech utilizes, have led to her work being described as producing a 'force field', as Mackay's words above also suggest.<sup>21</sup> Like her videos, *Cause and Effect series* uses a very direct visual language and maximizes the impact of that language, which shares the terse positivity of management-speak and the self-help manual. Similarly, and as we find in her video works, the image-force that is present in the *Cause and Effect series* can be traced to now ubiquitous boardroom PowerPoint presentations (through the use of bullet-points, capitalized

announcements, headlines, news-bites and so on), as well as to the pattern systems found in gaming, computation and mathematics.

### **Image force and a theatre of operations**

The appearance of the work on a long, 10-metre long temporary wall that runs diagonally across the gallery space stresses its emphatic effect. Beech's interest in directness is also apparent in the bold statements that the work makes: 'Capital does not explain Culture', 'Self Conception does not equal Self Transformation', 'No Horizon does not equal Progressive Future'. In speaking about the *Cause and Effect series*, Beech has noted the straightforward lack of irony in the work.<sup>22</sup> Yet at the same time, and upon closer inspection, there is an underlying trickery at work here, which Beech has described as engaging in a 'game system of faking cause.' This 'trick' is constructed by both the production of the work itself and its display. For example, the artwork comprises a set of poster-like works on paper. These seem to be produced using repeated and mechanized print processes yet, in fact, there are no machinic relations between them. This is the 'trick' that lies at the heart of the work. The stencils are not standardized repetitions; the seemingly repetitive forms display differences across the series, revealing that they have in fact been individually produced and embellished. Similarly, the display of the artwork on a wall which, like the hoardings of a building site, reveals the means of its construction, lulls us into a false focus on the processes of construction. *Cause and Effect series* therefore tricks the eye or brain in order to fool us into seeing these connections, preying upon our tendency to draw connections and identify cause where there are none. Production too becomes a kind of system in which our assumptions about the machinic nature of repetition, cause and effect are refuted.

Like all the works exhibited in *Propositions for a stage*, Beech's works on paper corral and command the space of the gallery. What is unusual is that Beech's *Cause and Effect series* is the only work that does not involve any aspect of moving image or video. The commandeering attitude to space that is integral to the work not only results from its method of display but is an inherent aspect of its concerns. While Beech is interested in the hermeneutic game-worlds of the crime novel or computational system, there is also a concern in the work with the systems and logics of neo-liberalism. Here, through this system, a very particular attitude to space is revealed—the collapse of space and of time. These space-without-space and time-without-time urgencies of neo-liberal systems have produced a world that is governed by speed, endless production and closed loops. This is a world of no space and no time for most of us as we work harder and longer, and leisure becomes infected by the immaterial forms of labour we perform for the likes of Facebook, for example.

We also find these ideas in Beech's multiscreen video, *Final Machine* (2013), where intermittently the space of the screen becomes violently imposed upon by a circular form that suggests both the aperture of a gunsighting mechanism, and the insistence of a bullet point. Both operations—the gunsight and the bullet point—act to organize space and impose upon it, as Beech's script for the video articulates: 'It's the collision of matter', the voice-over states: 'We executed our own veracity with ruthless systematic contact'.<sup>23</sup> As Mackay has noted: 'You can't reason with bullet points'.<sup>24</sup> There is, therefore, a violence in the way that the artwork organizes space as we see in the way that *Cause and Effect series* assertively

commands attention and in the imposition of the bullet point or gunsight onto and *into* the image in *Final Machine*. Time and space are therefore no longer evenly distributed but commanded and possessed. This aspect of *Cause and Effect series* relates to Beech's long-term investigation into the architectures and forces of neo-liberalism; for example, in an interview concerning her meeting with the American architectural photographer Julius Shulman, Beech notes that he presents a world 'that is authored by us ... which impresses on us the power of will and mastery'.<sup>25</sup>

