

The Builders

by

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Abstract

Created through a multidisciplinary theatrical devising process inspired by the worldwide phenomenon of art environments, *The Builders* is an immersive performance blending theatre and installation. Bringing together an ensemble of theatre artists, dancers and a musician, *The Builders* investigates transformation, territory and the practice of making oneself at home in the world. The performance immerses the audience in an extraordinary space inhabited by the builders, each one engaged in a relentless effort to transform their surroundings. As they work, they reveal their stories and their processes, reflected in their singular territories, each of which frames a chaotic assemblage of research, improvisation, personal mythologies and desires.

Over five months of practice-based research informed by performance, art environments, and installation, the ensemble and I investigated the transformations of space, materials, and identities that occur within devising and the making of art environments. This document outlines my research and my devising strategies as the director of the work, and examines the challenges and outcomes of *The Builders* meeting a live audience.

Keywords: Theatre; Collaborative Creation; Devising; Directing; Art Environments; Performative Installation

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Figure 1: *The Builders*. Photo by Paula Viitanen.

Artist's Statement: ***The Builders***

A game of marking territory. A series of secret installations. An investigation into the processes and performance of transforming space. And eventually, an invitation to an audience to enter into the world of *The Builders* to witness the making of distinct territories by a group of unlikely architects. These were among the major components of the accumulative devising process of *The Builders*, which culminated with a performance blending immersive theatre and installation in the basement visual arts studio of SFU Woodward's in Vancouver. As the creator and director of *The Builders*, I led an ensemble (Robert Azevedo, Gordon Havelaar, Eveleen Kozak, and Keely O'Brien, with David Cowling working with us on music) through a highly collaborative theatrical devising process focused on the worldwide phenomenon of art environments. Over five months of practice-based research informed by theatre and performance, art environments, installation and other visual arts practices, we investigated the transformation of space, materials, and identities. We mined our own compulsions as builders, developing material practices to realize our own spaces, which took inspiration from pre-existing art environments yet ultimately were the outcome of deeply personal desires to create.

A long-term accumulation, an extraordinary environment hidden in a basement studio, and then, in one quick transition, a deconstruction as the space was struck following the performances. What to do in the wake of such destruction? Figure out how to build more, build again, build better. And so, in writing this statement, a step towards this – an attempt to untangle some of the desires, questions and challenges inherent to the making of *The Builders*.

The Builders began from a body of research I have collected and repeatedly created from since 2012, focused on artists who transform public and private property

through aesthetic additions of junk, recycled and found materials. They are variously referred to as folk, outsider or visionary art environment builders, or simply (and less pejoratively) as art environment builders. Their transformations reveal a profound resourcefulness and an ability to envision possibilities far beyond the original function and context of the materials they employ – resulting in strange and wondrous environments where everyday materials are assembled, bricolage-style, into sculptures, structures, gardens and other inventions. Often working without a fixed concept or vision of a final product, the artists gather materials from disparate sources to create elaborate worlds that express personal beliefs and mythologies or serve as a manifestation of or gesture towards their ideal, utopian world. While their beginnings can be modest, sometimes arising from the discovery of a found object that evokes a larger vision, or from a small creative act that compels an individual to keep creating, art environments emerge from a long-term investment of labour, evolving over the greater part of an artist's lifetime.

In my past works, I examined themes inherent to art environments through solo performances and installations, working with found materials, site-specificity, and accumulative (and laborious) aesthetic elements built within the physical and temporal space of the performance or installation. However, I wanted to go further with this research, exploring it through collective-creation with an ensemble. For my MFA graduating project I designed and directed a multidisciplinary devising process centred upon art environments, inspired by both theatre and installation. I drew from my own training in physical theatre and devising, which relies upon rigorous engagement with oneself and with collaborators, objects and spaces as partners in authoring new work. I gathered ideas and material from research into art environments and other art practices, drawing from thinkers and artists including Elizabeth Grosz, André Breton and Jane Bennett, and from my own experience in making performance-installations. I sought to create a performance that approached a similar quality of transformation as that which manifested in art environments, exploring the ways in which individuals might compulsively and intuitively transform a space, an assemblage of materials, or their own identity, to develop a single, accumulative work over an extended period of time.

My interest in art environments arises from two sources. First, from my artistic practice of making theatre through devising processes, in which I often push found

materials and everyday spaces past their prescribed functions and forms in favour of alternate possibilities that emerge through play and transformation. Such a practice grows out of both desire and necessity – making theatre requires resourcefulness and an ability to work with whatever is at hand, be it a space, a material, a collaborator. I create theatre to reimagine and draw attention to the everyday; to encourage a heightened awareness of the mystery and enchantment within our daily lives, to the slices of the unfamiliar within all that we think we know so well – art environments being an example of those unusual manifestations that interrupt the ordinary and mundane. Devising theatre holds many parallels to the practice of creating art environments, first and foremost this rejection of the prescribed functions or formal conventions attached to objects, spaces and identities; the focus on play as a motivating force for creativity and transformation; and the tendency to collect and assemble material from a variety of sources and contexts to create something new. Both practices resist definition or easy categorization – the methodologies are diverse and highly subjective, best understood as “processes of experimentation and sets of creative strategies”.¹ My own process of devising, largely informed by the year and a half I spent working with Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Massachusetts, places great emphasis on the director *and* ensemble members as auteurs, creating work through a deeply personal engagement with the research material and with body, imagination and desire, objects and environment, and most importantly, the unknown. Like the environment builder, success in devising requires vision and determination, and, just as importantly, a capacity to endure being lost and to work through that not knowing to fashion something new. My strategies in leading the process aimed to provoke investigation and personal investment into the research material, pushing the ensemble to find their own individual impulses as ‘builders’, thus fueling my work as a director/builder. With their creations serving as my own raw materials for building/directing, it was my task to manipulate and shape their work into a larger structure that served my own vision.

The second aspect of my interest in art environments connects to another long-term process of making, which is that of making oneself at home in the world – an

¹ While this quote refers specifically to devising practices, it is equally applicable to the varied and experimental practices of art environment building. Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson, and Katie Normington, *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

unending cycle of enacting various transformations, adjustments, and aesthetic additions upon the spaces we occupy. A decade of living away from the place where I grew up, of moving apartments and moving cities, has not only provoked a desire for a permanent space of my own for living and creating, it has also attuned me to the series of actions that play out in the process of making myself at home in each place that I live. Within these actions (ranging from hanging pictures on the walls of my apartment to defining a cycling route, for example) I recognized a practice of daily rituals and small acts of “aesthetic ordering”² that allowed me to construct a familiar space that reflected my life back at me. Critic and writer John Berger defines ‘home’ in two distinct ways. First, as the “centre of the world,” a place where horizontal lines of travel intersect with a vertical line leading upwards to the sky and rooting down into the earth. Home brings nomadic wanderings to a pause and changes one’s direction of movement to reach up towards the heavens and down to the underworld, the “starting point and, hopefully the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.”³

Berger goes on to articulate home as being composed not of the physical materials that make up the walls and the roof of the shelter, but rather the habits, routines and memories – intangible, invisible materials – that comprise a living practice of home and belonging. “These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging. Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived.”⁴ I was reminded of these daily practices as I researched environment builders in Wisconsin in June 2014. I read pages from artist Mary Nohl’s diary while visiting the private collections of the John Michael Kohler Art Centre in Sheboygan; a typical entry reveals a fastidiously scheduled day comprised of painting, drawing, sculpture, yard work and walks around her neighbourhood. I spent an afternoon with Eleanor Every, wife and collaborator of Tom Every, who created the extraordinary machines within the scrap metal playground of *The*

² I refer here to Ellen Dissanayake’s book *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why*, which examines the aesthetic as the core of human experience, and aesthetic ordering and creativity (‘making special’) as biologically endowed predispositions of humankind.

³ John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 55-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

Forevertron in Sumpter, Wisconsin. Every spoke to me about the continuous endeavour of building *The Forevertron*, through the family's times of economic hardship and instability, and how, even after decades of building, the work never feels like work, but rather, play.⁵

It became apparent that much is shared between these long-term, accumulative practices – of environment building, of devising theatre, of making oneself at home in the world – and *The Builders* was a means to investigate their connections as well as their divergences, which produced critical tensions within both the process and performance. As I designed the process and constructed the performance, I was guided by questions of how we claim space and mark territory, and how these actions have the capacity to transform spaces, materials and ourselves. Employing collaborative theatre making as my primary means of exploring these questions elicited further inquiry and some productive unknowns. What impulses were behind these long-term endeavours to build? What kinds of spaces could we, an ensemble of theatre artists, dancers, and a musician, create through mining our own compulsions and desires? And how could these practices be elicited through performance? I wanted the performance to reveal and reflect upon its own making, and I also sought to capture the affect of the encounter with an art environment – the shift in perceptions and expectations of a space or material that it can provoke, the recognition of the familiar within an unfamiliar context, the mystery of its making and maker that can never be fully solved. Considering these questions, devising a theatre piece based on this material seemed both apt and counter-intuitive. While I designed a creation process that would highlight the convergences and contrasts of the two practices, I wrestled with the challenges of my performance-based approach at every step of the journey.

