







VOL 17 NO 1 A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from

Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese

and other important cultural operators.



This issue of LEA is a co-publication of







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Leonardo Electronic Almanac

Volume 17 Issue 1

August 2011

ISSN: 1071-4391

ISBN: 978-1-906897-11-6

The ISBN is provided by Goldsmiths, University of London

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Leonardo Electronic Almanac is published by:

Leonardo/ISAST 211 Sutter Street, suite 501 San Francisco, CA 94108

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LEONARDOELECTRONICALMANAC VOL 17 NO 1 ISSN 1071-4391 ISBN 978-1-906897-11-6

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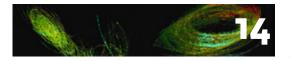
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An interview with Hugo Glendinning

The Making of Empty Stages by Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning

ABSTRACT

In this interview to acclaimed theatre photographer Hugo Glendinning, Gabriella Giannachi discusses with him the making of his latest work, Empty Stages (2003–11), a documentation about empty stages, touching on his collaboration with UK theatre company Forced Entertainment and Tim Etchells, who co-authored some of the images, as well as photographic methodologies and reflections about emptiness, absence, presence and performance.

by

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Figure 1. Centre Point, 2009,

Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media Copyright Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning.

TERVIEW

Hugo Glendinning has been working as a photographer for over 20 years. His work stretches across the cultural industries from fine art collaborations in video and photography, through production and performance documentation to portrait work. He

has collaborated with most leading British theatre and dance companies and is regularly commissioned by the RSC, National Theatre, Royal Opera House and many West End producers. His photographs are in a number of monographs and edited volumes, including Tim Etchells' Certain Fragments (Routledge 1999); Adrian Heathfield's (ed.) Small Acts – Performance the Millennium and the Marking of Time (Black Dog Publishing 2000) and (ed.) Live – Art and Performance (Tate Publishing 2004). He has collaborated with numerous artists, including Paola Pivi, Tim Etchells, Yinka Shonibare, Matthew Barney, Franko B, and Martin Creed. He lectures regularly in the UK and abroad and is currently AHRC Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Exeter.

Empty Stages (2003-11) is both a work and a documentation about empty stages. How did the idea of shooting Empty Stages emerge? What attracts you about an empty stage?

The first time that I shot an empty stage was when Forced Entertainment were doing a workshop based on King Lear - a kind of research project - in Sheffield. The location was a very small theatre originally built by a Victorian industrialist as a present for his daughters. By 1998, when we did the work on Lear, it was being run by an amateur dramatics group. The project itself never came to anything... it informed subsequent shows but was never intended as a completed work itself. It was one of their early clown pieces, a clown Shakespeare. The space they were rehearsing in, this 'toy' theatre, with full curtains and a very high platform stage, had something in excess of what we were doing in it. We were trying to find a way of presenting Shakespeare through a filter that one might call 'the child's experience'. We were breaking it down, even though we were still using all the constituent parts of the text. We soon realised that in fact the space was doing this to us. So I took some pictures of the space and, later, we went back to it and shot skeletons and other things to see if we could build it into one of the educational DVD-ROMS Forced Entertainment were doing at that time. The empty picture was needed so that the figures from the other shots with perfor-

mance elements might be moved about the space using Photoshop.

Later in 2001 or 2002 Tim [Etchells] and I began a conversation about new photo projects that weren't really based on performance but around theatres themselves. That was when this photograph of the children's stage in Sheffield was cited again. Subsequently we worked on Adrian Heathfield's exhibition on liveness at The Tate Modern. We were given a space as part of that and we thought we should do the Empty Stages.

For Tim I think the fascination with the Empty Stages comes primarily from his work with Forced Entertainment - there's an impulse in his work with the company to view or underline the idea of the stage as a kind of container - a volume of to be filled either literally or imaginatively in the performance. Many of the performances come back to this idea – the empty

frame or container of the stage... a space of potential. At the same time both of us have spent a lot of time over the past 25 years staring at empty stages waiting for something to start or happen. So even before we started photographing the Empty Stages series, we'd have spent many hours with them, wondering what might happen on them, waiting for performers to show up, waiting for the lights to be ready or the sound to get fixed. I think we were both drawn to the stages again as spaces of imagining. That's such a through line in the work Tim's done in any case and goes back to several of the other collaborations we've done – the CDROMS Nightwalks and Frozen Palaces, the cardboard sign photographs and so on.

Largely at the time we thought that a kind of innocent stage, like the children's stage, or working men's clubs, was the territory we should be looking at. Tim wrote some great stories on his blog on The Guardian [1 December 2009] about those initial visits to working





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How have you been you collaborating with Tim Etchells in this project?

