

Turned Tables: The Public as Performer

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INTRODUCTION

The theatrical experience begins long before the curtain rises. It begins with the participatory performance along the trajectory to the door of the performance space. These spaces before the actual hall are the architects' opportunity to construct a heightened and engaged sensory experience, to provoke a sharp, distanced awareness or create a vertiginous immersive experience. As such, the sites examined in this essay are the building approach, threshold, foyer space, and performance hall entry.

To discuss these two antipodes of public-as-performer I will focus on built projects by Ateliers Jean Nouvel and Diller Scofidio + Renfro, given their overt interest in vision and visibility, and spectator-spectacle relationships that can be seen throughout their work and particularly their designs for pre-performance spectacles. My intention is to unpack these works in which pre-performance spaces heighten the audience experience, visually, viscerally and haptically, and turn the tables, engaging the audience intentionally or inadvertently in the making of their theater experience.

Garnier's Measured Matrix

To frame the conversation on pre-performance space, two points must be made in regard to the utmost architectural model for the conflation of audience and actor—the 1875 Opera de Paris, by Charles Garnier.

First, the development of the Avenue de l'Opera and the Opera House at the end of this axis were linked

projects; thus, a vista and promenade through urban space towards the opera was of paramount importance to the design of total theater experience.

Second, the Opera is Garnier's manifesto on architecture, theater, and society and the construction of a space to support this society. Garnier argued that the "theatrical sentiment" is fundamental to human (nature), placed third in line after the "desire for affection and self preservation."¹ Reflecting on this, Architectural Critic Karsten Harries stated that "Human being is being with others; as such, according to Garnier, it is essentially theatrical. Wherever two or three people gather, there is theater.."

For Garnier "to see and to make oneself be seen, to understand and to make oneself be understood, that is the fated circle of humanity; to be actor or spectator, that is the condition of human life."²

To see and to be seen, in a specific light, place and context, is inscribed in the opera's public spaces. Plan and section reveal the hierarchical layering, distributing theater-goers in an economic, class, and gendered spatial matrix. Arriving by separate codified axes, all entered the cubic space of the grand stair, only to split and redistribute again according to stature—"parterre" versus "loges," those in the thick of things versus those removed to private salons. The spatial hierarchy of the grand stair, with its porous wrapper, identified the rank of the all too visible onlookers.

Ascending the grand stairs placed the mover at the focal point of the most concentrated wrapper of eyes a space could contain. A catwalk demanding ultimate

control of the elegance of ones forward movement as well as the ascent and turn at each of the marble landings. Each change in level and forced rotation was a device to bring the theater-goer's awareness back to their own performed movement through space, amplified by eyes focused on them, ascending through this gilded void. Thus attention doubly rested on the ascending member of the public: the performance resided in the action of the mover from the view point of the onlookers as well as the self-conscious movement of the mover.

This theme of actor, audience and participant continues to be questioned as in Jacques Rancière's recent essay "The Emancipated Spectator." He writes that the modern "paradox of the spectator" is that on one hand there is no theater without the spectator, but on the other hand that being a spectator is inherently bad as viewing is the opposite of knowing and spectating is the opposite of acting. "To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act."³ Two 20th century approaches aimed at transforming the spectator into an active agent. One activated through intellectual engagement, provoking "conscious(ness) of the social situation" coupled with emotional *distance* to the action and actors (Bertold Brecht); the second model was founded on the *forgoing of distance* between actor and spectator, the audience being "drawn into a circle of action that restores their collective energy" (Antonin Artaud).⁴ Rancière argues a third position, that "being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation..."⁵ As such Rancière's emancipated spectator is one who participates in a ceaseless exchange of roles, not the obliteration of difference between the positions of actor and spectator, seer and seen. These models are particularly interesting in respect to the performances that occur, that we enact and witness in all of those spaces outside the theater proper, in "our normal situation."

These themes of the spectator—engaged but consciously distanced, versus immersed within the action, and Rancière's third state—are reflected in the public's experiences that both Nouvel and DS+R construct.