The Builders in Process

The first contradiction between our process of building and that of the environment builder was the fact that I was making the work with an ensemble. Our first few months of devising were highly collaborative in our generation of both material and meaning –

⁵ Eleanor Every, conversation with author, June 16, 2014.

markedly different from the solitary, inscrutable efforts of outsider artists. I led physical training and improvisation sessions to find an alternative creative vocabulary with the ensemble – a vocabulary based in movement, imagination, and collaboration, specifically tailored to the people, ideas, and research at play. These sessions were opportunities to work with common materials (such as plastic bags, suitcases, and household objects) uncommonly, forging new relationships between ourselves and the objects at hand, and exploring how we might use these materials as building blocks in the creation of personal spaces within the studio. We researched many art environments and artists, bringing images, videos, quotes and anecdotes into sessions where we shared our findings. We discussed Andre Breton’s writing about *la trouvaille* (the found object), and its power to evoke a ‘convulsive beauty’ that is inexplicable and magical, that undoes the person who encounters it.⁶ We watched Jane Bennett’s lecture on vibrant matter, and considered the vitality and power that everyday objects can express within the context of art environments.⁷ I gave writing prompts and parameters for group composition work focused on themes such as construction and deconstruction, building a home, and marking territory. With these tasks, we researched how we could change a space through our actions within it and through additions and subtractions of elements such as objects, light or language. I also opened up our initial devising sessions to artists from outside the ensemble, inviting individuals to occasionally join us and participate in the research and creation process.

Despite this collaborative research and creation process in the first few months of devising, it was important to me to cultivate a space for secrets and solo projects to manifest, in keeping with the solitary and somewhat impenetrable creative processes of environment builders. Secrecy was a necessary ingredient to maintaining mystery and questions surrounding process, authorship and meaning, especially when so much of the work was undergoing rigorous examination, due to its collaborative nature as well as the context of its creation within the MFA program. My first tactic was assigning an installation project, where each of the ensemble members had to create aesthetic interventions in the

⁶ André Breton, *L’amour Fou*, A French Modernist Library (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

⁷ Jane Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard: Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter,” YouTube Video, 1:14:44, posted by “The New School,” September 27, 2011, <https://youtu.be/q607Ni23QjA>.

Woodward's building or the neighbourhood. These interventions were installed secretly and identified to us only through clues. Once discovered, they were left to decay or be destroyed, providing some insight into the ephemerality of artistic interventions (art environments included) that, left unprotected, become subject to forces of nature, time, and willful or accidental human destruction.

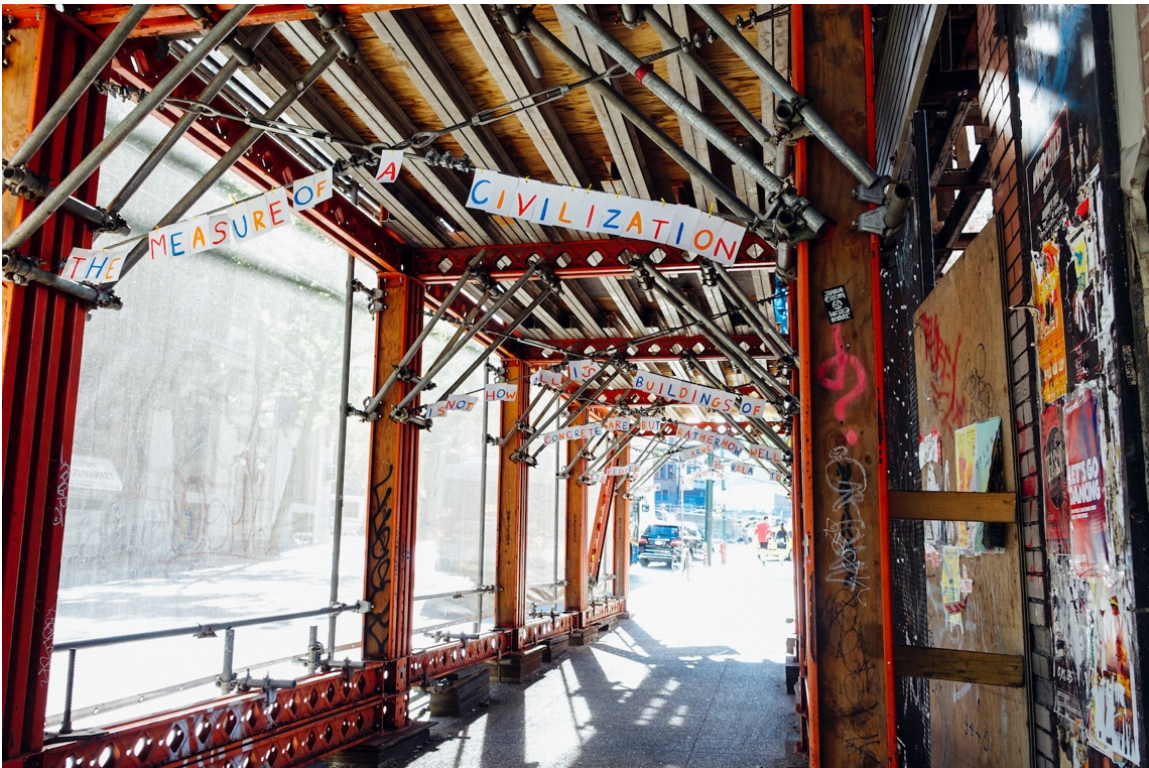


Figure 2: Eveleen Kozak's outdoor installation on West Hastings Street, Vancouver. Photo by Megan Stewart.



Figure 3: Keely O'Brien's shrine to the Rhinestone Cowboy in the 4th floor bathroom of SFU Woodward's. Photo by Megan Stewart.

Alongside these installations, I instructed the ensemble to identify materials they wanted to create with and begin an accumulative, long-term project of building with these materials. This was an ambitious request, and it brought forth an interesting challenge and tension into the making of *The Builders*, since my collaborators were artists with primarily performance-based practices. The challenge was fitting: the four of them (two dancers and two theatre artists) were, to varying degrees, outsiders to visual art practices, without a history of formal instruction in the field. Consequently, selecting materials and articulating specific creation methodologies had to arrive intuitively, through discovery and trial and error, much like the processes of the builders we were inspired by, who possess little to no formal training and limited awareness of the larger art world. While my provocation to build contradicts the spontaneity by which art environments come into existence, it was a result of my own necessity as a builder of the work. These were the people I had chosen to work with, and this instruction was my strategy to create process-oriented, tangible building within the context of performance; building connected to a

specific intent and vision, instead of being completely improvised. I encouraged the ensemble to articulate the various actions their materials demanded from them to realize their vision, and, more importantly, to investigate the personal reasons that were driving their desires to create. The most successful builds, as well as the most successful moments of performance that sprung from that building, came from the builders who, over the course of the process, demonstrated strong personal connections to their materials and their reasons for building. In the midst of the process, Robert Azevedo told me how he had quickly realized that he “needed to actually become a builder” in order to fully participate in the making of the work, and that his obsessive personality made him an ideal collaborator, ready and willing to be overtaken by his compulsions to build. Ivy was Robert’s material of choice, and its aliveness and fragility required him to be constantly engaged in developing his space and objects, harvesting ivy and making repairs and additions to his woven creations. I often saw him biking around the city with wreaths of ivy strapped to his back, drawing stares and looks of confusion from passersby.



Figure 4: Robert Azevedo working with his ivy suit. Photo by Megan Stewart.

As the ensemble collected and created, I led them through exercises in which they would employ their materials to define and transform a specific area within our rehearsal studio. I paid attention to the actions taken in marking the boundaries of a space, interested in the frame as the first step in building, and, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, in art making: “With no frame or boundary there can be no territory, and without territory there may be objects or things but not qualities that can become expressive, that can intensify and transform living bodies.”⁸ It is the frame that composes chaotic shards or states within space and time, carving it into “a structure and a form where they can affect and be affected by bodies.”⁹ Through this work, I urged the ensemble members to be playful with their materials, exploring the ways in which they could create with them, transforming the objects or the space or themselves through building and making. These activities were balanced between guided improvisations and composition assignments, and open, unstructured time where the ensemble could work independently on their ‘builds’ and associated performance material. The ephemeral territories the ensemble set up and tore apart as we moved around various studio spaces in Woodward’s, served as “arenas of enchantment”¹⁰ where objects and materials became transformed, and where the ensemble members could play and develop narrative moments for their builder, which would shed light on the impulses and motivations attached to the creations.