In an artistic and conceptual sense it is a complete collaboration even though in a practical sense I have shot most of the photos and I always look after the details of production, technical work on the images and so on, since that is not really Tim's area at all. We've arrived at what you might call a house style though, based on how I shot the first stages... it became obvious to me after shooting a number of the early stages that if I didn't shoot them in an incredibly neutral way, the meaning got skewed. So I have to be dead centre of whatever the space is – not necessarily the stage, but I have to find a centre which is, if you like, a point of neutrality and shoot the photo just as it is. There can't be anything that makes it look like I'm trying to do something, because I noticed that this was giving people all sorts of false readings.



Figure 3. Globe Theatre, 2007.



Figure 4. Highgate Wood School, 2006



Figure 5. Hope and Anchor, 2009.

All: Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media, Copyright Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning.

Why is neutrality so important in this context?

They are such different spaces, and to make them feel like a series we have to use this approach. Now *Empty* Stages has opened out away from just working men's clubs. We started to include professional spaces, as well as almost any raised platform. So as the project opened out, in order to pull them all together, we really had to find a way of looking at the pictures that was going to say that these are the same thing and aesthetically sit together. That was the prime motivation for finding a neutral way of doing Empty Stages.

How do you choose which stages to photograph?

We photograph all of them and we reject a few. There was one in a big garden in Paris, which was being set up for a concert and it looked too close to being something very definite. There was absolutely no ambiguity in it. On the other hand there was a little band set-up in the Hope and Anchor pub in Islington [London], which even had the name of the band on it but it somehow felt abandoned rather than announcing an imminent act. There was a huge absence there. In the case of the photo in Paris, I just felt the soonto-be-function of the space was way too identifiable. I guess we have chucked out more professional spaces than we have transient spaces.

Does your presence as a photographer affect the emptiness of the stage you are photographing?

I think it does. I try to absent myself from both space and process as much as I can when taking the photos. That's partly so that almost anybody can do it. If there's one space we really want to have that we've seen, we might even ask somebody else to do it and say you have to do it like this. Though so far we've only done that once.

How do you absent yourself?

It's the aesthetic neutrality, finding that centre, finding the one way of looking at all of them which says as little as possible about your position. There's also an element of cloak and daggers about it, because the stage does it for you, it keeps reiterating its emptiness and that helps to get rid of you.

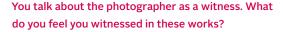
When you look at the photos later, when you're no longer there, do you feel your presence in the photo?

I don't feel my presence, but I can see choices, because even within this position of neutrality, or the supposed position of neutrality, there are many choices to be made when photographing a stage. So the choices I made when looking at the stage are visible to me. For instance, looking at this proscenium arch here [in British Library where the interview was held on 2 December 2009], do I want to see the brick wall and the pillar? Do I want to include the proscenium arch? Maybe I could have no proscenium at all here. You know, there are an awful lot of different framing decisions especially when you are dealing with something that is a frame itself, this double framing draws attention to the act. And often what I suggest to Tim, if he's got a good enough camera on him, is to shoot wide and crop later. But I never crop my own pictures. I'll have probably taken 5 or 10 pictures, and within that I'll have given myself a little bit of leeway to be wrong at the time, so if I'm convinced it's a certain picture I will pull back a little bit and go forward a little bit, just to give myself an alternative framing. I think the best photos that I do are those where I don't see myself. But I almost always see Tim. And then I try and iron that out by using Photoshop to make his presence disappear or at least coalesce with mine.

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Figure 6. King's Head Pub, 2009,
Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media,
Copyright Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning.



Yes, but I think that the witnessing at the moment of taking the picture is probably less important than the subsequent witnessing when you start looking at the picture, choosing it and looking at it again and again. I think of my old school, for example, Highgate Wood School – a lot of empty, green, plastic chairs, which were the same green, plastic chairs that I sat on 30 years before I did the picture in 2006. The school had the same clock, the same speakers. The weird thing

about that is, of course, that I sat in that space and witnessed all sorts of things, and when I stood there, I knew that I had been there and I knew I had seen things. So there was an element of me saying I am still here and it is still here. And it is still here in such an analogous way to my own memories that it's a kind of proof that it happened. I had been on that stage, I had acted on that stage and all sorts of other things happened there. So for me it was like saying it's still got a solidity and a reality, even though everything I ever did in that space or experienced in that space is