NOUVEL'S IMMERSION

Returning to the Paris Opera, I would like to draw comparisons between this space against Nouvel's

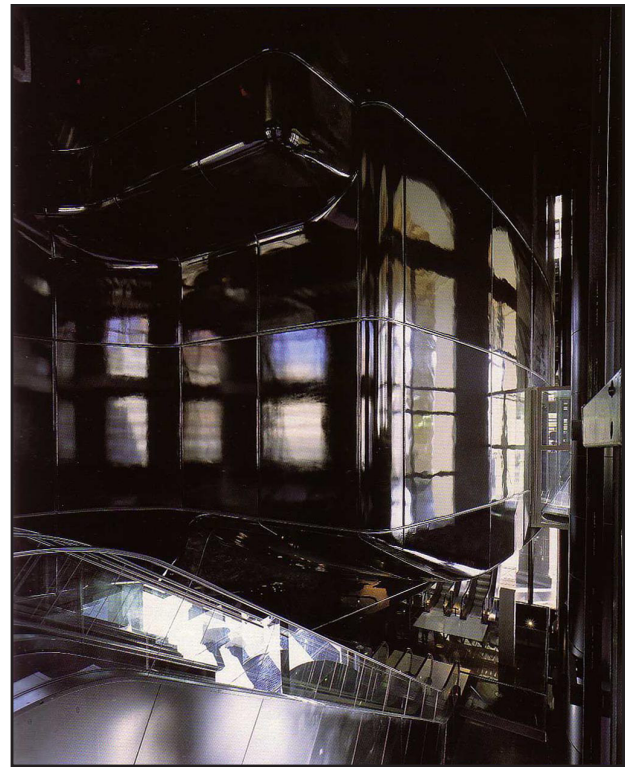


Figure 1. Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Lyon Opera Lobby

Lyon Opera (1993). In the former the vertical ascent shifts and turns to face all directions within a highly defined cubic volume. In Lyon the vertical ascent is via narrow escalators from the street to staggered platforms in a compressed, black lacquered space (Figure 1). The body of the theater-goer is passive, not moving but rather being moved. From scattered prospects in all directions one glimpses others. Eye contact is in fact scarce as one moves quickly from a crowd-condition at street level towards narrowing more intimate spaces. If light abounds, it does not help one clearly see the society in which one takes part. Reflections off the lacquer confound reality and illusion. One loses oneself in a disorienting space, in which the matrix of spatial hierarchy and social matrix dissolve into figurative smoke and mirrors. The intensely layered yet fathomable space of Garnier's stair in Nouvel's is a *troubling depth*. Extreme compressions—between lacquered hall and its glass and marble enclosure, into narrow escalators and passages—are intentional counterpoints to the vertical hollow that winds its way from the basement to former cornice line. The exploration of extreme dimension plays on more senses than the eye. The proprioception of the space is in the muscles, the ear, the gut.

Proprioception

This perception—*proprioception*—has its nerve receptors within the body, as opposed to being located on its surface or in what we commonly refer to as sense organs; messages originate in the muscles, joints, and the inner ear and thus communicate body part position in relation to the body and the body's balance in relation to gravity. Proprioception is also related to kinaesthesia, as it is through these internal signals that we experience motion.⁶

The eye however is not left out of the story; in fact, the extra-ocular muscles play an important role in “registering the direction in which vision is directed and thus of the registered direction of gaze and objects in egocentric space.”⁷ They focus the individual eyeball and binocular eyes together, communicating information about distances relative to the body. Thus the muscular, in addition to the retinal image, communicate depth of space, and one's position within that. The measurement of a “logical” or illogical distance to the ground below our feet prevents or triggers the gut sensation of vertigo.

Nouvel, I would argue, is a master of provoking vertigo, as exemplified in the dizzying and disorienting alternation between physically engaged motion and passive motion, compressive space and immeasurably expansive space.

