

What Does It Take to Open a Theater?

The *Réouverture des Halles* Experiment in Brussels

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*Or, as Antoine Vitez used to tell me – theatre having taught him this profound truth:
the essence of vulgarity, even the worst kind that is that of the executioner, is
laziness, that is, wanting to “live” without working or thinking.¹*

Yet Another Empiricist

In *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, Badiou sometimes indulges in dialogues with an “Empiricist”, who asks for more straight-to-the-point clarity, less monologues, and more concrete examples. In this article, in which I discuss some of Badiou’s theatrical propositions from a ‘non-Badiouian’ background, I would like to assume the position of the Empiricist. But the empiri-

¹ Alain Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theatre Survey* 49.2 (2008): 195.



cism that is needed for talking about the knot between theater, desire and politics is quite different from the one claimed by Badiou's dialogical opponent. What I would like to follow here is a line drawn by William James's radical empiricism, summarized in this famous quote: "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions an element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced."²

Such a proposition is directly at odds with an idealist or rationalist approach that emphasizes universals. Nevertheless a radical empiricist could agree with Badiou that theater is an assemblage that produces an event of thought, this thought being made of *theater-ideas* that cannot be found outside the theater.³ The problems begin when we ask which set of relations allows such an event – where, when, how, with and for whom? Can we experience theater-ideas without also experiencing complex and interwoven social, political, cultural, architectural relations? Badiou acknowledges the importance of such questions in the provocative last pages of *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, where he pleads for a public, mandatory attendance to theatrical performances – and consequently for the development of theatrical spaces funded by the State all over French territory.⁴

However, making theater "mandatory" – even for the sake of provocation – is not sufficient: it still excludes components of the global, theatrical experience. Let us take, as an example, a quite common experience spectators can have after having attended an experimental, theatrical performance in Brussels or in Paris. Generally, such 'experimental' performances happen in decentralized places – in the suburbs, or in multicultural neighborhoods where the huge majority of the audience neither lives nor works. It is not unusual then to see people calling taxis or running to a metro to escape an environment perceived as 'dangerous' or 'hostile' once the doors of the theater have closed. It is less usual (although not exceptional) to see people from the audience engaging in conversations with the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The point is: can we seriously isolate the pure theatrical experience those spectators had from all the relations preceding and succeeding it – from the fact they felt and sometimes feared that they had experienced an event in a white, educated, upper-middle-class enclave cut from the reality of its surroundings? Would the situation have been different if the attendance at the performance had been free and mandatory for the inhabitants of the suburb? Probably a little. But wouldn't the artistic and social codes of theatrical performances

² William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 42.

³ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 72.

⁴ Badiou, "Rhapsody for the Theatre," 231-2.

have still reenacted the divisions between the 'traditional' theater spectators and the others – the theater's others?

In other words, the questions I aim to address in this paper regard two important elements of any theatrical experience: 1st the nature of its public (and, often, its lack of diversity); 2nd the theatrical architecture and its links to its urban surroundings. Following James's statement that radical empiricism cannot exclude from its constructions any element that is directly experienced, I am not trying to operate a sociological deconstruction of Badiou's attempt to think theater philosophically: my goal is much more to evaluate how the consideration of those elements can enrich and empower theater-ideas.

Reopening Theaters

In the second half of the 20th century, European theaters – and most particularly French ones – have been thought of as public services that must be accessible to a large audience and thus not only reserved for Parisians or inhabitants of important cities. However, the theatrical decentralization and the will to open theaters to wide audiences have fallen short of the popular, educational, cultural, or even 'civilizational' expectations they often carry.⁵ As Badiou argues,

The "problem" of the theatre public (its disappearance, or almost, its scantiness, its identity [...] has primarily been phrased in terms of class analysis: it was a question, by way of lower prices and alliances with the syndicates, to bring the excluded from the Projects into the theatre. Or else it was necessary to go and 'perform' in the towns and villages. This was the era of popular theatre, of culture for all, of theatre as universality above and beyond classes. This required austere theatres, reinforced concrete, the visibility of machines, the repudiation of all velvet and gold, the destruction of the boxes where the noble ladies planted their décolletages. We have lost the velvet and the gold and the décolletages, without having seen the real crowds come in with their blue collars and their berets, even less the totality of the actual modern proletariat [...].⁶

Velvet and gold are not there anymore, and the people are still absent. If neither the

⁵ See, for instance, Robert Abirached, *Le Théâtre et le prince I: L'embellie (1981-1992)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1992) and Robert Abirached, *Le Théâtre et le prince II: Un système fatigué (1993-2004)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2005).