The tension between the theatre or stage as a place where events can take place and a site of absolute force or unequivocal belief is emphasized by Weber. In exploring the contemporary uses and importance of theatricality, Weber addresses the relation of the term to its militaristic use, 'a theatre of operations' being the most obvious example.<sup>26</sup> Here theatre becomes less a concern of re-enactment, stylization and excess but a question of the way in which power is exerted over bodies. He writes: 'the allusion to nuclear weapons brings to the fore one of the striking and distinguishing factors affecting the notion of 'theatre' and 'theatricality' today, namely the preponderance of energy over matter, of force over bodies, of power over place'.<sup>27</sup> What this means in terms of our thinking about theatre and its possible uses is a move away from theatre as a place of experimentation and play, towards an understanding of theatre as the operation and display of power, as we see in the works in *Propositions for a stage*. Beech's work follows this trajectory by demonstrating the intense force of its didactic, visual language; 'it is what it is', as the artist has stated.<sup>28</sup> Weber also speaks about the exertion of power inherent in the notion of theatre in its militaristic use. This exertion of power (or 'force') over bodies is addressed through Zach Blas's ongoing work on the use of biometrics and surveillance, or more precisely 'capture'.<sup>29</sup>

Blas's *Face Cages* (2014–16) presents a series of what the artist has termed 'endurance performances', in which four queer artists wear a mask—or 'cage'—of their own biometric data. Dramatically lit, each *Face Cage* is displayed on a plinth in front of a screen presenting a video of the performer wearing the relevant cage. This display of cage and performance paired together and exhibited using conventional museum furniture heightens the likeness of the face cages to medieval armour through their 'museumification'. This doubling of the presentation of the cages—on the one hand, as an object or artefact displayed on a plinth, spotlighted and thus exercised through the disembodied language of the museum collection and, on the other hand, enlivened through performance—highlights a disjuncture between the body as autonomous and 'alive', and the measurement and representation or 'capture' of that body. Blas further complicates this dichotomy: the screen documents and mediates a performance of the body, while the plinth bears the data of this body, itself mediated and transformed through 3D modelling into a mask or cage. This adds a complexity to common debates in performance art—questions concerning when a body is 'live' and when it is mediated, concerning what constitutes the real and the virtual body, and concerning the status of the documentation of a performance in relation to the performance itself. These are also considerations of time, as the descriptor 'endurance performance' also suggests. Blas's use of the term 'endurance' points to performance art's canonical concern with the physical (spatial) and temporal limits of the body extended through *duration*—the extended present. Thus, the performers in *Face Cages* each wear their cage for as long as they can endure it. Despite being constructed from a digital mapping of their own face, the cages are reputedly

very uncomfortable to wear and each performance lasts approximately 12 minutes. Yet this is not the only consideration of time in the work: while the performance points to the elongation of the present that is commonly found in much performative 'body art', it also addresses questions of the past and its relation to the present through both the presentation of the cages as artefacts—static forms that have only a tangential relationship to the present—and the performances presented as documents of something that has taken place.

The media theorist Shoshana Amielle Magnet has described the capture of the body through its biometric data as producing 'a cage of information'.<sup>30</sup> This cage is produced by the so-called 'perfect' measurement and 'accounting' of the face enacted by facial recognition processes. It is also a static and unchanging portrait that reduces ongoing lived experience, networks and relationships to a single constant measurement. As Magnet has observed: 'Biometric science presupposes the human body to be a stable, unchanging repository of personal information from which we can collect data about identity'.<sup>31</sup> Yet the assumption that this data 'snapshot', reliant on tropes and surface information, would reveal the 'core' identity of a person goes to the heart of what Magnet has identified as the failure of biometrics. This is its failure to fully see an individual life that is forever mutable and collective, and it is the failure of facial recognition technologies and other biometric measurement processes to recognize bodies marked by difference: whether those that lie outside of gender norms or dominant (white) racial characteristics. It should be noted, however, as Magnet does, that the failure of biometrics is also its success, as theatre becomes pervasive (whether successful or not). The exertion of the threat of 'capture' upon bodies suggests the form of contemporary technological theatre that Weber alludes to in his suggestion of 'a theatre of operations' as the exertion of power over bodies. Yet what is significant about Blas's work is the identification that this 'failure' enables the possibility of resistance. Here Blas's work such as *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012), which involved the collective making of masks using a mash up of individuals' biometric data and the joyous parading of these masks, draws upon the resistance that we find in the history of gay and lesbian performance, as well as through the strategies utilized by groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre.

