

Kirsten Dehlholm

Trespassing in a Transcendental Way

If we look at Nordic landscape paintings from around the middle of the last century and up to the beginning of this century, we discover how a particular motif recurs again and again. It is a reflecting motif drawing transcendence down into the water and somehow opening up a hole in the earth which reaches up to the sky. The motif can be found everywhere, from Kitty Kielland to L.A. Ring, from Gustav Fjælstad to many other materialistic metaphysicians. In fact that is what they are. Dreamers, who dream about the hole: the world where the sky comes into view. The road to symbolism is open.

Poul Erik Tøjner, art critic

The performances are in themselves an expression of the inborn longing for that which is bigger than us, the mysterious, and the transcendental.

When I began to work in theatre twenty-two years ago, I also found this road. And this road has since led to other roads. The symbolic images have become a metaphorical figurative language, where words and images supplement each other as equally worthy counterparts. Later the physical representations have become simple investigations of a metaphysical kind. The authentic personal or political stories from real life have been other approaches, other roads.

The mirror or the reflecting motif has always been present both as a means of identification and as an optical illusion. And the dream has been there together with the will to make theatre which trespasses, creating passages between the very concrete and the very abstract, the visible and the hidden or forgotten, between authentic reality and artistic authority.

My point of departure for a performance has always been the physical space. The performance starts with the choice of the performance space. The history, tradition, architecture and atmosphere of the building and of the room gives the framework for the performance, to be used as companion and counterpart. In this way a double staging is created, on one side by the play and the space, on the other by the theatrical concept itself.

Many productions have blossomed in different spaces.

All these rooms have been filled to breaking point. Now they are empty but the capacity of representation is maintained. I carry them all around with me. The good ones are light, the bad ones are heavy.

I open the door to one of the light spaces: a room at the Glyptoteket, a big museum with antique and classical statues.

One hundred and twenty people are putting on their costumes before silently flowing like a slow river into the eighteen rooms of the museum. All of them find their places as standing, walking, sleeping, singing, kissing, listening and dancing figures, alone and in groups. The performance *Påtrængende slægtninge* (Imposing Relatives, 1979) has started. As contemporary relatives to the antique gods and people, the performers behave silently in accordance with the spirit of the museum. The public mixes with them, stands very close by and looks at them. They do not look back. They know that eye contact goes beyond the threshold that divides private from public behaviour. They see through the spectator, out into nothing. In this way they maintain the neutral free zone that is necessary partly to let the spectator's vision remain unhindered, and partly to maintain their "role" as both themselves and as an image at the same time. They don't play, they are. The performers are chosen for type and age, and have maybe never performed before. In the social life behind the performance they overcome possible personal borders. They have not been directed towards certain registers of feeling, but they are aware in which context they perform, and they intuitively understand how to perform without playing. They are characters; they do everyday things, but do not look everyday; or they do unusual things, but look as they usually do. They are each part of a bigger picture that the public

must put together. The spectators are in doubt about who is performing and who is not. They also become part of the performance themselves.