⁶ Badiou, "Rhapsody for the Theatre," 230.

splendors of Italian theater nor the humble austerity of concrete theaters can bring a people to their theaters, maybe it is about time to reverse the questions: how may a theater be brought to its people? How can we open, or reopen, theaters to the people who surround them? This question is at the core of the Belgian project *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* (literally: "Reopening of Schaerbeek's Covered Market"), led by the small, independent publisher, Les Éditions du Souffle. Throughout this article, I will use this project's propositions to discuss architectural and public elements that are lacking in our theater-ideas.

Schaerbeek is a municipality of the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium. Home to Brussels's gentry and upper-middle-class at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, today it is a multicultural place with various popular neighborhoods – where huge Moroccan and Turkish communities live. The *Halles de Schaerbeek* were an important covered market built in 1865, rebuilt in 1901 after a devastating fire, and closed in 1920. The place then became successively a storage device, a garage, and a parking lot. In the beginning of the 1970s, the place was almost sold to a real estate agency but an important mobilization managed to prevent its destruction: a statement of intent written by Belgian theaterman Jo Dekmine suggested the Halles de Schaerbeek could become a cultural center – and they actually became one, step by step. In 1974, the place was 'occupied' by a cultural animation team lead by Belgian cultural activist Philippe Grombeer, but it wasn't until the 1980s that the building was definitively saved from destruction. After two rounds of architectural renovations (to consolidate the building and upgrade it to the latest norms) and an official recognition as one of Brussels's French-speaking cultural centers, the Halles de Schaerbeek is today a well-established theater, hosting performances, dance, theater, circus as well as crowdfunding events for emerging artists.

Let me be clear here: each year the Halles de Schaerbeek welcomes a large number of cultural events. So, when the *Réouverture des Halles* project talks today about a *reopening* of the Halles, it does not mean that the cultural center has itself been closed. The project's argument could be summed up as follows: the cultural center is abstractly open, but the building is closed to its first intent and to people, both architecturally and socially. The most direct way to understand why the project considers the primary purpose of the cultural center to have been lost is to examine the two quotations ahead of the *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book, published in 2014 by Les Éditions du Souffle. On the one hand, we find a quote from Jo Dekmine's statement of intent in 1972; on the other, an extract from the press dossier for the Halles de Schaerbeek's 2013-2014 season:

People will come to the Halles on impulse. They could sit where they want to, change

seats, even lie down if they are tired, bring their glass of beer or lemonade, smoke their cigarettes. That'd be a kind of public space where nothing would prevent a guitarist to begin playing somewhere or a small orchestra to improvise a street dance. The market must have: its 24/7 drugstore; its bookstore where you can buy your newspaper at 10:00pm – or an orange, or a painting at midnight; a Spanish guy preparing gambas; a muslim butcher grilling a whole lamb. The spectacle is an open fire, not a goal. The place exists stronger than the spectacle, and the people stronger than the place.⁷

The programation aims at maximizing the use of the great hall, according to the maximal number of seats allowed by the current bleachers, and following, as much as possible, a principle of mini-series. Matching their remarkable technical possibilities, the Halles affirm their capacity to integrate ambitious, international projects: the shared welcoming of *Penthesila* with the Charleroi Danses biennial or the participation to the production of two important pieces for the Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2014 are markers of this internationalization. In the following years, the Halles will develop their European, international vocation.⁸

On the one side, we have a utopian vision for what an open theatrical place could be; on the other, what this place has become after several decades of cultural management, including public bills of specifications and architectural renovations aimed at isolating the Halles from their neighborhood – *be quiet and productive while you are at it, and please don't disturb*. Reopening the Halles does not mean going back to an idealized, almost pre-capitalist, and in any way outdated mode of functioning. A sense of possibility has been lost in the process of Halles's adaptation to the norms of other cultural centers. Reopening the Halles means to track back those possibilities and what they can open into the future.