Spatial Pulsation

In Nouvel's most recently completed performance space, the Danish Radio Symphony Hall (2009), the compressive experience begins with the metro-ride to this newly developed outlying part of town in a car crammed with theater-goers. Once released, the out-of-place audience traverses a wide path towards the illuminated blue cube to then encounter what is for Nouvel a typical gesture—a low and compressive entry which opens out in to a significantly more vertically vast space, invariably hoisting the gaze of the newly-arrived skyward. Illuminated lines in the underbelly of the “meteor” draw the gaze up, offering glimpses of sky through slivers of space between this hovering mass and the glazed envelope. Frequenters of the hall commonly turn 360° to take in the full space and the gawkers who entered just after; barely through the door, the immersive space demands effort for orientation (Figure 2).⁸



Figure 2. Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Danish Radio Symphony Hall

Other details, such as the contoured concrete lure the theater-goer's hands, bringing ones sensation of the space back to ones own body, to the tactile experience, the immediately tangible surfaces.

One continues ahead, passively moved by escalators through a narrow slot, over a void. Emerging from this narrow vertical slot one turns 90, 180° into the tightest and most remote spot of the now horizontally compressed space between the plinth and the "meteor" of the symphony hall above. Obliquely, at the greatest distance across this plinth, a vertical expanse of glass overlooks the elevated metro by which one arrived. At the opposing corner, nearly hidden from view, a dining area overlooks the approach. Further defining the limits of this space caught between this plinth and the "meteor" above are horizontal galleries giving access to the concert hall; behind these galleries, concrete cores, stairs and escalators; behind these, the glass fishnet enclosure; behind this the blue scrim.

From the beginning of the trajectory to the moment one enters the concert-hall the audience moves and

is moved, literally, figuratively, viscerally. Spatial narrative is played out by the audience-performer moving and being moved, lured through layers of space carved out from below our feet and above our heads (Figure 3). We look up, down, and reorient. Rotations, revealing what is hidden, lead one on, further orienting and disorienting, compressing and releasing that compression, ascending and turning again and again, until one is pushed, quite literally by the ticket-holding crowds, through the tightest of portals into the symphony hall itself.

Not unlike Garnier, Nouvel contests that "everything is theatrical" though with a subtle difference.

Scenography... is not a question of producing a spectacle,... but simply bearing in mind the fact that there is *somebody* who is looking and *something* being looked at... in accordance with the precise knowledge of... the emotions you want to trigger.⁹

Gently built up experience with clear spatial and social definitions chez Garnier are, in Nouvel's space, traded in for ambiguous, layered, and vertiginous space. It is intentionally labyrinthine, Piranesian.¹⁰