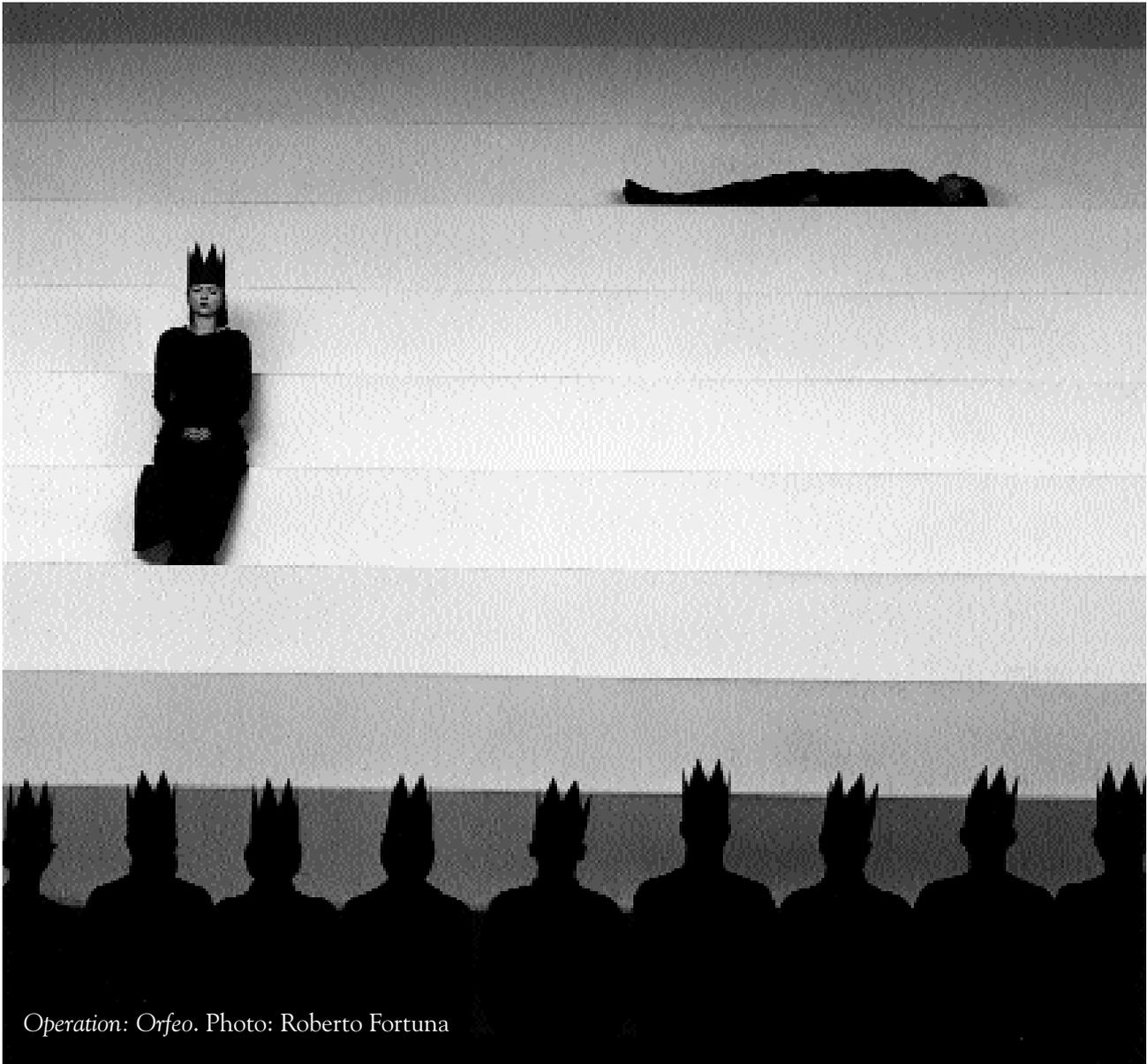
When the museum must close, the performance must end. The performers and the public go out together, like a fluid current, bigger and slower than when it flowed in the opposite direction. Outside the world appears changed - for a time.

In newspaper articles the museum's director had to defend the fact of having opened the doors of the past to the performing guests of the present. But for the happiness of many he continued to hold the museum open as a grand set for theatrical and musical actions for many years.

I open the door of another space, a high air-born room. It is Århus' Town Hall in 1989.

A long narrow shaft cuts through the five floors. The audience stands at the three upper floors and looks down on the floor which functions as the stage. The floor is covered with white linoleum, like a shining wide screen that sucks the eye towards it. Here a soprano lies down and sings, three dancers stand, walk and lie down, a storyteller sits down and then walks. A black man sits on a black chair and casts light from himself. The performance is a scenic composition in grey, white and black, created for a bird's eye view. The performers are seen as signs, as changing pictures that deceptively seem to avoid the force of gravity.

The title is *Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor?* (Why Does Night Come, Mother?) - a sentence taken from a much loved children's song (*Solen er så rød, mor*, The Sun Is So Red, Mother) about a child who asks big questions on her deathbed. The song is used once in the performance to question the great enigmas: the force of gravity, perspective and perception. The perfor-



Operation: Orfeo. Photo: Roberto Fortuna

mance explores the primary processes of sight; the immediate impressions of the senses which happen before an objective description of the seen world is created. The eye creates a two-dimensional image (R2) but the brain corrects, and we perceive a three-dimensional image (R3). In between there is a stadium (R2.5) where the form appears as a middle thing between flat surface and space, a relief stadium which seems to be more open and searching. The meaning which corresponds to an unfinished, less stable, more unde-

cided and more thinking phase in perception, is found here. Here is where the performance is located.

The music is composed for a soprano who is lying down. She sings against her own recorded voice, which comes from different directions. The Town Hall's high room, with its many closed office doors, changes completely and becomes a cathedral. The voice travels as in a church dome. The performance acquires a sacred turn without becoming saintly. This could be said of many of my performances. I wonder

about this, but it seems to be natural for the performances to reflect themselves in the sacred, in the sublime. It must be because they are a form of liberation. The performances are in themselves an expression of the inborn longing for that which is bigger than us, the mysterious, and the transcendental. A spiritual dimension which does not attach itself to any particular religion, but binds itself to the mystery of human beings and to the universe. Despite the act itself, the process of making theatre is full of continuous obligations to solve lots of practical, technical, economic and organisational types of tasks.