A Performative Architecture

Reopening the Halles de Schaerbeek first means removing its partitions. The book *Réouverture des Halles* – which is the basis of the project – is crystal-clear on that point, even in its composition: everything begins with architectural questions. In addition to a new statement

⁷ Jo Dekmine, quoted in *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*, ed. Marianne Van Leeuw-Koplewicz (Brussels: Editions du Souffle, 2014). My translation.

⁸ Extract from the Halles de Schaerbeek's 2013-2014 press dossier, quoted in *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*. My translation.

of intent regarding what a reopened Halles could be, the book is mainly composed of drawings of the reopened Halles by Yorn Le Bihan and of very precise architectural plans elaborated by Brussels's architectural practice V+ and drawn by Sara Cremer. Those plans are entitled "derenovations". As Thierry Decuyper, who supervised the architectural work on this project, emphasizes: "Derenovating the Halles is deconstructing that which has transformed the minimal, Spartan shelter – a shelter that, for centuries, was enough to welcome collective practices – into a built organism that is simultaneously skillful, obscure and hermetic."⁹

The renovated Halles de Schaerbeek is a work of skill indeed. The renovation process led the architects who were in charge to deploy a number of ingenious tricks to meet various specifications and building codes, such as paying meticulous attention to each patrimonial detail of the initial architecture; the requirements set by the intended cultural programming inside the building; the technical norms which aim mainly at reducing any potential noise pollution. As a result, the building is a very effective 'black box', suited to welcome important, artistic productions but closed to its surroundings. Noises will not bother the neighborhood but this comes at price: the neighborhood will not bother, or mind, the theater anymore. While in the past, the covered market was open to all kinds of winds and people, allowing a mix between the countryside and urban life through the interactions of sellers and buyers, we are now facing two hermetically closed realities.

Now, derenovating the Halles, trying to get closer to its first, open state, also comes at a price. If the building was isolated for the purpose of welcoming technically exigent (and often sonorous) productions, a reopening means radical changes in the events that can take place in the Halles de Schaerbeek. Nocturnal, noisy activities could take place in the basement, while daily, humbler propositions could be performed on a first floor now open to the street. Decuyper's short text in the *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book makes it very clear: programming requirements and administrative, technical norms are not two separate realities – they come together, and we cannot think about the impact of one element without directly considering the other's impact. There is no such thing as a theatrical or artistic idea that has no impact on the material conditions of its realization. And so, it is probable that reopening of the Halles will make things harder for artistic creation, as it will be summoned to take the neighborhood into account on at least two levels: the material impact the creation can have on its neighborhood and the fact that creative processes and representations are permeable to the street and the various inhabitants that walk it.

⁹ Thierry Decuyper, "Retour sur une rénovation exemplaire," in *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*, 29. My translation.

As Decuyper's short text states, the degree of permeability between spaces more than an endless list of technical requirements constitutes the very core of the architect profession:

What do we win, in terms of functional quality and of relations to the world, when we remove or open a wall? What can bring us less selective, and maybe rougher, links between the inside and its neighborhood? The architect finds its role back here, a role that does not consist in doubling limitations but in establishing thresholds opening negotiations for new meetings.¹⁰

Architecture – and theatrical architecture maybe more than any other one – performs. It makes thresholds exist, it institutes selective, open, mild, rough places. One of the main achievements of the book *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* is to present its statement of intent and the architectural drawings on an equal basis. The drawings make suggestions for the future of the Halles de Schaerbeek; they make their reader-viewer feel what another, reopened architectural space could produce. In that sense, the importance of architectural proposals cannot be overstated. We know intuitively that lines perform; we experience it on a daily basis – 'do not cross the line', 'please follow the line'. The *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book superimposes plans of a future reopened Halles building with tracing papers representing the currents walls, partitions, and doors that 'close' the Halles. This superimposition shows how lines have a simple and directly efficient impact to isolate spaces and their meanings. But the book also shows that lines, even in the confines they impose, also allow the development of new propositional powers – and the removal or redrawing of lines alone develop a whole new set of potentialities to create new spatial and social meanings. The architectural plans of reopened Halles are thus part of what human-geographer Joe Gerlach calls "vernacular mapping", that is:

Vernacular mapping inheres in the material co-production of cartographies by humans and non-humans alike whereby the underlying ethos remains intensely political, but in a tenor distinct from the representational politics allied traditionally to maps. Vernacular mapping, rather, is a valorizing of mundane cartographies that are caught up in the generation of an as-yet untold micropolitics. [...] Vernacular mappings are non-statist, extra-institutional, participatory, cartographic practices, either digital or analogue in their composition, in which such performances are not taken to be technologies of capture, but

¹⁰ Ibid., 31. My translation.

as techniques of addition; of adding more to the world through abstraction; of adding to the riskiness of cartographic politics by proliferating yet more renders of the world.¹¹

What Gerlach is emphasizing here is the virtual, political potential of a collective appropriation of mapping techniques in order to develop, to make see, feel, and think yet unexplored possibilities for the territories we inhabit. A “vernacular” development of mapping techniques, oriented towards pragmatic everyday life, aims especially at transforming what Tim Ingold calls “lines of occupation” – directed toward the conquest of a rationalized space – into “flowing lines” which follow the gesture of an act, which, just like wayfaring, are neither placeless nor place-bound, but *place-making*.¹² By revealing possible affective, virtual realities, maps and plans allow us to think of thresholds-spaces, spaces where the negotiations between the inside and the outside, between the technical and the pragmatic, between the administrative and the everyday must constantly be undertaken.

Architectural plans must thus be seen as performances which engage us with various possible stories about the way we open – or close – spaces. The performative aspect of any plan is still reinforced when this plan concerns a theatrical device – the finest performance-place. Encounters and negotiations between geographical, architectural performativities and theatrical performativities must be encouraged: not only does it accentuate the social, material practices that make theater-ideas possible but it also is akin to the spatial turn that affects contemporary arts practices and makes of art a “site” where “intellectual technologies” are invented.¹³ As any theatrical production, architectural plans intend to tell a story, whether it is verbal or non-verbal, about the becomings of spaces and the way we manage (or not) to inhabit them. And conversely, just as any architectural plan, no theatrical production can tell a story without being materially, urbanistically and geographically situated. Theater-ideas, if they are not “lazy” ones, are also architecture-ideas.

Montrer patte blanche: On the Theatrical Crowd, Generic and Particular

I have just asserted that theatrical performances, like theater buildings, tell stories and pro-

¹¹ Joe Gerlach, “Lines, contours and legends: Coordinates for vernacular mapping,” *Progress in Human Geography* 38.1 (2014): 23.

¹² Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 85, 101.

¹³ See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Press, 1989), and Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), quoted in *Géo-Esthétique*, eds. Kantuta Quiros and Aliocha Imhoff (Clermont-Ferrant/Dijon: B42 Publisher, 2014), 7.

duce possible future stories. Before digging deeper into those stories, an important question must first be answered: who tells those stories, and to which public? This question addresses the nature of the “theatrical crowd” – of what it consists of, both ideally and pragmatically.

Alain Badiou has stated it numerous times: because the theater is a public mediation between the State and its exterior, “the relation between the stage and the public has always been a torturous problem”.¹⁴ However, “real,” efficient Theater – that theater that can lead to the presentation of *theater-ideas* – can only gather a “generic” public – and by “generic” Badiou means “an indiscernible and atypical subtraction of what Mallarmé calls the Crowd”.¹⁵ The “generic” nature of the public must be stated, in this context, against another “false” theater, which is perhaps the most commonly encountered nowadays: a theater that does not produce thought but that is a factor of social distinction; a theater where “those who come to exhibit their salacious or restrained enjoyment in it are marked by an identitarian sign, be it constituted by class or by opinion”.¹⁶