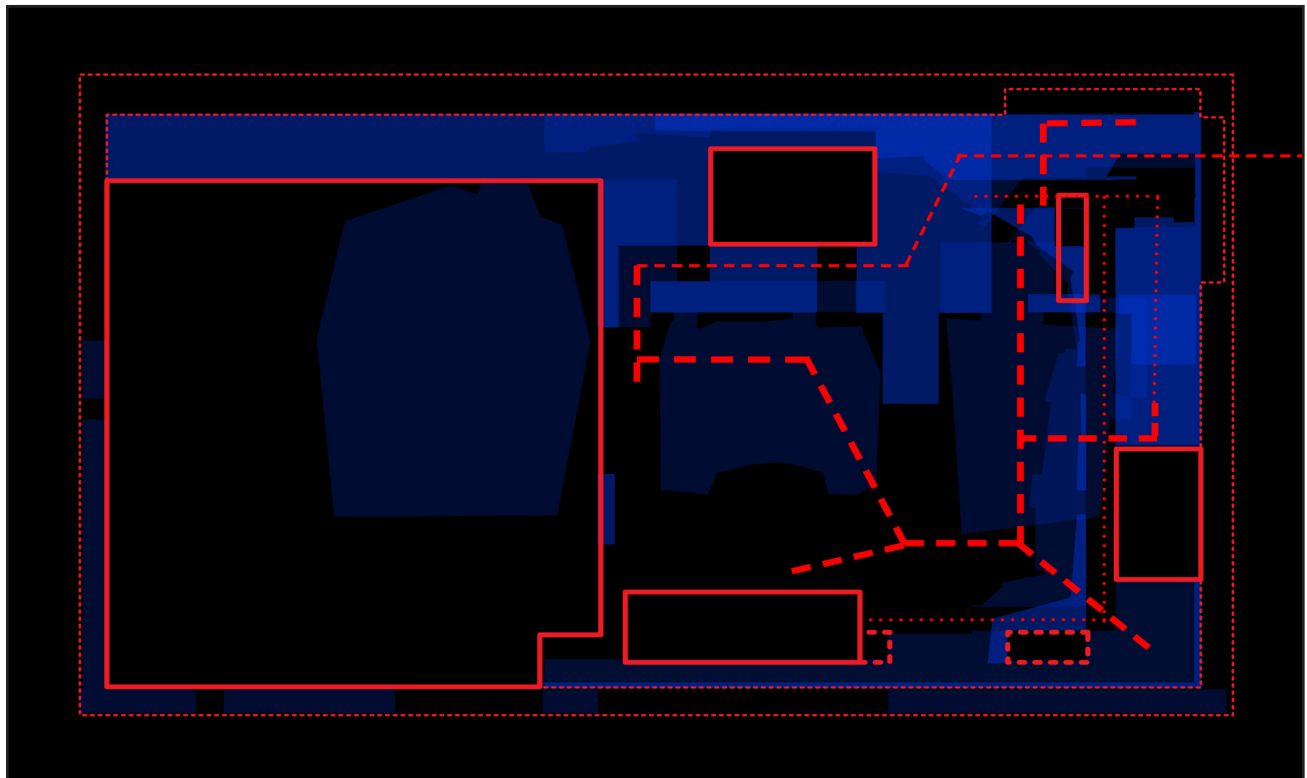


Figure 3. Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Danish Radio Symphony Hall, Movements and Voids

Several things are at play here; first the physical registration—the proprioception—of compressive space and release, reinforced by texture, color and illumination that bring the gaze or consciousness down to the immediately surrounding surfaces and then up to those which are remote or even imperceptibly distant. Nouvel aims “to provoke a disturbing, even moving experience... which facilitates one’s awareness of light. The movement and the vibration of time.”¹¹ The carving away in X, Y, and Z destabilize, registering viscerally. At the same time the fathoming of these layers of depth engages the eye as it seeks to measure depths and decipher the layers of information. As in Garnier’s grand stair, one is in the thick of things; yet not so surrounded in section by on-lookers as one is surrounded in layers of space to be fathomed. The exploration of space and its extremes, near surfaces and far destinations, the constant fluctuation of attention between one’s bodily navigation and visual fathoming I would argue render the public as performer in this pre-performance space.

DS+R’S INVERSION

This immersive experience that Nouvel constructs is nearly the antithesis of the roles we are charged to play in the spaces constructed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R). Their work continuously problematizes institutions, and problematizes the gaze, the act of seeing, spectating, and surveillance. Although the action may be on stage, DS+R construct relationships in which the public is repeatedly made aware of their spectating; they are caught in the act of seeing. Unlike the experience of being within the thick of things, in DS+R’s work the public looks in from both a physical and conceptual distance while being exposed as looking.

Their remodeling of the Brasserie (2000), a 1970’s nightspot for people-watching, contains their principle techniques for rendering public as participant. The diner-to-be is engaged in a three part spectacle: first as inadvertent performer, second as self conscious performer, and finally as observer of these performances. This story unfolds as follows: A diner’s approach is captured by video camera, appearing as one in a series of fifteen still frames on monitors above the cocktail bar. “Making an entrance” through a portal in a taut surface, the diner descends an elongated glass stair to the main dining floor.¹² Those already eating observe. In the

crossing of a threshold the inadvertent performer enters fully, now self-consciously into the “narcissistic and exhibitionist act” that has been set up.¹³ The self-awareness is augmented both by the attention needed to navigate the stair’s elongated treads and their unsettling glass surface. For the Brasserie veteran an alternative path leads directly to the bar, a discrete shortcut between one’s “video appearance” and physical appearance at the bar.