I have entered perception's space and I will stay there a little longer. Perception will help me through a room that lies before me: the theatre space or the black box. A loaded room filled with conventions and expectations of finding entertaining answers to small and larger questions. For all these years I have avoided the black box proscenium theatre with fixed audience seating. But with the visual-opera *Operation: Orfeo* in 1993, I moved onto the stage. Theatre stages have lots of possibilities, but not the natural architec-tonic frame that my earlier performances were built on. I had to bring with me the architecture: a staircase and a frame to screen the spectators' view from the staircase's finished form, to give an illusion of an infinite space. The theatrical illusions of this performance are optical.

The content consists of familiar mythical material (Orpheus and Eurydice). I use this for a dramaturgical division into three: Orpheus' descent to Hell (twenty minutes in the dark); Orpheus' ascent with Eurydice (twenty minutes in half light); and the loss and the memory of the loved one (forty minutes in the light). Three situations that affect our senses differently: how do we listen in the dark, what do small displace-

ments of black figures in half-light mean, how does light allow the three dimensional space to appear two dimensional and what do the singers look like when they "sit" on a wall and sing.

The performance ends with waves of laser light that, in their most literal meaning, break through the frame and the picture. The laser drowns first the singers and then the audience and the process finishes with a synthesis of blue light. In this way the allusion is made to the myth's ending, when Orpheus' body is torn apart by the wild Maenads and thrown into the river while his singing head floats on the water.

The myth is indirectly told through a direct figurative language for the senses, using thoughts on life, death and rebirth as a code. A chorus of twelve singers and a solo singer deliver a symphony *a cappella*. A dancer slowly slides down the staircase, stands and climbs up again with her back to the public, before she stretches out her arms and lies down on the same step from which she started, while a singer sits alone and the standing choir on the lowest step waves good-bye.

Operation: Orfeo has been shown on large traditional stages and has therefore had a public that normally does not see a performance "without plot" - a public that has difficulties in letting go of the kind of theatre that builds on a continuous narrative. That linear perspective has long been broken, overrun and dissolved in art, from the moment when visual artists actually occupied the stage bringing with them new narrative forms that did not respect the unity of time, place and plot nor the tradition that gives the spoken word the main role.

For many years, the principles and elements from the other arts have been seized. New art forms need new spaces, and all kinds of rooms have long since been put

into use, but still only to show the old theatre in new ways. This is the kind of theatre that places the human being in the centre - even if it is described as the centre of a fragmented world; this kind of theatre cultivates a privileged observation perspective which is classically controlled.

This privileged observation perspective has many ways of expressing itself. It could express itself aesthetically in homage to beauty or the sublime, which is to say aiming at the reproduction of natural or transcendental beauty. Similarly it has expressed itself by creating a world that looks like the world we live in, by satisfying our mimetic craving and our wish to be continually mirrored. It has expressed itself by being controlled by the creators themselves, by the artists' overview however partial this is. The attention to meaning has perhaps been invisible for the spectator, but it has been there, hidden under the many layers of years of fragmented postmodern thinking. And even there meaning lives on as a ghost in the best of health. "What is it about?" is screamed. "What does it mean?" is asked. "What is the meaning?" is whispered again and again.

I cannot avoid hearing these questions, I cannot avoid asking these questions myself: questions that must be as old as human beings themselves. In all these years I have escaped the direct answer by exchanging space and sensation for God. In the performance *Dobbeltøksens Hus / XX* (House of the Double Axe, 1998) God has even taken the character of a blown-up figure in the middle of the labyrinth's space; it is not sensuousness, but sensing, as the trait in our being which lies close to a religious interpretation. I have invaded all the different rooms and used them as look-out points to respond, both to the observer and myself, to the desire for overview which we have received from our classical, aesthetic and Christian upbringing.

But a new - and old - space opens its

doors to us now. The old space is the universe; the new is cyberspace. Without the universe, no cyberspace. The new space has no walls, floor or ceiling. It has no architectonic structures or historical traditions to relate to. Here there is no longer one place, the centre of society or of the world, from where the sovereign human being can observe the surrounding world. Society - and technology - have pushed human beings out into the periphery, from where they can jump from observation point to observation point. They can move around unhindered in dynamic space, where everyone is user and observer and independently decides the next step to take; where the entrance to space is an IT card. The more cards you have in hand, the more you can open. You have admission to the whole world's space.