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008,) 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48



Figure 5: The ensemble creating personal spaces from found objects in an early devising session. Photo by Megan Stewart.

Transformation is one of the key convergences between devising and environment building, and it was an influential concept within the creation process and performance of *The Builders*. Both practices make a common investment in the potential for places, objects, and people to transform and shift beyond their prescribed functions, contexts or narratives. Both gather material from a variety of disparate sources, pulling familiar things together in unexpected formations to reveal alternate ways of occupying space and fashioning one's self in relation to the world. John Beardsley describes visionary art environments as being characterized by incongruous juxtapositions, that they “embody a kind of arrested chaos, a vigorous approach to creation that looks spontaneous.”¹¹ These alternate visions exist in defiant contrast to what we know and expect from objects and spaces (whether functionally or formally) yet we can still find traces of recognition; their power “enhanced,” as Beardsley writes, “by their disconnection” to their original context.¹² Similarly, in referring to the disorienting process of the performer's body transformed by the power of its own actions, Virginie Magnat defines devising as “the art of losing one's moorings to the familiar, a fruitful loss yielding a kinaesthetic and associative form of

¹¹ John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, 1st ed (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44.

awareness.”¹³ My prompts and direction within our devising sessions pushed the ensemble toward this kind of loss and spontaneity, whether through solo and group improvisation sessions with objects, or tasks where they had to build structures or specific kinds of spaces (a home-like space, a disorienting space, etc.) with whatever they materials they had on hand. What manifested from this work were distinct building processes, such as Robert and Gordon’s respective methods of weaving ivy and wire into sculptural objects, as well as unlikely transformations of everyday things, such as Eveleen’s garden of plastic bottle flowers and Keely’s etudes featuring household objects standing in as a family at a dinner table. Play served as a means to discover and endow objects with new functions, meanings and narratives, and these transformations also helped to shift the ensemble’s relationship to the spaces they created and occupied and their behaviour within them. It was here that the making became much more individualized and less ensemble-oriented, gradually leading to to the creation of the four unique ‘builder-characters,’ to be discussed further below.

My directorial approach gave a great deal of transformative agency to the ensemble members during the process and performance. I created the conditions for *The Builders* to take shape by setting out the parameters of our devising, reframing and adjusting them as the work developed, and placing various elements in dialogue as I structured the piece. As the ‘master builder,’ I built the house, and the ensemble lit up the rooms. Providing the ensemble with this sense of agency and authorship felt necessary considering the research we were working from, whereby environment builders claim and take control of a space to create according to their own visions, desires and aesthetics, often in the face of circumstances beyond their control (such as personal trauma, sickness, and social or economic hardship). The ensemble members created with ivy, sequins, scrap metal and plastic, gaining knowledge of the possibilities of their chosen materials and inching towards a vision of their respective worlds. I worked with netting and fabric to design the enclosure of the studio space with set designer Amanda Larder, but more importantly, I worked with the material that the ensemble and I generated. It was my

¹³ Virginie Magnat, “Devising Utopia, or Asking for the Moon,” *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (March 2005), 74.

task to delve into my own creative impulses surrounding this material, working with what the ensemble offered and shaping it into a performance that served my vision as a builder.

I did not realize until July that our transient movement through various studio spaces in the Woodward's building was unintentionally replicating Berger's theory: we were nomads, carrying our materials with us from place to place, setting up and tearing down our temporary structures within each space we occupied. Our lack of a permanent home where we could create and rehearse had impeded my desire to have real, accumulative building occur, and by the end of July, the performance we had was very much a product of the spaces in which it had been made. It was impermanent, a sequence of solo and group compositions strung together that *represented* building; as small, ephemeral creations were constructed and deconstructed by the ensemble in a conventional, dramatic performance space. While the ensemble clearly had unique material practices and big ambitions to build, their creations not had the chance to take root, to acquire the defining accumulative permanence of the art environments that inspired me.

The Builders Find a Home

In a stroke of luck, our nomadic wanderings through Woodward's came to an end at the beginning of August. When an international symposium took over every studio and closet space in the building, I began a frantic search for a room where we could continue to work. The only unoccupied space was a basement visual arts studio, and we were granted access to the studio for our final month of work, as well as for our three performances. Unlike our previous rehearsal spaces, the visual arts studio could accommodate our messy installations and big ambitions to transform. We finally had a home – a place that, to refer back to Berger, replaced our horizontal wanderings and ephemeral builds with a more permanent foundation from which we could take root and extend upwards. With an empty space ready to hold all kinds of aesthetic transformation, I turned the last month of the process into a game, invoking the spirit of competition to further compel the builders to take up space, to build compulsively and rigorously. It was a game of territory, and the rules were simple – to build anywhere in the room, at any time; to define the boundaries of your space, with all expansions extending from that initial

boundary; to be able to build into other builder's spaces, yet to face the possibility of eviction should that person want to expel you from their territory. Everything created would be part of the final environment, and even the final environment would grow over the course of the three nights of performance. As the game shifted my approach and intensified our collective energy in the final month of the creation process, the structure of the performance changed drastically.

Within this new space, I realized I had the opportunity to play not only with content, but also with form as a material for building. Merging theatre and installation as forms, I created a hybrid performance space that more accurately reflected our working process, our research and our personal impulses to build. I wanted these distinct building practices to coexist with the crafted narrative moments that we had collaboratively created for each builder, and the combination of forms helped to create an arena in which both could be encountered. I was interested in the narratives of these builder-characters – each one an assemblage of the ensemble members' personal history and research into specific art environment builders – and in the particular rituals and methods the ensemble members had developed through building their spaces. I was also intrigued by the expressive potential of these transformed spaces and objects, and wanted to establish an environment wherein these stories, objects and spatial designs could communicate with equal power. Within a performance of defined and limited duration, I sought to activate audiences to move around and explore the space, perceiving with all their senses, attending not only to the performers, but also to the objects and their composition. My strategy to equalize attention towards the maker, the making and the made, so to speak, was to have building occurring consistently through the duration of the performance, with the ensemble at work on their environments before the audience even entered the room. At specific points during the building, narrative moments for each builder would emerge, either simultaneously or in sequence. These sections were distinguished from the building sections in that they were rehearsed, and their various combinations of action, intention, text and music were used to briefly illuminate each builder's inner story and impulses to build, with an expressiveness that differed from that of their building work. These building and narrative sections collectively moved towards a culminating final moment for each builder, where they would briefly become united with their creations in discrete ways, activating and animating them before these moments receded and they returned to their

tasks, suggesting an unending loop of making and attempting to find a perfect communion between builder and their environment.



Figure 6: *The Builders* in rehearsal. Photo by Paula Viitanen.

The individual builders themselves were the accumulation of five months of investigation into art environments, their makers, and the personal ‘builder’ impulses we all possess. The ensemble’s respective materials and the repetitive actions of their making, layered with their own experiences and their research, informed the creation of a builder-character and the articulation of that builder’s narrative. Character became an additional material within our creations, and the builder-characters emerged in a manner similar to how environment builders make their work, drawing inspiration and materials from disparate sources to forge something new, a layered composition of chaotic shards, to refer back to Grosz. And while it may be argued that the construction of our builder identities was contrived by virtue of it being part of a devising process and performance, there is a shared activity of self-fashioning between the ensemble members structuring their builder characters and the environment builder composing and articulating their identity through their own processes of making. John Beardsley cites a comparison of the

environment builder to Claude Levi-Strauss's concepts of the *bricoleur*, who works wonders with whatever materials are at hand, and the magical thinker, who "creates new myths from the odds and ends of old ones, from the shards of individual and collective history, or from observed phenomena and taxonomies in nature."¹⁴ Beardsley argues that the comparison does not rest only with the *bricoleur* on a practical level and the magical thinker on a theoretical one: "Like the *bricoleur*, they use whatever material is on hand, combining unrelated fragments to a fresh purpose. But like the magical thinker, they often do so to create new myths from the shards of old ones. It is this form of magical tinkering – conducted on both the physical and metaphysical levels – that provides a connection among...wildly differing environments."¹⁵ As we devised *The Builders*, character was an additional way of framing our gathered materials into a composed chaos that sought to be reflective of the various components that went into its creation, rather than a definitive representation of any one person. In a future iteration of *The Builders*, I would seek to draw more attention to the processes of creating these characters within the space of the performance, to emphasize character as materiality, as well as its assemblage-quality, comprised of various, fragmented sources. This might occur by leaving clues and references to the ensemble members and their research within the playing space, whether those clues be texts, images, objects or costumes. It would also be worth exploring how we could draw attention to the construction of character within the performance itself, revealing its materiality and composition in a similar manner to how the builders' environments are constructed and developed during the performance.