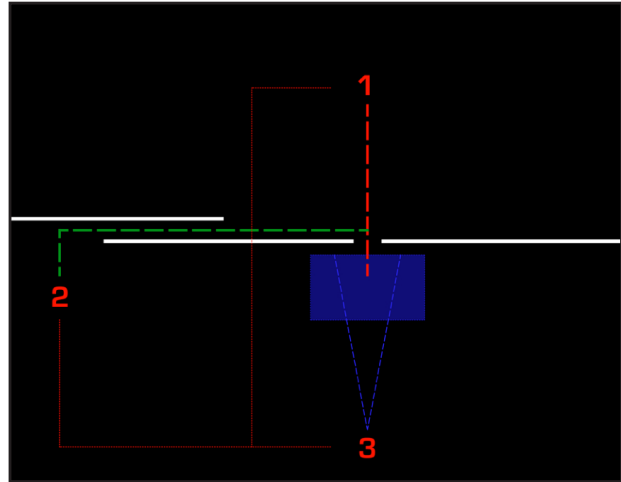


Figure 4. D+S(+R)'s “set up”

Three devices, apparent in this work, recur in both their Institute of Contemporary Art and Lincoln Center Projects: 1) the arrival through a portal or confrontation with a surface which puts one on the spot, 2) the existence of a second (generally oblique) access that allows a discreet slipping behind the scene and 3) a use of a media or spatial delay, to re-present to the public their participation in either the act of acting or the act of looking (Figure 4).

Each also celebrates the approach. The Boston Harbor stroller experiences the privileged waterfront view into the mediatheque and glazed galleries above it much as the uptown subway rider sneaks a peek into the dance studios hovering above Alice Tully Hall. Moving closer, we discover crowds gathering, on Alice Tully’s “info-peel” or the ICA grandstand, but crowds looking away from us. Then we arrive at the first threshold. At Alice Tully we confront a glass entry wall that seems to arbitrarily divide an otherwise continuous space. Across this threshold awaits our spectators occupying the elevated Donors’ Balcony projecting like

a papal balcony over the lobby. A stranger entering this place would find him or herself both sectionally and socially in the self-conscious position of being observed by an insider from a privileged viewpoint. An alternative, discreet entry is offered to the north that slips in between the glass and wood lobby walls (Figure 5).

The ICA attempts this paired approach in several places. Early renderings reveal paired entries to the lobby; one perpendicular to and entering directly into the lobby through the south façade; a second slips along the side. A portal in the underbelly of the exterior grandstand puts a new-comer traversing this surface directly on stage, while lateral approaches allow one to skim the sides, and

slip onto the grandstand, and up along the west façade of the event space. Given the continuity of the grandstand's wooden surface from outside to in, another entry at the summit is certainly implied though none exists.¹⁴ Here too the frontal ascent to this barrier puts one on stage, visible through the glazed rear wall of the event space.

In an interview published in *The Ciliary Function*, DS+R's monograph named for the muscle that focuses the eye's lens, partner Renfro asserts that they "strive towards a self-awareness of the building in which the audience understands itself as audience...." Specifically in regards to the ICA, Scofidio adds in that "the building looks at looking, the primary activity in the museum."¹⁵