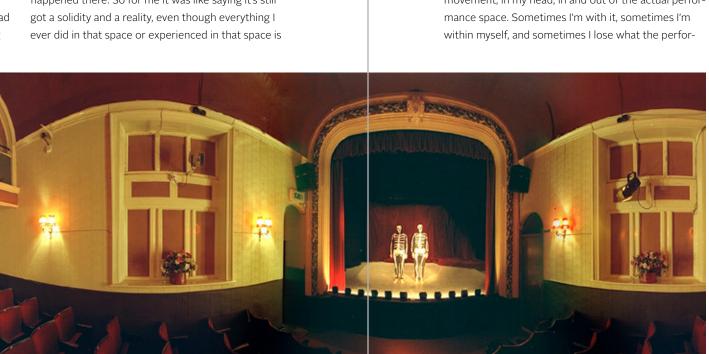




Figure 8. Lantern Theatre Sheffield, 1998, Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media, Copyright Hugo Glendinning and Forced Entertainment.

distant memory now. So taking the picture fixes things in a way that almost nothing else does. And when I look at that photo it gives me a huge amount of space to wander.

The experience of the *Empty Stages* is very like the experience of live art. Whenever I watch live art, as opposed to TV and cinema, I'm very conscious of my movement, in my head, in and out of the actual performance space. Sometimes I'm with it, sometimes I'm within myself, and sometimes I lose what the perfor-

mance is because I've started thinking about something else. And it's not something that you do nearly as much in cinema, where you've got this fast cutting rhythm. I think the *Empty Stages* give you a kind of photographic space that's like the experience of being in a live performance, where you can imagine, wander in that space forward and backwards in time.

You were saying before that the act of witnessing, so to speak, is constructed later at the point of looking at the images.

It is to do with the very small amount of time that I generally spend taking the photographs, and the fact that I haven't spent an awful lot of time in those spaces on the whole. Normally people want you out as quickly as possible. So I generally experience it afterwards. All the technical things you have to do to shoot a photograph take over at that point. Afterwards, when you look at it, then you can decide what that photograph is and when you're editing you can choose which is the best picture and which allows the kind of thought travel that I described before, which gives you that space to move back and forwards and imagine possible worlds.

Figure 7. Lantern Theatre Sheffield, 1998, Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media, Copyright Hugo Glendinning and Forced Entertainment.

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INTERVIEW



So Empty Stages doesn't only contain traces of the past, but also possibilities for future use?

There's one, which technically I don't think is a very good empty stage, because we've never really shown it with Empty Stages, but it is an empty stage. It was the Bloody Mess empty stage in Frankfurt. And at the end of *Bloody Mess* there is just tinsel and crap and everything all over the floor, and I just took a picture of it because it was there. And there's also a line towards the end of Bloody Mess. Rob and Richard, the 2 roadies, are grumbling about things and say somebody's got to clean up this mess. And you look at the picture

Figure 11. Nightwalks, 1998,

you feel that somebody's got to clean up the mess sometime. There are many instances where you think actually there is going to be a roadie, or there's going to be a cleaner, or there's going to be somebody who is going to come on here and move stuff around. And in a way for many of them that's the first performance I imagine in the future, some bloke or woman has got to mop the mess, and shift all the chairs back into the auditorium. And I absolutely see those acts as performances.

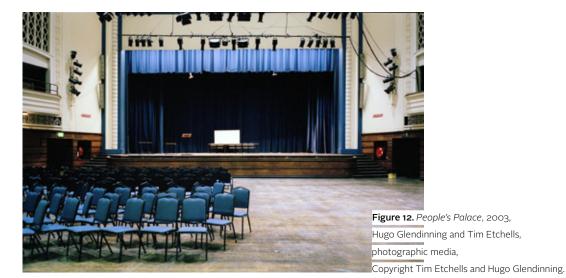
Recently, whenever I've been doing live work, I've been trying to get in early to shoot technicians walking around stages, because they do an amazing choreography of looking at lights, pointing at things. There was one recently at Sadler's Wells and there were about 15 technicians walking across, walking back and forwards, looking at things, pointing at things, getting ladders, putting ladders away, it was total choreography and on a stage that was about to contain 4 major choreographic works. I took loads of pictures of them. There are a few that are good and interesting. But in a way those technicians are part of the story of the

Empty Stages as well. They look like dancers. There's one where there's a little huddle of guys and women talking to each other, and then there's one over here. And it's such a narrative gift. You've got a bunch of technicians not talking to the other one, who's looking. But those sorts of things, and being in theatres, increases your awareness of the potential for stories to happen that aren't necessarily just plays.





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What are the technical difficulties, if any, for shooting the *Empty Stages*?