¹⁴ John Beardsley, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, 1st ed (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.



Figure 7: Eveleen Kozak works on her plastic garden in *The Builders*. Photo by Paula Viitanen.

Meeting an Audience: The Builders in Performance

Combining theatre with aspects of installation was a tactic to evoke the mysterious and disorienting affect of the encounter with the art environment. It was also a means to attend to the performative aspects of the ritualistic actions and daily practices we all engage in to gain a sense of home or simply a sense of order, however permanent or fleeting. The combination of forms was an effort to move away from ephemeral, illusory representations of building and to level the hierarchy of elements within the performance space, allowing audiences to attend to elements such as objects, actions, stories and sounds according to their own interests. The three performances of *The Builders* brought out three very different audiences, whose behaviour could shift the feeling of the work from a more traditional, seated performance, to an immersive theatre performance (such as Punchdrunk's enduring production of *Sleep No More* in New York City), to a performance-installation (PearlDamour's *How to Build a Forest* served as a particular inspiration for this format). Invitations were offered to the audience, both vocally and

spatially, as to how to be in the space. The audience could sit (at more of a distance on folding chairs, or close up on gallery-style benches) or could move around the space and observe the builders from different vantage points. The builders themselves offered various levels of invitation into their realms – some were guarded and fixated on their work, while others, particularly Keely's Rhinestone Cowboy, seemed to thrive off interaction, and even invited participation in the making of her space. My choice to merge theatre and installation within *The Builders* was an attempt to challenge and push theatre as a form, rejecting conventions of the theatre space and its divisions between audience and performer, of traditional narrative arcs and their delivery, and of the audience's movement and behaviour within the space of the performance. Elements of postdramatic theatre, including simultaneity of action and text, scenic overabundance and non-hierarchy of the various elements and forms present within the work¹⁶ created a space that encouraged audiences to enter into a more contemplative form of spectatorship, possessing the freedom to select and structure the work according to their own experience and engagement with it.

¹⁶ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (Abingdon, [England] ; New York: Routledge, 2006).



Figure 8: Keely O'Brien's Rhinestone Cowboy, *The Builders*. Photo by Paula Viitanen.

As much as I sought a hybrid between theatre and installation, key elements kept it firmly within the realm of a theatre performance, such as lighting shifts, prescribed times of audience entry and exit, and the presence of dramatic, character-driven text. And while the hybrid space gave the performance a vital energy as the audience tested out and discovered the possibilities of their presence and behaviour amongst the builders and their environments, the dominance of the theatrical produced defining tensions and an imbalance between the various elements at play. The movement between 'building sections' and 'narrative sections' created an unintentional foregrounding of the theatrical and a backgrounding of the creations and the tasks of making them. Projected, spoken text and sequences of rehearsed action could pull focus and demand attention in the way that the making and the objects themselves could not. Consequently, there was a challenge in how to restore focus to the objects and the tasks of making once the structure of the piece was established. The curious viewer, exploring the space and watching the builders as they worked through the building sections, might discover the expressive potential of these elements, while others might simply wait for the next narrative section

to occur, passing the time through these less presentational sections, which were driven by the builders' impulses to build and advance their space rather than to advance a narrative. In considering a future iteration of *The Builders*, I would attempt to reduce the dominance of the theatrical, to establish a space that is less evidently driven by these narrative moments, where the tasks of building and the created environments could perform as strongly as the human performers. The challenge lies in how to transmit narrative without the obvious 'performance mode' that reduces the work to representation. I would spend more time with the ensemble delving into who or what they are performing for within these narrative sections – for themselves, for an audience, for a real or imagined other? – and would develop their parts directly in response to that. This could mean lessening the volume of the performer's spoken text, especially if their performance moments are directed not to a larger audience but to themselves or an imagined other, taking it down to a more conversational or even whispered volume. Narrative sections would still occur throughout the continuous work of building, although I would reduce the clear delineation between the two sections through repetition, more overlap amongst the performers, and lighting cues that shifted according to time, rather than according to content. I would take more cues from installation practices, expanding the structure and duration of the work, and would perhaps do away with prescribed times of audience entry and exit, which clearly frames the piece as a performance. With a longer duration and open entry to the space, the builders and their environments could become something an audience might happen upon, giving the audience more agency in how they experience and interact with the work and how long they choose to stay.

Another critical tension that manifested through this hybrid structure was that of real building versus representation of building, which would appear and recede at various moments throughout the performance. This tension was a result of my structural choices and perhaps a reflection of the limitations of theatre as a form, which traditionally constructs fictions for the audience to enter into. For the most part, the build scenes solidified my intent to reveal building and making as both a process and performance, illuminating the large and small-scale repetitive actions that occur as we occupy territory and transform spaces to fit our needs and imaginings. Yet, these processes of building were not only backgrounded, but also could become undermined in their authenticity when the narrative scenes took over. These scenes would, to varying degrees, bring the

ensemble members into a 'performance mode' of building fictions and out of a 'building mode' where they were engaged in the real work of transforming materials and spaces. The challenge of the structure required the performers to maintain the energy, intent and tasks of the build throughout both the building and narrative sections, without dropping into an obvious performance mode (characterized by projected dialogue and clearly rehearsed actions). It was this 'performance mode' that had the potential to point to the theatricality of the entire endeavour, reducing the creations, the makers and the making to mere representations, instead of something we had personally invested in and built from the ground up. Within this precarious structure, the build scenes were most effective when the builder possessed a clear sense of their task and its connection to their project as a whole, as well as a strong personal connection to the work. Similarly, the narrative moments held the most coherence and power when the energy and intention of the building was maintained through the action of the scene.

Occupying a delicate space that oscillated between theatre and installation, *The Builders* was an experiment in the possibilities of the theatre space as a site of encounter with performance as well as process. The processes I aimed to bring to life were not only those connected to the life-long endeavours of creating art environments, but also processes of devising theatre and building worlds, and those never-ending processes of making ourselves at home within whatever kinds of spaces we occupy. *The Builders* drew attention towards acts of marking territory and enacting transformations both tiny and grand, and created a unique space for the contemplation of those acts. The hybrid structure, the interaction between building environments as well as narratives, and the invitations to explore the space encouraged audiences to be active in constructing their own experience of and conclusions around the builders and their creations. The audience became builders in their own way as they navigated and made meaning from the assemblage of voices, environments and stories they encountered. Audiences described the environment of *The Builders* as a meditative space, an intricately woven, hyper-sensory environment, and a dream world, composed of mysterious elements that could not quite be unravelled, yet alluded to the singular vision and intent of each builder. As performance makers, we combined our particular skills in crafting narratives, creating actions and building characters with less familiar methodologies of material-based, visual practices as a way to explore the power of building and transformation and the use of

common materials, uncommonly. The results have stirred questions and challenges that I hope to address in future iterations of this and other works, building more, and building better.



Figure 9: Gordon Havelaar and audience member, *The Builders*. Photo by Ashley Tanasiychuk.

Appendix A.

A Letter

November 17, 2014

A letter to a man on a train headed east. That's you, Bennie.

You board on a Tuesday evening.

These words will not keep you company on the train. You'll be home before I finish the letter. Even so, writing gets easier with an addressee.

So Dear Bennie,

On Wednesday, before I schooled you at darts and at the beginning of the six or more pints we shared, you asked me about what I do as an artist. I began as I often do with people who are outside of my discipline, putting forth my broad moniker of "theatre maker" with a grin, before delving into the specifics of how I create – as a performer, a director, a collaborator, a writer, a facilitator of theatre that is frequently site-specific or site-responsive, and devised. You were fascinated by devising, because of its potential to emerge from any kind of source, rather than an existing play text, and by its collaborative and chaotic nature. You were, right?

You asked me where this kind of theatre lives. "It seems as if this kind of work isn't being created for those grand theatrical establishments," you said. I told you that no, for the most part, this work is not really being created for or in those establishments, or if it is, perhaps it does so with a mind to critique their traditional structures and the conventional hierarchies they perpetuate (plays written by playwrights, staged by directors working with actors, presented to an audience following a brief period of rehearsal). I spoke about the existence of this work outside of those spaces, whether in houses, on streets, in parks,

factories, public and private spaces of all kinds. The potential for these shared spaces we occupy everyday to become reenchanted in a new context, appropriated for alternative use, wherein performance can come to life. Of course, the next thing I talked about was process, and its importance to devising. How the explorations and research undertaken by the creator(s) shape the piece, unearthing a language for the questions or themes at the centre of the work. “And by language, I don’t just mean the spoken/written word. That language can be created by other means as well...by light, or objects, or movement or sound!” Yes, I get excited about this stuff.