The Big Bang happened when the digital media exploded. Digital media are multiple and interactive, they are dynamic, they are both social and asocial and they are virtual. They are new and they are principally driven by technology and market forces, and to a minor degree contrived by artistic and aesthetic insights. The development of the digital media's linguistic form is therefore a new space for artists, men and women, to enter. Artists don't invade but interfere, poke their noses in, research and challenge this space's endless dimensions - at the same time as they continue to ask the big question about the human being's existence. Is it possible? Yes! It must be possible. *Hello, is anybody out there?* asks Laurie Anderson. She shows the way.

I myself am just standing on the threshold, as it is this space that has invaded me and not me who has invaded the space. I have to understand that the invasion of outer space is not life threatening nor is it a dream, but only a new order of the world.

And at the end of all our research we will arrive

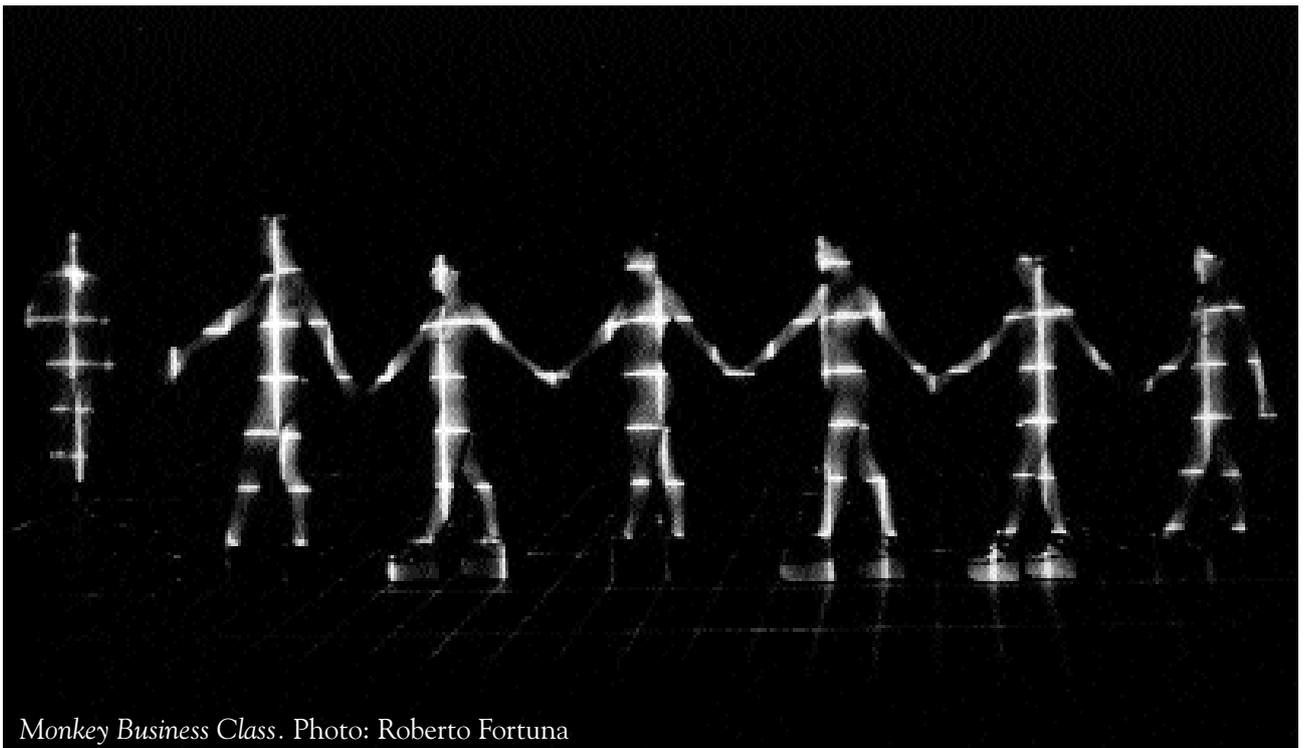
*at the place where we first started, and know
that place for the first time.*

Nostradamus (1503-1566)

Thanks to Lars Qvortrup, Intermedia Aalborg University, for inspiration, for new doctrines and for introduction to IT-space's placenta.

Translated from Danish by Julia Varley

KIRSTEN DEHLHOLM (Denmark) trained as a textile artist, but has worked with theatre since 1977. First with Billedstofteater and since 1985 with Hotel Pro Forma, as artistic leader and director. Fifty performances have been created for museums, town halls and public buildings of architectural significance as well as theatres. All performances are created in close collaboration with other artists. She hates theatre.



Monkey Business Class. Photo: Roberto Fortuna