The fact that going to the theater is a marker of social distinction is the first reason for which the title of this subsection includes the French expression *montrer patte blanche*. Literally meaning “showing a white paw,” the expression is used figuratively to say one has to display her/his right to belong: “prove your credentials”.¹⁷ The social homogeneity of the current theatrical public in most European cities may be particular (we are talking of the upper-middle-class and of intellectuals or artists with precarious jobs – not of the upper-class); it is nevertheless the cause and effect of a selective and distinctive process that isolates, once again, the inside of the theater from its surroundings. The *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book insists on this isolating process that reenacts the spatial closing of the Halles – and on the cynicism that cultural marketing can display on that matter. The program for the 2013-2014 season of les Halles de Schaerbeek said, speaking of spectators who would choose not to benefit from their fidelity program: “Give them that pleasure, keep their illusion going: let them be distinguishable with each other, let them pay more”. Playing cynically with post-modern disenchantment, those words only reiterate that culture is won by distinction – and so much the worse for emancipation.¹⁸

¹⁴ Alain Badiou and Elie During, “A Theatre of Operations: A Discussion between Alain Badiou and Elie During,” in *A Theatre without Theatre*, ed. Bernard Blistène et al. (Barcelona: Macba, 2007), 22.

¹⁵ Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” 198.

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ The expression comes from one of Lafontaine’s fables entitled *Le loup, la chèvre et le chevreau* (“The Wolf, Goat and Kid”): the wolf tries to pretend he is a goat but it fails when the kid tells him, “Show a white paw or stay without”.

¹⁸ Van Leeuw-Koplewicz, *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*, 20.

The theater public distinguishes itself socially, but also culturally and racially. That leads us to the second reason for using the expression *montrer patte blanche* in the title of this subsection. The paw you have to show to prove your credentials is, well, white, which says a lot about the skin color of the overwhelming majority of the theatrical crowd – and so much for its wished “genericity”. The case of the Halles de Schaerbeek is exemplary here, as the predominantly racially-homogeneous character of its public contrasts a lot with the multicultural nature of its neighborhood. The postcolonial question asked to theater management is maybe still more difficult to address than the social one: here, saying “everybody is welcome” will not suffice, because “people don’t want to be tolerated, they want to be desired”.¹⁹ The question thus becomes how to elaborate a programming that would not be *for* everybody but *with* everybody, knowing that “we” – educated, white “Westerners” – do not have all the requested cultural, historical resources to solve the equation on our own.

Actually interrogating the practical opening of a theater such as Les Halles de Schaerbeek to its multicultural neighborhood leads to a classical problem of postcolonial ethics: what is a “generic” crowd? Is it a crowd whose cultural, racial, historical singularities are erased in favor of a generic, “universal” figure of individuality? But even if such an abstract, universal individuality could exist, how do we prevent such a figure from molding the features of what has long been thought of as an ideal constant, the one of not so universal people that Deleuze and Guattari describe as “adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language?”²⁰ And if we describe the genericity of the crowd as the conjunction of all the singularities and variances it encompasses, what conceptual and pragmatic frames do we need to make such an idea more than an abstract ideal?

The difficulty of thinking the theatrical crowd in and with its necessary diversity in a postcolonial era appears bluntly in a passage of Badiou’s *Rhapsody for the Theatre*. When quoting Badiou above about the problem of the theater public, I didn’t give the end of the paragraph, which goes as follows:

We have lost the velvet and the gold and the décolletages, without having seen the real crowds come in with their blue collars and their berets, even less the totality of the actual modern proletariat, those profound intellectuals with their unimaginably complex factory lives that are our Moroccans, our Algerians, our Senegalese and our Malians, our Turks, our Yugoslavs, our

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004 [1987]), 105.