I had a book on the table, *Invisible Things* by David Harradine and Synne Behrndt of the UK company Fevered Sleep, which I’d been re-reading before you arrived. “So, this book is all about the creation process of a devised theatre piece,” I explained, “and their source material was the quality of the light in Brighton, England. They made a piece about the light in this town.” You chuckled, surprised, maybe a little impressed. You flipped through the book, this document of a process told through essays, drawings, photographs, journal entries, lists and questions. Its collage-like quality makes it one of the most successful documents of a devising process that I’ve encountered. It reminds me of devising’s terrors and joys, and most importantly, it makes me excited about articulation of process. So, this letter is a tactic to find that pleasure in articulating process, and to address the challenges and questions and desires that drive my work, that are leading me to my Graduating Project for the MFA program. I’ll tell you about my research into art environments, and why I’m compelled to explore this research through devised theatre. A hunch: what it seems to come down to, is an in-depth engagement with process and transformation that is rooted in art environments and in devising, and the affects and intensities that both practices can provoke amongst makers and witnesses.

Elizabeth Grosz has this little book called *Chaos, Territory, Art*. It found its way into my hands a month ago and her theory of art applies well to both devising and the art environment. Grosz speaks of art as it produces sensations and enables matter to become expressive, more than itself; a creative force that composes the chaos of the world through framing, making marks and defining territories. When I consider devising and art environments, hers is a framework that speaks to these practices and could stretch my

strategies and ideas for this upcoming creation process in intriguing directions. I'll tell you more about it as I ramble along the way.

There's a lot to contend with. But there's also something else that's been occupying my mind the past few weeks, and I mentioned it to you on Wednesday night. It's the issue of explanation and defense of artistic works, and my challenge to articulate my work and process in a way that doesn't deaden it or dissect its mystery until there is nothing left. What is intriguing to me about art environments and about devising, are the mysteries of their making or unfolding; the stories, sensations and questions that emerge, that stick with me well beyond the actual experience. I struggle with writing about my artistic methodology, because when it comes to putting it into words, they don't do justice to a process that evolves with each project, according to the elements at play, nor to the discoveries that are found in the studio, when these elements (people, materials, spaces, questions, etc.) collide to build something new. Words fail me; explanation seems inappropriate. In some way, I fail before I even begin, for devising lives in its avoidance of definition, its inability to be pinned down. To envelope it within definition would be to imperil it, making it as formulaic as the conventional theatre it seeks to separate itself from. Nevertheless, I'm attempting. And hopefully there's something in that. Tim Etchells writes that "in this failure – by definition language is not and cannot express what it seeks to describe – an admission of the struggle of everyday life – to get blunt tools to do fine work, to carve out a life in, around, despite of and through what passes for culture in the late twentieth century."¹

My first postcard to you, in 2009, was a single word and a short phrase of a definition. No return address, no explanation. It took you five years to figure out it was me who sent it, making it my greatest accomplishment in mail-based mystery making. This long-winded letter is quite the opposite of that postcard. I admit my struggle, but perhaps these blunt tools will make some sense of my ideas, hopefully liberating them, or at the very least keeping them alive in a document that exists alongside the creation process of this final project, that provides some initial reflections before the process even truly begins. It will not reveal all its secrets. And there's no expectation for you to reply.

¹ Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 102.

It's an unconventional letter, Bennie. There are lists, a manifesto, a tiny travelogue, a text quite essay-like that brings up the theory I'm toying with at the outset of this upcoming process. There are good words, too. Follow me though this, and pints are on me for your next visit.

beginning

n. 1 The point in time or space at which something starts

1.1 The first part or earliest stage of something

begin v. Old English *beginnan* "to begin, attempt, undertake," from bi- + West Germanic *ginnan, perhaps "to open, open up" (compare Old High German *in-ginnan* "to cut open, open up," also "begin, undertake"), with sense evolution from "open" to "begin."

Aside from those fortune cookie cards from 2008 (your fortune was: your heart is as big as Antarctica) you have not seen my work. Let me tell you about my process, an ever-changing thing that shifts to meet each project, adapting to the collaborators, ideas, spaces and materials at play. Lately, the work has been both solo and collaborative. It has taken shape as devised theatre and performance installations. For the past year, it has lived in black box theatre spaces both shoddy and top-notch, with the exception of a summer installation that occurred outdoors, in Charlottetown. There is always a starting point that triggers the work and the explorations that go into its making. Recent examples include:

- *An Idea - In Ears Pricked, Eyes Peeled* I imagined a ringing red telephone on a city sidewalk, with a voice on the other end that toyed with listener's perceptions of their surrounding outdoor environment. Site visits where I sketched, listened to and observed the environment prompted the text spoken by the voice on the rotary-dial phone. Three weeks of repetitive manual labour to build the objects

that filled the environment (egg carton curtains) opened up a “thinking-space”² wherein I developed the performance aspect of the work

- A Word - There were words that launched the spring 2014 ensemble creations of Black Box, the undergraduate devising class I took part in as an artistic director: Solo, Duet, Party, Retreat. With *Retreat*, the second production I co-directed, there was also a text I brought into play: *The Facts of Winter*, by Paul Poissel. We didn't use any of the text itself in the final performance; rather, it became a means to generate new stories and characters that served as the bones of an immersive performance in an labyrinthine, off-kilter hotel.
- A Costume - In the fall of 2013, my first semester in the MFA program, dirty coveralls – green, paint-covered, size XXL – spurred me in the studio, where I discovered, through solo improvisation, training and play, a character that lived in the suit, as well as a specific world I created through encounters with objects that emerged from the suit's many pockets.
- A Space - Following the coveralls, there was a space – a crude visual arts studio space that was converted into a miniature black box theatre by fellow MFA Kyla Gardiner and I. We were driven by frustration over our lack of access to theatre spaces we could really inhabit and transform within the school, so we made our own theatre space. Unsatisfied by the critical response to theatre and narrative-based work in our studio class, we made an empty performance, a piece that was all spectacle; that accumulated mess until its confetti gun climax. The next time I worked in that space, I attempted to use it as a window into another world: I sealed it off and filled it with floating paper houses and a solitary figure, me, silently building by candlelight.

² Derek McCormack and Alanna Thain, “Thinking Spaces for Research-Creation,” in *Inflexions No. 1 - How Is Research-Creation?*, 3.



Figure 10: *Retreat*, Photo by Ashley Tanasiychuk; *Ears Pricked, Eyes Peeled*, Photo by Mikey Wasnidge; *Untitled #3*, Photo by Ashley Tanasiychuk.

process

n. 1. A series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end:
 1.1 A natural or involuntary series of changes:

Middle English: from Old French *proces*, from Latin *processus* 'progression, course', from the verb *procedere*, from *pro-* 'forward' + *cedere* 'go'.

Spaces. Materials. Movement. Play. People. Ideas. Words. Being in relation to all this, and in relation to the other people creating with me, if it's a collaborative process. Bringing these elements together within a space, and in their meeting: eruptions, battles, connections, fusions, fissures, answers, and more questions. The space holds all these possibilities, tensions, relationships and disparities. In discovering and naming and

shaping, a chaotic accumulation gains structure. It becomes an entity that continues to grow, not only within the space of the workshop/rehearsal, but within and beyond the performance event. To me, this approaches some elucidation of devising. To be more specific, there are certain creative approaches I employ to engage the imagination, the body, and the mind to create a space where the new and the unknown may enter. These approaches may look like:

- Physical theatre training and improvisation. This approach adapts methods from Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, Massachusetts, where I was a student artist for a year and a half. Training and improvisation works with the actor's energy through rigorous movement and physical exercises, tapping a source of creativity beyond the daily, "beyond what we already know exists," as Stacy Klein, Double Edge's founder and artistic director puts it.³ By placing this energy in dialogue with partners – be they people, materials, space, light, music, etc. – the seeds of new work appear, to be developed and explored through further research, repetition and revision. Double Edge first introduced me to this idea of practice-based research. We never used such specific terminology, but research was everywhere and everything. And with all the readings on practice-based-research I've encountered this semester, it was Ian Watson's definition that felt most fitting for me in relation to training and improvisation: an embodied research model that is "about exploring possibilities, testing limits, and laying foundations that will form but do not constitute public performance."⁴ Watson notes the challenge of documenting this kind of improvisatory, body-based research, as it is an amorphous strand of knowledge that really only exists in its doing, "a fusion of training, interpretation, and experience in which the various genesis strands are difficult, if not impossible, to tease apart... Much of what has been discovered and stored in a performer's body is tacit, rather than explicit knowledge."⁵

³ Stacy Klein, "Why Devise? Why Now? Creating the Impossible," *Theatre Topics*, 70.