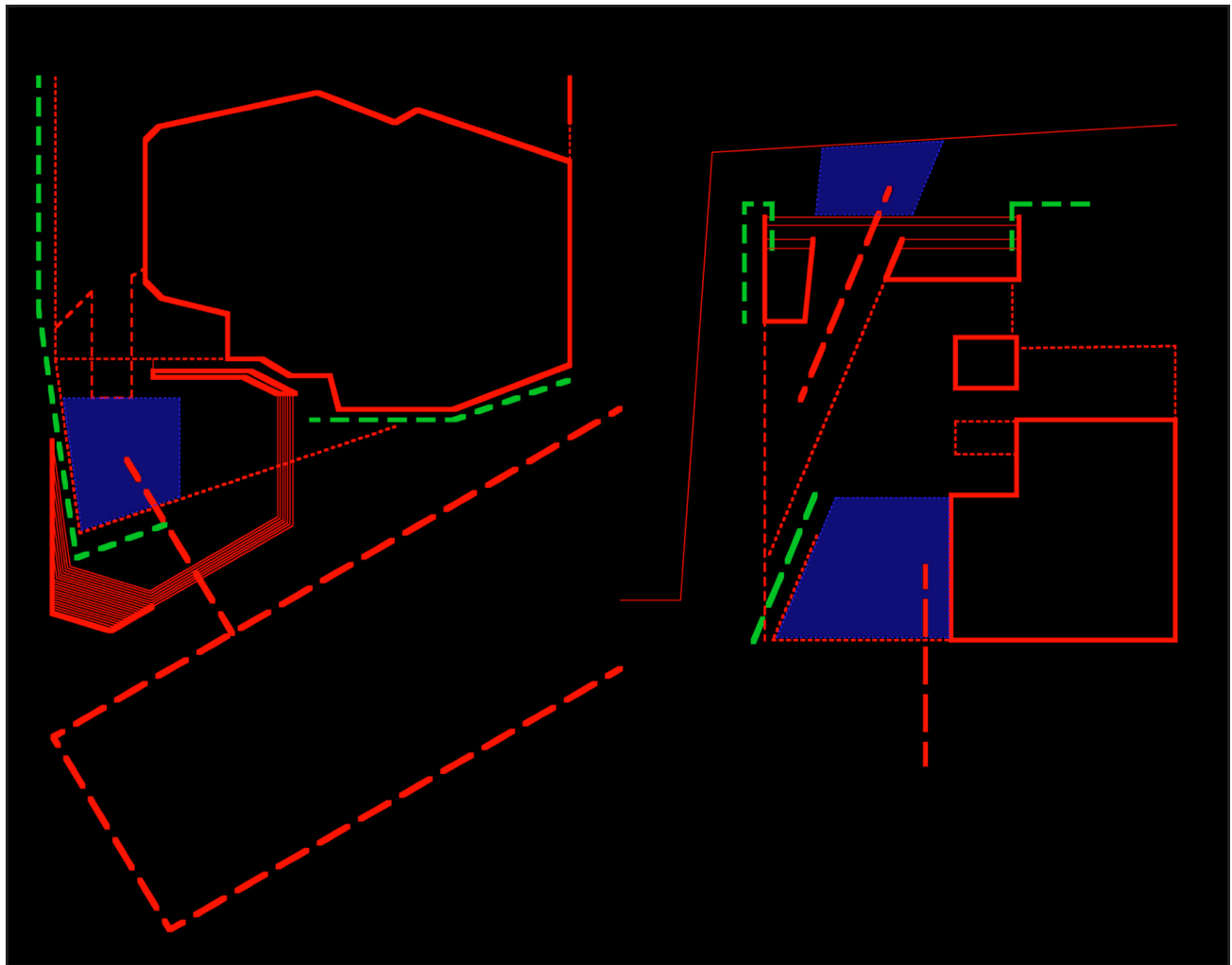


Figure 5. DS+R's putting the public on the spot (and side-stepping that) at Alice Tully and the ICA

The delay, digitally realized at the Brasserie, becomes spatialized in the ICA and Lincoln Center as one slowly discovers the paths that lead to these places of privileged view or exhibitionism. The Julliard's large glass surface, overlooking Broadway, exposes a private internal stair within the school rendering its daily comings and goings a spectacle. This stair equally participates in impromptu performances inside, as it resides within a foyer before the in-house black-box theater.

The ICA sets up the anticipation of the privileged harbor viewing space—the suspended mediatheque, not unlike the suspended dance studio or large glazed Broadway wall at the Julliard. From any interior landing one sees hints of the mediatheque across the building's central void. The path there is indirect, discovered midway through the galleries. And upon arrival, we recognize ourselves in those climbing up to the space before we move into the most celebrated interior of the building dedicated to our seeing the harbor re-framed.