Pakistanis, and so forth. Distributive equality has not established its rule over the theatre halls.²¹

Beyond the lack of distributive equality amongst the theatrical crowd, one cannot help but notice the repetition of this strange and disturbing “our” – an “our” that shows the astonishing difficulty not only to make manifest a diverse theatrical crowd but simply to find the right words to talk about it. It is difficult indeed not to think of a colonial benevolence here. Why would the Moroccan or Algerian diasporas be “ours”? And what is the “we” that is implicit here? “We”, white Westerners, facing “them”, former colonized people – migrants, sons and daughters of migrants? If we want the nature of the theatrical crowd to evolve, we not only need to renounce such accounts in terms of “we” and “they” but we also need to acknowledge that our ways of thinking – our conceptual frameworks as well as our theatrical forms – must evolve as well. No more “we” and “they”, no more “inside” and “outside”: our task, in theater as well as in contemporary societies, is to think a “we” that is not centered on a national, homogeneous idea of an idealized common (and thus precluding) origin.²²

When criticizing Nussbaum’s universalism as a concentric cosmopolitanism based on the idea of community as commonality of values, beliefs and norms, Braidotti rather praises a conception of transnational subjects defined by their “restlessness”: “In this shift, a unitary and “home-bound” subject gets redefined in terms of multiple belongings, non-unitary selfhood and constant flows of transformation”.²³ Thinking subjects as transnational, in-the-process beings – whether those subjects are first-generation migrants or white Westerners directing a theater – allows for an account of the genericity of the crowd that is not based on the presupposition of an ideal subject but that makes space available for a polyphonic elaboration of what an inclusive “we” could mean. It is not “we” versus “they” anymore but “we’ are in *this* together”.²⁴ When Braidotti writes that we are *in this* together, she means that such a conception of a transnational subject is more efficient to describe a postcolonial sense of global humanity but we should also take the “in this” part literally. We are in various spaces together and the way those spaces are collectively defined or not impacts what we are and

²¹ Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” 230.

²² The “we” and the task that is “ours” can thus only be thought of as minor processes – a “we” defined by its to-come component rather than by its origin. Deleuze famously invoked a “people to come” to describe such a becoming: Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 1989), 217-20. See also Janae Sholtz, *The Invention of a People: Heidegger and Deleuze on Art and the Political* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 242.

²³ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

what kind of crowd we constitute.

It is thus not a mere coincidence if the openness or closeness of theaters to their surroundings has led us to such considerations on the nature of the subjects making up a “generic” crowd. As places that constantly play with different types of spaces, with passages from everyday life to representation, from consumerism to spectatorship, from backstage areas to visibility, theaters are materially meant to allow experiments regarding the transformations of subjectivity in a postcolonial era. The *Réouverture des Halles* book makes several suggestions to tackle this question. The most important one is also the simplest: the book suggests that the “direction” of the reopened Halles be a one shared out between four different centers, one of them being entirely devoted to colonial and postcolonial questions. Such an idea sounds basic but is nevertheless urgent, as the French-speaking institutions in Belgium lag behind current postcolonial research being conducted in English-speaking countries or even in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Important archival work could be realized by this pole concerning both local phenomena in postcolonial history and the development of urban music and arts. Moreover, *Réouverture des Halles* also suggests continuing archival work alongside artistic productions: a market selling, amongst other things, fair-trade products from the Maghreb could be held three times a week in the Halles, and a cafeteria should put into light the particular cooking traditions developed by Moroccan and Turkish mothers from the neighborhood. The cafeteria would thus award those culinary traditions “the patrimonial status they deserve as specificities from the North of Brussels.”²⁵

Whether they are of artistic or para-artistic natures (cooking is, literally, an aesthetic experience),²⁶ those postcolonial principles aim at telling everyone, theater-lovers or inhabitants of the surroundings: this is your place, *we are in this together*. The idea that the *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book states firmly is that the opening of such strange buildings as theaters can only be realized through the affirmation and valorization of all kinds of material practices that make up their surroundings. Such an opening cannot only revolve around the theatrical, artistic representation alone; other material practices have determining influence on the assurance of the connection of the theater to its surroundings. Theaters being material buildings that welcome theatrical performances as “material, corporeal, machinic assemblage[s],” the confrontation of such buildings with other material practices does not remove anything from theater but allows its insertion in a complex urban device.²⁷

Now, what would it mean for theatrical creation itself to be conceived and performed with

²⁵ Van Leeuw-Koplewicz, *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*, 19.