⁴ Ian Watson, "An Actor Prepares: Performance as Research (PAR) in the Theatre," in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*, 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

- Defining a specific source or starting point, and using play, experimentation, games and constraints as a means to devise bits of new work from this source, within a creative laboratory setting. Or starting without a known source, and instead filling the room with a collection of things to work with and, by adding, subtracting, moving things around, likely and unlikely combinations, editing, revising, selecting and structuring, a performance is built. This approach also evades rigid definition, as it encompasses tools and activities I have amassed over years of various kinds of performance training, from puppetry to live art to dance, as well as participation in other creative processes.
- Writing is another approach to creation, one that I am trying to develop particularly for this upcoming project. I'm beginning to create more work using writing as a starting point – a challenge for me, since I feel like it doesn't come naturally, at least not in terms of creative writing. However, I also use writing constantly in every process I participate in as a tool for reflection, for documenting the work and the ways in which we create it, and for keeping track of ideas that come up, for current and future projects. These journals serve as an archive for every process I've gone through, and I frequently return to them before embarking on a new project, mining them for ideas, strategies, activities and guiding questions. Despite what Watson says about the challenge of articulating that which is tacit, rather than explicit, there is nevertheless an attempt at articulation that takes place within these journals as well.

From these approaches, the works emerge. As do guiding principles and an evolving aesthetic. Ready for some declarations and exclamation points, Bennie? Here's a manifesto:

manifesto

n. A public declaration of policy and aims.

mid 17th century: from Italian, from *manifestare*, from Latin, 'make public', from *manifestus* 'obvious'

- The creation process holds equal value as the performance of the work!
- The process adapts according to the people, spaces, source materials, and ideas at play!
- The work creates an arena of enchantment for its artists and attendants.⁶
- The theatre activates its artists and attendants: it provokes questions, piques curiosity, elicits emotion, activates imagination, shifts perspectives. Attendants are not passive spectators, but are implicated, involved participants, integral to the process of bringing the work to life.
- The theatre gains its power from its capacity to transform – to transform spaces, materials, people, and perceptions – offering alternative visions of what the world is, and what it could be. It does not create a utopia but it does reach towards it.
- The theatre is everywhere! It spills beyond the confines of traditional spaces and moves into the spaces that are part of our daily lives.
- The work is site-responsive! It attempts to locate the extraordinary within the ordinary and the everyday. It engages multiple senses to foster a finer sensitivity to the surrounding environment among attendants.

⁶ The concept of the “arena of enchantment” is taken from Elizabeth Grosz’s *Chaos, Territory, Art* (48). The term attendant, which implies both presence and participation from those experiencing a performance instead of the more passive terms of audience/spectator, present only to listen or watch, is taken from Stephen Di Benedetto (126).

research

n. the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions

v. investigate systematically

late 16th century: from obsolete French *recerche* (noun), *recercher* (verb), from Old French *re-* (expressing intensive force) + *cerchier* 'to search'.

I should get to my research. For the past two years I've been obsessed with the mysterious and strange spaces of art environment builders. These spaces are called by many names, including visionary/folk/outsider art environments, but I'll stick with the simplest designation, that of the art environment, which Leslie Umberger (author and curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum) employs most frequently as well. My fascination with art environments is deeply connected to the Maritimes, as my introduction to such places happened there. Maybe you've visited Andy's Dummies, just off the bridge in New Brunswick, or driven by bottle houses in Cap-Egmont, PEI, or seen Maud Lewis's painted house, preserved in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia? These places and so many others pop up along rural back roads, in farmyards and gardens and on public and privately-owned land in the Maritimes and far beyond. They are sometimes hidden within houses, though quite frequently the extraordinary contents of the interior spill out into the exterior. My experience of such places is always marked by awe and wonder, witnessing how an accumulation of materials and a life-long endeavor to transform an environment opens up an entirely new way of being in the world. I'm intrigued by the affects and sensations that occur through experiencing these spaces, how they encourage a new way of interacting with an environment and everyday materials, and how they engage the imagination, painting a picture of a maker, a vision, and a non-stop process.



Figure 11: Andy MacDonald giving a tour of Andy's Dummy Farm, Baie Vert, New Brunswick, January 2012. Photo by Megan Stewart.

Tiny travelogue: In June of 2014, I drive around Wisconsin for nine days, exploring eight different art environments (a small fraction of the many environments that exist there). I want to experience these places in person, and perhaps find glimmers of answers for how these environments could come to life through theatre. I drive 1080 miles in a little red car. I stand outside Mary Nohl's wildly decorated house and creature-filled sculpture garden in Fox Point, a Milwaukee suburb, taking pictures through the chain link fence, attempting to see the place from every possible angle, writing about what I experience from behind the fence. I make a list of all the concrete creatures I see in the yard that overlooks Lake Michigan. Returning to it now, they read as prompts for image-making in the studio:

- A faceless couple, melting into one another
- Conversational fish
- A dinosaur with folded arms and a goofy expression

- A man with a hat hugs a fish. They stare into each other's eyes.

- A collection of stumpy, top-hatted heads



Figure 12: Mary Nohl's house, Fox Point, Wisconsin, June 2014. Photo by Megan Stewart.

In Sheboygan, I visit the John Michael Kohler Arts Centre and in addition to getting a private tour of their collection of objects from art environments from all around the world, I watch four hours of videotape from 1988, in which Nohl tours a videographer and two friends around her house. She describes almost everything she's made inside and outside the house, she goes through her basement collections and sketchbooks, chattering all the while about her non-stop gathering and creating. Sifting through her bric-a-brac, she chuckles and says, "I sure have enough ideas to keep me busy for the next few years."

A few days later, I pull into the parking lot of Delaney's Surplus Store in the tiny town of Sumpter, in Sauk County. A cottonwood tree has filled the air with floating bits of white fluff, a downy snow on a sunny day. I walk past the scrap yard behind the store, past junky collections of toilets, bathtubs, rusty pipes and other debris. The path veers right

and I am suddenly face to face with the most elaborate, enormous art environment I've ever witnessed, *The Forevertron*. Built by Tom Every, a demolition man with a penchant for collecting odd pieces of scrap metal, *The Forevertron* is an extraordinary structure, a machine that extends towards the sky with twists and curls, steampunk-esque, supposedly able to launch a traveler into the heavens when activated. I have never seen anything like this before, in scale or style. I stand there, astonished. When I regain composure, I go find Eleanor Every, Tom's wife, who is now chiefly responsible for the environment's upkeep, since Tom has been in a nursing home the past few years. However, he is still designing nonstop, coming up with ideas to incorporate new pieces of scrap that arrive at the site. Now they rely on their children and nomadic workers to execute the designs – but finding help is an ever-increasing challenge.



Figure 13: Tom Every's *Forevertron*, Sumpter, Wisconsin, June 2014. Photo by Megan Stewart.

Eleanor tours me through the grounds, showing me structures with similar astrological functions such as the control tower and the *Celestial Listening Ear*. She plays music on the spine of a scrap metal dragon, and introduces me to the bird band, a flock of quirky birds with bulging eyes all built out of scrap metal, musical instruments and old tools. *The Forevertron* has been in progress since the 1980s. Charismatic and chatty, she tells me stories of the days when there were teams of people who would come by to help realize Tom's vision, and of fantastic parties and hardships and non-stop work. "We worked," she says, with the slightest sigh, "But when we worked, we played."

transformation

n. A thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance

from Latin *transformare* "change in shape, metamorphose," from *trans-* "across" + *formare* "to form"

Her words stuck with me.