### **Theatrical methodologies and exhibition-making**

There has been much recent commentary regarding the 'flattening' of the world that has resulted from the connectivity of the digital, the standardization and monopolization of international supply chains, goods, services, and most particularly systems of control. This produces an image of the world in which we live as a single, vast, interconnected space; a total ecology in which every part fits together and everything has its place and its part to play. *Propositions for a stage* responds to this situation by attempting to think about time and space differently; that is, by considering the way in which both time and space might be broken up into discontinuous and discrete parts. We might call these parts 'stages' or we might refer to them as 'worlds' (as distinct from *the* world—the singular conjoined entity suggested earlier). By connecting this discontinuous space–time to the stage, I seek to draw upon ideas of theatre where theatre is understood not simply as a style connoting flamboyance, repetition or excess but as a means for organizing space and time differently. For me, the idea of theatre offers the possibility of a discrete world—a place set apart from

the everyday but not separate from it. It is not a place of escapism but of seeing, thinking and ordering the world differently. The stage (or theatre) is, therefore, a place where events take place and a place from which to reflect or to see, as the connection to its Latin root *thea* suggests. Visualizing a theatrical stage, we picture an illuminated space; we picture a place and a time that has a particular intensity. This theatrical stage of our imagining might as much be a proscenium arch as the ad hoc gathering of a street performer who draws people together through the production of an intensity, and the illumination and delineation of a space through this feeling of intensity that is shared by those gathered together. In both cases we are drawn into an immersive relationship with that space—it corrals us and envelops us (perhaps only momentarily) in its world. As Lewis suggests, this is time broken up into stages, where these stages might be of different shapes and sizes so that time is uneven and not uniform.

*Propositions for a stage* is therefore an exercise in thinking about forms of social organization and ways of seeing the world not as an unending flatness but as discrete and separate spaces and times. The exhibition is an exercise in thinking where the artwork does the ‘thinking’, providing—as the title suggests—a series of *propositions*. As such the artwork acts or performs—it does things in the space. *Propositions for a stage* begins with the idea of the stage and of theatre not as stylistic categories but as an ‘operation’. My focus therefore is on thinking about what might happen in the space and the time of the stage, and what this special space and time enables. The stage therefore creates a space–time that is temporary, and organized around our own experience and encounter with it. The exhibition begins from the question of what these methodologies and structures can bring to the way in which we think both about exhibition-making and the way that we engage with, or encounter artworks. Following this logic, *Propositions for a stage* is conceived not as a ‘group exhibition’ in the usual sense but rather as a series of individual ‘theatres’, where the theatres in question are the artworks. However, it is important to point out that these artworks—all substantial projects by the artists rather than individual works or collections of works—are not all theatrical in style in the conventional sense. They are not solely concerned with qualities often associated with ‘theatricality’, such as high drama, camp, repetition and enactment (although some of these things find their way into the work). Instead theatre and most significantly the stage designate a particular means of engagement and the outcome of that engagement. The exhibition proposes that the artists’ work produces an intensity of space and time within the gallery; it seizes time and occupies the space of the gallery by demanding our attention and our involvement or participation with it. Here I think of the individual artists’ projects as producing their own discrete worlds within the gallery; these are worlds (particular spaces and times) and logics that we enter into, albeit momentarily. To think of the exhibition in this way—as a series of worlds and encounters with these worlds—is to rethink our expectations of exhibition-making, and of time and space itself.

These possibilities are played out through a series of proposals that are enacted by the individual artworks exhibited, so that, crucially, *Propositions for a stage* is not an exhibition *about* theatre or *about* staging; instead, it is a space in which the artworks are presented as a series of worlds—discrete spaces or stages, if you like, that each have their own propositional logics. This approach to the task of curating is markedly different from the

usual approach towards group exhibitions, where each individual artwork is contextualized in order to fit within the overall thematic of the exhibition. Too often this results in a closed loop of statements in which both the viewer and the works are constrained within a space of demonstrated 'truths'. Words such as 'about', 'demonstrated' and 'show', for example, are words that are often used in this approach. Therefore, one of the overriding concerns in curating *Propositions for a stage* has been the question of making space for the participation of both artworks and viewers as active bodies or agents within the exhibition itself. A visitor to the gallery enters into and encounters the space of the artwork itself as a momentary immersion; the artwork does not simply show or represent but is considered for what it does or what it proposes to us—it is itself a propositional form.

1 Alain Badiou, 'Theses on theater' in *Handbook of inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 72.

2 David Lewis, 'The paradoxes of time travel', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (April 1976): 145.

3 Lewis, 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel', 145.

4 Lewis, 'The Paradoxes of Time Travel', 147.

5 It is worth noting that HG Wells' novel *The time machine* was first published in 1895, the same year that the Lumière brothers and the English inventor Robert W Paul both projected film publicly for the first time.