²⁶ See *Aesthetic Experience*, ed. Richard Shusterman and Adèle Tomlin (New York: Routledge, 2010).

²⁷ Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” 190.

and for a more generic, diverse, postcolonial, “restless” crowd? The theoretic frame furnished by Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* is maybe the most fitting for answering this question. If we cease to consider theater as the place where an abstract “community” of spectators gathers to live a kind of mystic-political experience, we lose a theoretical prestige but we gain a practical access to the multiple experiences that can be conceived and shared through performance. The multiplicity of experiences performers and spectators bring with them (and the more diversified the crowd is, the better) allows for theater to be a demystified place of communication between a whole range of ethical, political and aesthetic experiences. As Rancière argues, “an emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators,” that is to say, a community of diverse interpreters able to translate and narrate the heterogeneous components of their experience to make it an in-the-process transmission of skills to perform, to teach and to learn alternatively.²⁸ Performers are sometimes learning, sometimes teaching, and spectators as well. Combining this approach to the theater public with a postcolonial one is thus the best way to empower the very sharing of experience that constitute a performance and the stories we are able to tell, individually and collectively.

Opening the Stories

We must trust the capacities of all singular spectators to narrate their stories, with and through theater as well as other material practices. That is one major condition to answer the question that runs throughout this paper: “Who is telling what story, and to which public?” Emphasizing the openness of theaters to multiply and enrich the stories we are able to tell collectively from our local, material situations is one of the most important features of the *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek* book. Actually, the transformative power of interwoven stories is not only one of the themes of the book; it is also its *raison d’être*.

Nobody formally asked for this book: it was not ordered by any public authority – and certainly not by the current team working at Les Halles de Schaerbeek. The considerable architectural work that has been furnished was not conceived as a series of instructions for a contractor: once again, no authority is planning to (de)renovate Les Halles. The book is “only” – but it is a lot – a wager on the propositional forces it encloses. It aims at showing that empowerment results from the confidence we should put on our collective capacity to reverse the stories, to create new stories, to believe in their ability to modify our surroundings. The

²⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 22.

book does not want to be a utopia but rather a very concrete set of suggestions that can be practically, materially enacted – first enactments can be found on the project’s website.²⁹ This enactment depends on the performativity of the possibilities told by the book: are they strong enough to become counter-stories, stories that can rehabilitate our collective power to act “outside the black box,” which the abstract idea of theater has too often become? And are we strong enough to continue and appropriate those stories?

By betting on such possible powers of stories, the book inserts itself in the tradition of speculative fabulation – a tradition the book proposes to perpetuate through one of its “directing centers.”³⁰ According to Deleuze, fabulating means engaging in a minor process of invention, in a kind of speech-act that is neither personal nor impersonal but which builds up a collective enunciation in which both the speaker and the people s/he speaks about are altered as they are taken into a common becoming.³¹ Fabulation is thus a kind of story-telling that develops the powers of the false to initiate new becomings. In the words of Gregory Flaxman, fabulation is a kind of sci-fi approach to the fabrication of knowledge, since SF is devoted to the “not yet,” the “otherwise”:

Science fiction launches thought into those domains where, and dimensions in which, we can no longer quantify the world in terms of what we know but, instead, we must create concepts in response to what which “one doesn’t know, or knows badly”.³²

Fabulation brings new dimensions to the world to tackle problems we do not know, or know badly, and such an approach is precisely at the core of what Donna Haraway calls “speculative fabulation”. Speculative fabulation is a kind of narration that brings thoughts that are not mere recognitions of what already exists, but that create more paths toward a more complex account of our relations to the world.³³ Speculative fabulation, with its interwoven storytellings, aims at revisiting our figures of thought and at deploying the hidden possibilities that lie dormant in those figures. Figures, Haraway says, “are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes of knots in which diverse bodies and meanings

²⁹ Ouverture des Halles (2015), *Réouverture des Halles | Un lieu pour nous et pour les autres*, unpaginated. Available at: <http://ouverturedeshalles.be>.