They seem to be a key in understanding where this compulsion comes from, how the process of non-stop building is fueled by the joy of play and creating something totally unlike anything that has existed before, realizing a vision. I find a similar experience in devising, in being immersed in the process of making and play, and experiencing the moments when something works, when two things are put together and a something new emerges, revealing itself, perhaps after much trial and error. Those moments can be so rich, and unexpectedly rewarding, that they compel me to keep searching, to keep playing, finding and making more. Etchells has a great definition of play, from his book *Certain Fragments*: "Play as a state in which meaning is in flux, in which possibility thrives, in which versions multiply in which the confines of what is real are blurred, buckled, broken. Play as endless transformation, transformation without end and never stillness."⁷

The importance of process, or endless transformation, to both devising and art environments is why I'm compelled to devise around this subject matter. The art

⁷ Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 53.

environment has resonances with the processes and values I engage with in my own artistic practice, from its assemblage-quality, to its rejection of pre-existing forms and methods, to its resourcefulness and unrelenting work towards a unique, personal vision, shaping spaces and materials into something new. Process is intrinsic to how I interpret such spaces: of locating identity through life-long creativity (never stillness), and gaining a sense of home through transformations of space. Process exists on many levels here, within the work and the life of the artist – the art environment builder constantly transforms their environment, and in doing so, shapes their own identity and sense of belonging through this continual process of building. Making themselves, alongside their work. Process is also integral to Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of art, where art is not about final products, but instead, ongoing processes that continue to resonate and impact the becomings of other beings and materials. She defines these becomings as material instead of imaginative, for they do not signify or represent, but rather assemble, make, do, produce. She writes, “Art is the becoming-sensation of materiality, the transformation of matter into sensation, the becoming-more of the artistic subjects and objects that is bound up with the subject’s cross-fertilization with the art object.”⁸ For Grosz, and, extending the theory to the art environment and the devising process, what is created within the processes of art is not new objects or materials, but forces and sensations that contribute to the development of the subject (be it the artist or attendants) through their connection to the work. The artist engages with the world, with its materials, forging new relationships amongst them, coming to know themselves and their environment better. For Mary Nohl, so much of her work developed in response to her surroundings and what they offered her. A daily practice of gathering found materials from her neighbourhood to turn into outdoor sculptures, and her manner of creating in response to the trees, the lake and the weather made the landscape “an active character in her repertoire,” evaporating the distinction between landscape and art environment.⁹ For Tom Every, the work is similarly relentless, continuing today despite his declining health. As he says, “I am interested in recycling, and reusing, and looking at things from a different perspective...Everything is a process and leads from one stage to another.”¹⁰ In my own work, I’m also driven to keep

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 23, 75.

⁹ Leslie Umberger, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*, 285.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

building from and transforming what I have previously created, finding new ways to engage with the materials and ideas that continually fascinate me.

Within these becomings, an understanding of how art is always reaching towards the future, impacting the bodies and perceptions of those creating and experiencing the work, as Etchells described in his keynote address at the PuSh Festival in January 2014. My own encounters with art environments continue to impact my creative process, resonating long after initial visits to these places. The stories of the builders, the compulsions behind their creativity and the meager means with which they begin to build their elaborate structures, have propelled me to make work that responds to the questions, affects and imaginings these environments provoke. Etchells' thoughts on the future transformations and reverberations of performance resonate beyond the discipline – he discusses how works demand recounting after the event, as well as “mimicry, echoing and versioning too, demanding other actions, other gestures, other events.” The potential for art to reach beyond itself occurs “in the way that work, after the fact, remains unresolved; as image, as experience, as memory/texture, the way it stays unresolved in conversation/discussion – the way it lingers but is not understood, and the way that this not understanding, the incommensurable in fact, stays with us as provocation, challenge, irritant, food and fuel.”¹¹ I'm intrigued by what both creation processes, devising and environment building, can inspire within those who encounter it, how they can provoke other gestures, transformations, and modes of perception, or offer other ways to envision the world. My own project is an attempt, using the language and tools I have, to engage with all those provocations, desires, and questions stirred up by art environments, to deal with what remains long after I leave such spaces. In some ways, it is the knowledge that I will never truly understand these practices (despite all the resonances), which compels me to grapple with them, to find my way in, and create in response to that. A becoming-more, as I engage with all these processes...of devising a piece, of writing a paper, of considering theatre and art environments in relation to space, materials, people, play.

Bennie, are you lost yet? I feel like I'm leading you into the thickets. Don't trip on the citations.

¹¹ Tim Etchells, “Future Keynote”.

With regard to Double Edge's creation process, Stacy Klein has written that "To devise is deeper, more personal, and intimate, and ultimately demands a visceral investigation of content rather than another rehashing of forms."¹² Similarly, Grosz writes that art distinguishes itself from other modes of cultural and material production by way of its capacity to intensify, eternalize or monumentalize, new sensations. While the production of commodities (even artistic commodities) may generate sensation, these sensations are pre-experienced, known in advance, and guaranteed to affect in a particular way, thus achieving a task, goal or an end. In contrast, the sensations and affects that arise from art are previously unknown, they emerge to find a life of their own, and in doing so, help us to investigate our own processes of becoming and our possible futures.¹³ Investigating content lies at the heart of devising and environment building. Within both processes, there exists an accumulation, with all its chaos and mess, charged with the potential for transformation – of the emergence of something new and unfamiliar, and the tensions and possibilities arising as the unknown insinuates itself into the known.

What accumulates within art environments is often a collection of refuse, found items, the detritus of capitalism, and the castoffs of nature. Mary Nohl never stopped gathering and collecting materials for her work (she had stores of stuff in her basement – driftwood, bottlecaps, bones, stones, pieces of glass, all saved for upcoming projects). Maud Lewis painted every surface available to her within and outside her tiny shack. The Everys still collect scrap metal so it can be added to *The Forevertron*. Within the devising process, the accumulation expands to include ideas, images, questions, texts, methods, other source and generated material in all mediums, shapes, forms. There is chaos...a room fills with stuff, a roll of white paper is drawn with webs and maps and keywords and questions, the walls are covered with sticky notes. Not to mention, the creators themselves are filled with possibilities – old and new languages of gestures, qualities of movement, stories to be told, fights to pick, dreams and desires. And out of this chaos, a structure or logic emerges.

For Grosz, art works with chaos by framing it to extract something composed and immanent. Furthering her point, she cites Deleuze and Guattari: "Art indeed struggles with

¹² Klein, "Why Devise?", 70.

¹³ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 4.

chaos, but does so in order to bring forth a vision that illuminates it for an instant, a Sensation...Art is not chaos but a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation...neither foreseen nor preconceived.”¹⁴ To compose chaos, if only for a moment, requires a frame. Framing, territory, and marking comprise the ways in which art erects a plane over chaos, not to control it, but “to contain some of its fragments in some small space (a discourse, a work of art, an experiment), to reduce it to some form that the living can utilize it without being completely overwhelmed”.¹⁵ With the chaotic accumulation of the devising process, a structure or organizing principle is required to make sense of it all. The structure forms the bones, the skeleton of some unknown entity that gradually comes into being, which may reveal itself as any number of things. I’m interested in how this process, of composing and framing chaos, compares between devising and the creation of art environments. In devising, this part of the process is often hidden within the space of rehearsals. With the art environment, the builders also frequently work alone, sometimes even in secrecy. Yet something is urging me to bring these processes to light, to bring them into the performance space.

I’m searching for the frame that will join these processes together, bringing them to light within the context of performance. I’m interested in a creating a performance that reveals and reflects upon its own making. I want to show process – the composition of chaos, the creation of imaginary worlds, and the physical labour of making these worlds – because I have a hunch it might uncover something about art making, and beyond that, about life and our own constant efforts to make sense of the chaos around us through building, framing, creating. As Grosz writes, “Art is first architectural because its cosmic materials require demarcation, enframement, containment in order for qualities as such to emerge, to live, and to induce sensation”.¹⁶ I want to witness the act of enframement and

¹⁴ quoted in Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 9.

¹⁵ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

demarcation because I believe there is meaning not only within the space contained by the frame, but within the act of framing the space itself.

territory

n. 1.1 *Zoology* An area defended by an animal or group of animals against others of the same sex or species.

1.3 An area in which one has certain rights or for which one has responsibility with regard to a particular type of activity

late Middle English: from Latin *territorium*, from *terra* 'land'

Marking territory is at the root of the art environment's creation, connected to larger human desires to locate ourselves by way of the spaces we inhabit, and how we inhabit them. Spatial boundaries offer a sense of control, a space where creative possibilities may take root and take shape with some degree of freedom. Leslie Umberger addresses this idea in an article on women art environment builders who transformed their homes, a particular kind of frame, writing "the makers of art environments do not begin their work with any grand plan in mind. Instead, they begin with the understanding that home is the realm within control, and a comfortable place slowly transforms into a creative repository".¹⁷ The environment builder, the theatre maker, humans and animals use territory and boundary-drawing not as a self-protective act, but as Grosz writes, an "erotico-proprietorial" act, defining "a stage of performance, an arena of enchantment, a mise-en-scene for seduction that brings together heterogeneous and otherwise unrelated elements: melody and rhythms, a series of gestures, bows, and dips, a tree or a perch, a nest, a clearing, an audience of rivals, an audience of desired ones".¹⁸

This is why I am so intrigued by the visionary art environment, and why devising is my way into this research. The work I create is often focused around the idea of enclosures, and using acts of drawing new boundaries or erecting structures within

¹⁷ Leslie Umberger, "Home Is Where the Heart Is," *Raw Vision*, 28.