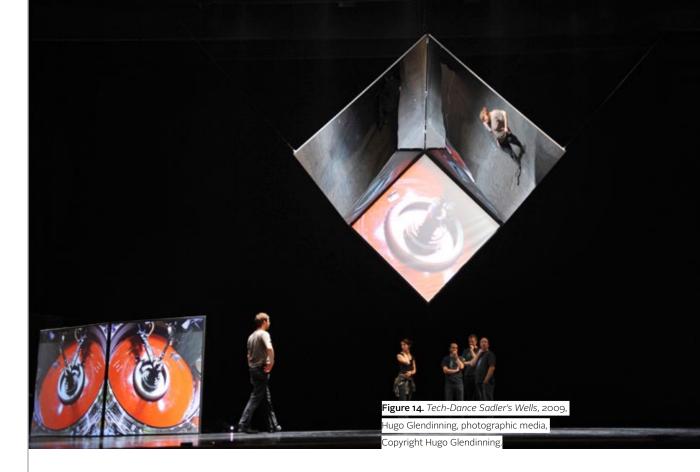
The biggest problem is with verticals and convergence of perspective. Now that perspectives can all be fixed in Photoshop it's not such a big issue, but it can still look a little wrong if it's not done properly And the other thing is that generally you will need a tripod because the stage won't be lit, so humping around not just a camera but a tripod, or finding something solid to put a camera on in order to get the picture if you're there without a tripod, can be difficult.

Many of the provisional stages will also disappear themselves, so there's a double disappearing act with these little podia that have been put there in often a really dumb place to give some sort of presentation, with a mike plonked on them. Not only is there a great absence of anything happening on the stage, but you also know that very soon that stage will be absent. It's going somewhere else. But that's also true of some of the working men's clubs that have been smashed and knocked down since we photographed them.

Would you say that there's something theatrical, a performative happening on these stages? Or is it something that happens in your photographs afterwards?

Some of them are. There's a lot of chair choreography going on, which is very theatrical. One of the very early ones, the People's Palace in Mile End, which, built





in the 1930s, is part of Queen Mary Westfield College, was an early attempt by the Royal Ballet to bring ballet to the working man and woman. The space is now used as a lecture hall or even an examination hall. Somebody had started clearing the chairs away and when I arrived there was nobody there. The chairs had been half cleared in quite a disorganised way. They hadn't actually been doing it row by row. They'd been doing a few chairs at a time. And you could see how they'd done it and how they'd left it, with no explanation of why it had been left half-finished. The narrative there is entirely theatrical. And there are so many occurrences like that through the *Empty Stages*.

How are you going to compose the photos for the public? What kind of architecture are you going to build?

Most recently we've decided that we should show them by shying away from a grand gesture and do it in white frames with white borders so you have enough space round the image to let it breathe, in a box frame, which is, again, another kind of proscenium, if you like. Prior to that we had done a few big prints with no borders, and actually it felt a little immodest. There's something about a smaller scale, a 12 by 16 print, where the actual print size is about 12 inches across. There was something in that quietness, that modesty and that reframing, the double reframing, that really helped to push it back and just make a whole quieter thing, rather than pushing it into your face and say look at me. So I think, again, that this was a good way of neutralising too much statement, because I think you just need to be quiet about it.

How are you going to order them alongside each other?

I don't really know. We looked at an order for this show in Lancaster (2009) and because I didn't get a chance to go to this space I didn't know how it was going to hang. So we did do a suggested order, but I said they didn't have to keep to it. Because in this case it's a set of 15 pictures and that pretty much covers all the kinds of stages from provisional/temporary to a professional set of a traditional play. There's one opera that I shot in Compiègne in France, which was very definitely a set on a stage, albeit a slightly strange one. And then there's the Globe Theatre, empty in the winter with rain, which you know what it's going to be.

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Those are the very solid ones that are just themselves in a way. And then you can run down through the more provisional stages, the stages that are used for other things, the stage that is in a room that used to be a station, the stages that have dinner tables in front of the stages, that have a lecture theatre in front of them, and so on. You know, there's a kind of descending order of functional distance from theatre. And then there's also these functionally-specific but very peripheral stages, or moveable stages like little podia, the movable boxes used to raised athletes for the award ceremonies, and things like that. So in 15 pictures you can pretty much cover yourself – but we have maybe 100 or so pictures now. And we'd

certainly want to have little runs of change, so that the generics of the stage types don't become too clear, but stay quite fluid.

When you photograph an event, generally speaking, do you think you change the event that is occurring in the act of photographing them?

It's such a philosophical question. I know the answer can only be yes, but to try and say this has changed because I took the photograph and whether it's the existence of the photograph that changes things, or the taking of the photograph that changes things, and exactly how, I couldn't tell you. But just at a philosophical level, I would say yes, absolutely.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We graciously acknowledge the AHRC whose funding of Hugo Glendinning's Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts made it possible to shoot *Empty Stages*.

Figure 15. Theatre de Compiegne, 2003, Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells, photographic media, Copyright Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning.