³⁰ Van Leeuw-Koplewicz, *Réouverture des Halles de Schaerbeek*, 21.

³¹ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 222.

³² Gregory Flaxman, *Gilles Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy: Powers of the False*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 295.

³³ Donna Haraway, *SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 4-5.

coshape one another.”³⁴ Bodies or cyborgs are such material-semiotic figures. And such are theaters, such are Les Halles de Schaerbeek, with their complex entanglement of architectural, social, artistic, politic, commercial, normative, creative, historical dimensions. Working on the very body of such a figure in order to put into light its undeveloped potentialities through textual and architectural suggestions is not getting out of the theater: it is opening it to the multiplicity of stories that it was built to tell.

Conclusion: Geo-Archi-Theater

In the introduction to this paper I pleaded in favor of a more complete account of all the elements that make up a theatrical experience. Accordingly, I have focused on what could seem as side issues when compared to the majesty of pure theater-ideas, that is to say the material, social, architectural and narrative possibilities a theater *building* contains. This plea for a fuller account of the material practices that surrounds theater practice is nevertheless compatible with the defense of theater-ideas. Firstly, as theater thinks “the knot that binds together desire and politics” in order to produce “a public illumination of history and life,” theater-ideas can only be made more vivid by an opening to the otherness that surrounds the theater and makes it possible.³⁵ Secondly, theater always implies a part of chance and the public must be counted in that chanciness – “Only [...] a chance public is worth anything at all.”³⁶ This factor of “chance”, which is also the “genericity” of theatrical realizations can only be reinforced by the way theater buildings are opened to their public in spatial, architectural, social, postcolonial and cultural ways. The architheater is a theater that takes the chance of its materiality and situation to tell further stories.

As Badiou constantly argues, theater has always been an affair of the State.³⁷ The statement is no less true regarding the state of our social democracies than it is of Euripides’s or Molière’s time. Thus, the question “Why would a crowd which does not revolt against flagrant injustices actually constitute itself as a collective subject through the grace of a theatrical summoning?” is as well an affair of the theater as an affair of the State.³⁸ The originality and the power of the *Réouverture des Halles* project is to go and seek in practices that the State arguably does not explore enough: the material arrangements of local and global ele-

³⁴ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

³⁵ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76; Badiou, “Rhapsody for the Theatre,” 189.

³⁸ Badiou and During, “A Theatre of Operations,” 187.

ments that characterize postcolonial, urban contexts where theater and politics can happen. Describing such a frame for thinking and acting requires, according to me, the addition of the prefix “geo-” to the architheater. This “geo-” derives from the concept of *géo-esthétique* (“geo-aesthetics”) coined by the curatorial platform *Le peuple qui manque* (“a people is missing”) to designate the need, in our postcolonial and decolonial era’s artistic practices, for a double spatialization.³⁹ The first spatialization concerns the way works of art are produced in singular spaces and circulate in various spaces where the polarization between highly rated, ‘international’, Western centers and ‘provincialized’, emergent spaces does not work anymore, neither aesthetically nor ethically. The second spatialization applies to the importance space takes in works of art themselves – elements of architecture, geography, cartography and, why not, geophilosophy becoming parts of the narrations and translations the artists perform.⁴⁰ At such a crossroad of possibilities, the figure of geo-archi-theater aims at opening paths for the exploration and narration of alternative, more inclusive futures.

The opening of theater to geo-archi-theater, its will to gather a people that is not there yet, constitutes a difficult, complicated, tiring process. But theater has always been about fatigue, and so has thought. “The public comes to the theater to be struck. Struck by theater-ideas. It does not leave the theater cultivated, but stunned, fatigued (thought is tiring), pen-sive.”⁴¹

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³⁹ *A People is missing, Le peuple qui manque* – curatorial platform, unpaginated. Available at <http://www.lepeuplequimanque.org/en>.

⁴⁰ *Géo-Esthétique*, eds. Quiros and Imhoff, 5.

⁴¹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 77.

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