6 Thanks to my students Zishi Han and Shun Yao for reading and translating the novel.

7 Lavie Tidhar, 'A bull in a China shop on the moon: An interview with Wu Yan', *The Internet Review of Science Fiction* 3, no. 2 (February 2006), accessed November 19, 2016, <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10241>.

8 'Windows on the world (Part I)', Ming Wong, accessed August 16, 2017, <http://mingwong.org/windows-on-the-world-part-1>.

9 See 'Wayang (Chinese street opera)', National Library Board Singapore, accessed August 16, 2017, [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1218\\_2011-06-28.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1218_2011-06-28.html) for more information on the history and various forms of *wayang*.

10 There is not space here to discuss the individual elements that make up *The Reconnaissance*. However, it is worth noting that the sandbox presents a metaphor for the timelessness and the vastness of the desert: 'a model desert' a voice announces in the sound piece in the work. Yet this metaphor is immediately curtailed by another voice in the work which states: 'the grain of sand is a dead metaphor for timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take you nowhere'. This trick of opening and closing the vistas or possibilities of space and time is evident elsewhere in the work, such as in the three photographic prints, which present views from the mountainside village of Deir Yassin across the valley. In the prints, space opens out before us. A contrary view is then presented in the intimate views of details of plant life across the site presented in the accompanying slide show.

11 There is much to be said here about the temporality of catharsis in relation to the Palestinian situation. As Orlow highlights in his interview with Yoa'd Ghanadry of the Palestinian Counselling Centre, the continuation of trauma, violence and dispossession and the associated loss of hope (loss of a future) impacts upon clinic definitions and understandings of treatment. Continuation means that there is no 'post', rendering the definition of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (which many Palestinians suffer from) unusable. This continuation of trauma without an end also questions the temporality of psychoanalysis itself based as it is in the 'after'. The popular image of the Freudian scenario depicts the patient not in the midst of trauma but in the midst of recounting or remembering trauma after the event. Similarly, we might consider the way in which catharsis—one of the bases of

theatre—emphasizes a temporal format that is anticipatory; the crisis is resolved so that there is always an end, a post-trauma as is discussed in the interview with Ghanadry, in eds. Uriel Orlow and Andrea Thal, *Unmade film* (Zürich: edition fink, 2014).

12 Uriel Orlow, *The Reconnaissance (With Paused Prospect and Paused Retrospect)*, 2012–13.

13 Andrea Thal and Uriel Orlow, 'A conversation about Unmade Film', trans. Fiona Elliot in eds. Uriel Orlow and Andrea Thal, *Unmade film* (Zürich: edition fink, 2014), 154.

14 Orlow and Thal (eds), *Unmade Film*, 154.

15 Uriel Orlow, *The Reconnaissance (With Paused Prospect and Paused Retrospect)*, 2012–13.

16 Orlow and Thal (eds), *Unmade Film*, 16.

17 Anthony Downey, 'Lost in narration: a conversation between Rabih Mroué and Anthony Downey', *Ibraaz* (January 5 2012), accessed August 21, 2017, <http://www.ibraaz.org/usr/library/documents/main/lost-in-narration-a-conversation-between-rabih-mrou-and-anthony-downey.pdf>.

18 Downey, 'Lost in narration'.

19 Rabih Mroué, *Duo for two missing persons*, 2013.

20 Robin Mackay, 'Foreword' in Amanda Beech, *Final machine* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2013), vi.

21 Robin Mackay describes Beech's *Final Machine* (2013) as: 'A force field produced, reproduced and consumed; desirable, seductive images that assure political right by mobilising aesthetic might'. Amanda Beech, *Final Machine*, v.

22 Amanda Beech, exhibition tour (July 29, 2017), Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts.

23 Beech, *Final Machine*, 103.

24 Mackay, 'Foreword', vi.

25 Amanda Beech, *Sanity assassin* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2010), 16.

26 Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 98.

27 Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as medium*, 98.

28 Exhibition tour (July 29, 2017), Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts.

29 Blas has stated that he prefers the use of the term 'capture' to 'surveillance' as it more adequately describes the use and intention of the gathering of personal and biometric information for both commercial and governmental purposes.

30 Shoshana Amielle Magnet, *When biometrics fail: Gender, race, and the technology of identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

31 Magnet, *When biometrics fail: Gender, race, and the technology of identity*, 2.