

About The Loop / Erwin Jans, Dramaturg

The stage has always been a haunted place. The *Ur-szene*, the primal scene of theatre is the dance of a shaman incarnating the gods or the dead forefathers. It is not exaggerated to say that the shadow of the dead and of the invisible gods constructed the original stage. Since that immemorial beginning theatre has become the place where ghosts keep on returning. No performance in the *hic et nunc* (the here and now) without a conscious or unconscious past hovering over it.

A special sensibility is needed to see ghosts. A sixth sense. The other five senses won't do. That is why for most of the mortals, who rely only on their five senses, ghosts don't exist. For the sixth sense they do exist. As an obsession, sometimes even as a trauma.

One of the plays by the first playwright to be considered modern, Henrik Ibsen, is called *Ghosts*. It is often said that all Ibsen's plays could be called *Ghosts*. One could even go a step further and say that every play and every performance could be called *Ghosts*. Theatre is a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself. It is a repository of cultural memory. But that memory is also adjusted and modified as it is recalled in new circumstances, new places and other times.

There is no ghost that does not haunt the person who is aware of it. Haunting the living is its mode of being. Ghosts haunt people because the past is always excessive in relation to the present. The present is never only the present that wants to project itself towards the future. The ghost represents the excess, the 'too much' of the past that keeps spilling over in the present.

Whoever once met a ghost knows how strong its appeal can be. Anat Stainberg saw a ghost. Her performance *THE LOOP* is in that sense a true ghost story. Anat Stainberg saw the ghost of Frederick Kiesler. Or more precisely the ghost of the *Space Stage* Kiesler constructed in 1924 in Vienna's Konzerthaus. It was a spiral-stage construction that got a lot of international attention. Kiesler belonged to a group of artists who wanted to reform theatre not by writing new texts with new contents, but by restructuring the architecture of the stage. One of the basic insights of the constructivist movement was that new forms, new spaces and new architecture would create new subjectivities and as such a new society.

Confronted with the unprecedented social and technological changes the 20th century got obsessed by the idea of a New Man and fascinated by the possibility of creating a New Subjectivity that could cope with the complex demands of the new era. The fascist and Stalinist incarnations of that New Man transformed him into a monstrous and destructive project.

“Like many other European modernists in the 1920's, Kiesler was a utopian idealist. Kiesler first gained recognition in 1925 at the International Exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris, where he exhibited a large gridlike structure titled *City in Space*. Its straight lines and flat planes joined at right angles embodied the utopian belief that simple geometric forms in art would help facilitate a more rational and egalitarian society. Within a few years, however, Kiesler abandoned that approach in favor of curving biomorphic forms. The new surrealist movement rejected rationality and regularity in art. Arguing that human beings are organic, the surrealists favored forms inspired by sources in nature—plants, animals, microscopic organisms, water, clouds, and rocks, for example. Kiesler began to conceive buildings based on open, ovoid forms, which he called “endless” because they could be infinitely adaptable. His drawings and models were hopeful conceptual prototypes rather than pragmatic plans. Kiesler left Europe just before World War II and settled in New York, where he earned income primarily by designing store windows, exhibition spaces, and theater sets. In 1959 he designed the *Endless House*, in which egglike rooms could enclose the inhabitants like a womb and thereby “foster peace within.”(1)

One never really knows if one was faithful enough or not to the appeal of the ghost. The language a ghost uses to speak is always fragmented and broken up, partly and sometimes completely lost in history, contaminated and weakened by time and distance. The past can never be repeated as it was. In that sense *THE LOOP* is an ironical title: there is no repetition. And still something from the past is asking for articulation.

Although Kiesler's *Space Stage* and his utopian ideas have inspired *THE LOOP*, the performance does not repeat or illustrates them. Betrayal and transformation are often the best ways to remain faithful to a ghost. *THE LOOP* speaks it's own language. Less utopian and less idealistic than Kiesler's, more intimate and more confusing. More connected to our experience of the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Space is central to the thinking of Kiesler. It is also the central category in the performance of Anat Stainberg - in all her performances. But unlike Kiesler's idealistic spiral-stage or his ovoid forms, which seem to suggest a utopian new beginning or a peaceful protection, Anat Stainberg's spaces are warped, bent, fragmented, haunted, labyrinthic, filled with history and traumas. Objects, music, light, words, bodies,... they are all part of an archaeological search for past layers. Space is never neutral or just open. Space has always already been the stage for something else. Maybe what Anat Stainberg does is a performative psychoanalysis of space? In that sense she just repeats the founding gesture of theatre: asking the ghosts to take the stage for a moment in order to deliver their difficult to decipher messages for the living.

(1) http://www.landmarks.utexas.edu/artistdetail/kiesler_frederick