In each of these projects DS+R create an augmented awareness of the act of seeing and being seen. Thresholds and barriers, glazed impenetrable surfaces and punctured solids set up the inadvertent entry onto the scene, the instant inversions from outside onlooker to entrenched participant. Less evident entries that slip between layers allow the initiated to move directly into the position of power—the observer. Boundaries of lenticular film coated glass or translucent honeycomb frustrate the act of seeing, heightening awareness of our attempt to see. I would argue that at no point do these strategies allow one to get lost in the thick of things. Rather one is singled out, exteriorized, continuously seeing, and recognizing oneself as seen. One is always oriented, located in the Cartesian crosshairs, positioned within a clear situation, even when suspended in space above the Boston Harbor.

CONCLUSION

This clear positioning of the public individual within a hierarchical matrix of overt role play bears much in common with the social and spatial structure found in Garnier's Opera, though in DS+R's spaces it is across infra-thin boundaries that our participation as the privileged and distanced onlooker is inverted to that of entrapped performer. These con-

ditions unfold as oppositions in section, as distinct from the multi-directional ambiguous relationships constructed in Nouvel's space. Although less complex volumetrically, the DS+R pre-performance participatory act involves a trajectory leading one through alternating roles of observer, observed and back again, with increasing discovery of one's participation in the "scene." Critical spatial elements, such as the Brasserie's elongated stairs, engages us, through "performance anxiety," in the making of the pre-performance performance. Nouvel involves us in a less overt, and less visual, participatory act leading us along a trajectory traversing alternating extremes in orientation and dimension, ambiguous reflections and layered depths, engaging us, vertiginously, not through our looking but our groping in the dark, employing proprioception to viscerally find our place in space.

Eye and gut.

Two opposing techniques—the augmented gaze and the augmented fathoming of immeasurable space bring acute awareness to one's place, one's participation, be that in relation to other people, that gathering of two or three that according to Garnier is essentially theater, or one's places in endless space that is the essential question of both ritual and theater.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Lyon Opera House Lobby, courtesy of Hisao Suzuki, El Croquis Editorial.

Figure 2. Ateliers Jean Nouvel, Danish Radio Symphony Hall; top row and bottom right courtesy of Atelier Jean Nouvel; bottom right courtesy of Regina Hernandez Limonchi.

Figure 3. AJN's movements and voids in the Danish Radio Hall; author's illustration.

Figure 4. Diller Scofidio + Renfro's setting up the narcissistic act; author's illustration.

Figure 5. Diller Scofidio + Renfro's putting the public on the spot v. slipping in the side door; author's illustration.

ENDNOTES

1 Karsten Harries, "Theatricality and Representation," *Perspecta: Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture* 26 (1990): 23.

2 Ibid.

3 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2008), 2.

4 Ibid., 7-8. The specific texts that make these claims are Antonin Artaud's "The Theater of Cruelty," *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958); and Bertold Brecht's "Alienating Affects in Chinese Acting," *Brecht on Theater*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957).

5 Ibid., 17.

6 According to the *Millodot: Dictionary of Optometry and Visual Science*, proprioception is the "awareness of posture, balance or position due to the reception of stimuli, produced within the organism, which stimulate receptors (called proprioceptors) located within muscles, tendons, joints and the vestibular apparatus of the inner ear." Other medical dictionaries refer to this as a kinesthetic sense, and thus motion in addition to body posture, balance.

7 I.L.M. Donaldson, "The Functions of Proprioceptors of the Eye Muscles," *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 355, no. 1404 (Dec 29, 2000): 1693.

8 Interview with Architect Jon Mayfield, April 19, 2010.

9 *El Croquis: Jean Nouvel 1994-2002* 112-113, (2002): 25.

10 Ateliers Jean Nouvel, "Architecture is like music," *Press Release: Opening, Concert House Danish Radio*, January 17, 2009.

11 Ibid., 17.

12 Deane Simpson, "Interview," in *Diller + Scofidio (+ Renfro): The Ciliary Function*, ed. Guido Incerti, Diaria Ricchi, Deane Simpson (Rizzoli Int'l: New York, 2007), 54.

13 Guido Incerti. "Transgendered Media," in *Diller + Scofidio (+ Renfro): The Ciliary Function*, 38.

14 Interview with Architect Eric Howeler, April 24, 2010.

15 Deane Simpson, "Interview," in *The Ciliary Function*, 123 - 4.