¹⁸ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 48.

everyday spaces as a means to open up other worlds where new sensations or transformations may occur. The “arena of enchantment” transforms ordinary space; it endows it with meaning and properties otherwise unavailable to it. The pieces that make up the space may seem disparate, unrelated when considered on their own. Yet together, as a collection, as part of a structure, another logic appears, the material and environment become transformed, gaining alternative significance and function. Within this space, makers and attendants contend with these transformations, faced with the fragments and remembrances of the old and familiar within the mysterious and new configurations of materials and environment. In the unfamiliar, liminoid space of transformation,¹⁹ we forge new relationships to these elements and to each other. Perhaps we experience other ways of understanding the world, possibly in accordance or in conflict with what we know. Nevertheless, we gain something, we become more through the encounter.

I began to approach this idea of marking out a space, defining this arena of enchantment in October, during a short workshop activity within my Performance Studies class. I cleared the classroom of its usual contents (tables and chairs), and filled a space in the centre with a variety of objects, furniture and materials. I asked participants to claim an area of the room as their own, to envision what they would require to make this area into a meaningful place, and to consider their actions in creating this place. I invited them to select objects from the centre of the room and from their own belongings to bring into their space, and to arrange them to their liking. I watched as participants made boundaries, using objects, furniture and their bodies, and observed how their aesthetic came into view through the arrangement of the space they claimed. Impersonal materials and objects were endowed with additional meaning and value through their selection, positioning within the space, and connection to the other elements. The classroom space itself shifted from drab and empty to being filled with eleven islands of colour, shape, and texture, arranged and inhabited by their individual composer. Within this upcoming process of my

¹⁹ I can't help but bring in this slice of Richard Schechner, who writes that “Liminoid artistic and social activities take place at the margins and in the creases of established cultural systems, off the beaten track in ‘bad’ neighbourhoods, and in remote rural areas” (71), as it refers not only to the spaces where art environments are most often found, but also to the spaces where the new, postdramatic theatre tends to insert itself as well, and where ensembles such as Double Edge retreat to create their work, in an attempt to separate from the commercial, conventional theatre world.

Grad Project, I intend to return to this activity with my collaborators, delving deeper by playing with longer timeframes to create the space, as well as with scale, and the means by which such spaces become established. For example, how can space be transformed through light, or sound? Or how might performers use only their bodies to transform space and create this “arena of enchantment”? The workshop/development process will explore these ideas, and our discoveries will likely lead to many other avenues of inquiry surrounding this notion of territory and enframement.

endowment

n. 1 The action of endowing something or someone

1.3 A quality or ability possessed or inherited by someone.

late Middle English: from legal Anglo-Norman French *endouer*, from *en-* 'in, toward' + Old French *douer* 'give as a gift' (from Latin *dotare*)

The devising process and the art environment transform space, and, as previously mentioned, transform materials as well, endowing them with greater meaning and power beyond their everyday form and function. Art environments in particular rely on everyday materials and trash to create extraordinary spaces. The magic lies in recognizing these humble materials, repurposed and given new life. A house made entirely of bottles. A healing machine made of tin foil, coat hangers and plastic beads. A field of birds, their bodies made from musical instruments and rusty tools. Kingdoms constructed from chicken bones. Why these particular materials are chosen is another part of the mystery, impossible to untangle. In devising, we are sometimes privileged with witnessing this moment of transformation – an orange confesses its love to a star, and flies to meet it; a piece of string becomes the apparatus through which we are all connected; a fishing net transforms into a shelter. In the devising process, improvisation and play with materials and objects allows for these other possible existences to reveal themselves. As Grosz writes, “Art enables matter to become expressive, to not just satisfy but intensify – to

resonate and become more than itself”.²⁰ Play with objects and materials creates all kinds of moments of endowment, where objects gain an alternative meaning and life, and these transformations can occur over and over, an endless game of reinventing the object and its identity. This upcoming process will find many instances of objects brought into the workshop space, explored and employed in ways that may contradict their original function, yet could open up other possibilities for their existence – new functions, histories, combinations. It’s hard to say just what we’ll discover. But by leading sessions where we train and improvise with objects and materials, create scenes with them, or bring them to life through puppetry and installation work, I hope to trigger some awareness to these moments of endowment, of making something formerly inexpressive sing with new life.



Figure 14: The Bottle Houses, built by Edouard Arsenault, Cap-Egmont, PEI, July 2015. Photo by Megan Stewart.

Bennie, so much is unknown at this moment in time, right before I launch into an ensemble-based creation process for this work. There’s that David Harradine quote, coming back to mind: “To search for something that doesn’t yet exist, to know you’re searching for it, and to not yet know what it is; that is devising” (looking through the book

²⁰ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 4.

now, I can't even locate the page of that quote, it is lost in the disjointed pile of devising documentation). Despite the not-knowing, I'm guided by good questions. How to create a performance that reveals and reflects upon its own making? What frame will we (the yet unformed ensemble) find to give structure to the chaos of the devising process and the contents of my research? How can we create a space to convey the life-long creative transformations that occur within art environments yet connect to our own ways of engaging with the world?

This letter focuses mostly on process, guiding principles and questions, strategies and challenges for creation. There is a great deal more to be said about the upcoming performance itself, which will bring the work to a whole other stage of its growth as it meets and interacts with an audience. But I'll save that for another time. Come back to the West Coast next fall and I'll tell you about it. Like I said, the drinks are on me.

Loquaciously yours,

Megan

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Appendix B.

Collaborator Biographies

ROBERT J AZEVEDO (ensemble) Robert is an emerging contemporary dance artist. Although currently based in Vancouver, BC, his work is still heavily influenced by his home and upbringing on the East Coast of Canada in Moncton, NB. Azevedo recently received a BFA in Dance and English Literature at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. His practice explores themes of communication, identity and play, through a variety of mediums.

DAVID COWLING (music) David is a composer, sound designer and performing artist studying Electroacoustic Music at Simon Fraser University (BFA). As a composer for short films, web series, and theatre productions, Cowling writes densely layered tracks using primarily his voice and electric guitar, distorting and modulating these recordings in the production process. As a performer in the band Leave, he, along with collaborator Emma Daly, create melancholic and ethereal folk songs draped in reverb, swelling guitar chords, and powerful vocal harmonies. Previous works include the sound design and score for the web series *Blank Verse* (2013); scoring for *The Belonging Project* (2015) web series, and numerous solo and ensemble electroacoustic performances at the School for the Contemporary Arts at SFU.

GORDON HAVELAAR (ensemble) Gordon is a creator who performs and lives in Vancouver, Canada. He continues to develop his craft through studies at SFU's School for Contemporary Arts and the Tamalpa Institute. His time in Marin county, with the dance provocateur and innovator Anna Halprin, inspires his approach to content. He has been fortunate to work with diverse artists, from Megan Stewart's *The Builders* to Toronto-based artist Chris Boni's *Let's Show Them Yellow Light*. With his background in Health Science, his current projects look at the anatomy and being through movement and object.

EVELEEN KOZAK (ensemble) Eveleen is a theatre artist currently completing her undergraduate degree in theatre at Simon Fraser University. Previous shows have included *News Item* by Carole Fréchette and *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg adapted by Caryl Churchill. She is interested in storytelling, multi-disciplinary documentary work, and learning how to incorporate different artistic practices in a theatrical context.

KEELY O'BRIEN (ensemble) Keely is an interdisciplinary artist and co-artistic director of emerging theatre company Popcorn Galaxies. She is currently completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts at Simon Fraser University. Recent projects include *Industry Dream of Rewind* (upcoming Spring 2016), *The Love Talker* and *Radiant Thing* at SFU, *Invisible City*, *Hold On Tightly*, and *Elk Walk*. She served as contributing writer for SFU's 2015 season of Black Box shows, and her writing will be featured in SFU's Spring 2016 Main Stage production, *Anthropocene*. Keely incorporates her visual art practice into her theatrical projects, designing costumes, sets, and puppets for her own shows.

Appendix C.

Video Files

The Builders Trailer

Creator: Daniel Wester (video and editing) and Yves Candau (additional video footage)

Description: Two-minute video trailer for *The Builders*. Featuring ensemble members Robert Azevedo, Gordon Havelaar, Eveleen Kozak and Keely O'Brien, with music by David Cowling.

File name: The Builders Trailer.mp4

The Builders Time-Lapse

Creator: Paula Viitanen

Description: Moving time-lapse video of *The Builders* shot during the dress rehearsal. Featuring ensemble members Robert Azevedo, Gordon Havelaar, Eveleen Kozak and Keely O'Brien, with music by David Cowling.

File name: The Builders Time Lapse.mp4