

Anna Viebrock

Rita Kersting

In her stage sets, Anna Viebrock's keen interest in public space is apparent. Her waiting rooms, foyers, refuges, courtyards, multipurpose halls and offices lead us away from the private intimacy of a peep box giving dramatic plays – about love and dependency, for example – a supra-personal arena where the emphasis can be placed on social dimensions. Sometimes, she even spatially transcends the interface dividing the public auditorium from the stage, the so-called Portal, that is the intermediary between reality and fiction, life and theatre. This is part of the stringent frame of the stage as a space grounded on the principle of control, to be seen from one side only, never naturally lit, with perfect acoustics, and surveilled by hundreds of spectators. Anna Viebrock draws attention to this traditional state in many of her stage sets, which subtly reveal how they have been fabricated and designed. For in spite of what often seems to be astounding illusionism at first sight, by which the artist not only presents the space itself and its functions, but also its own history, this apparent authenticity is disrupted by details that are slightly out of place, by incongruences of scale, improbabilities and absurdities. On occasion – as most recently at the Volksbühne, Berlin – Viebrock makes use of the revolving stage of the theatre to present the rear view of her architectural set, making visible its construction, including the hands-on work involved, while at the same time, the yellow brick façade at the front, for example, manifests itself as a superimposition.

Anna Viebrock discovers her images on her travels – often, the 'not sought after', which turns out to be a find. In so doing, she follows the advice of the artist Boris Sieverts in his travel guide "Wie man Städte bereist" (How to visit cities), namely,

start at the outskirts, with all senses alert and take one's time. Her approach also conforms to the "As Found" concept developed by the architects Alison & Peter Smithson i.e., to collect found objects, make observations at a site, and allow these to play a part in the design.

The fragment as a part or component of the intended whole was the hallmark of the stage set VISITORS ONLY created in 2003 for the choreographer Meg Stuart. The vertical cross-sections exposed by a central chunk cut out of a residential building revealed the rooms, walls and floors. Holes cut in the walls afforded views into all the rooms. This stage set thus undermined conventional arrangements of space in our residential properties. VISITORS ONLY is indebted to Anna Viebrock's early interest in the artist Gordon Matta-Clark's analytical cuts, his "discreet violations" and their socio-political significance. The striking impact of this architectural vision is due to the force of the cuts, which open up unfamiliar possibilities for action, while at the same time hindering others.

In 2017, Anna Viebrock presented the influential exhibition THE BOAT IS LEAKING. THE CAPTAIN LIED together with Thomas Demand, Alexander Kluge and the curator Udo Kittelmann at a palazzo belonging to Fondazione Prada in Venice. This was a fascinating multi-perspectival show, in which the confluence of images, films and objects with the architectural setting created illusions, casting doubt at an iconographic and spatial level on their credibility – indeed, on authenticity in general. Anna Viebrock's labyrinthian architecture, drawing on her knowledge of theatre, offered suspense and surprise, including a room marked by catastrophe, a row of shops and a cinema. She drew on material from her set for TESSA BLOMSTEDT GIBT NICHT AUF (TESSA BLOMSTEDT DOESN'T GIVE UP) to lend the rooms in the upper storey a novel theatrical, but also poetic architectural ambience, in which the painted patina merged with the patina of the historic palazzo.

Viebrock was born in Cologne in 1951, which only a short time previously had counted as the largest heap of rubble in

the world. She grew up in Frankfurt and studied from 1971 to 1977 at the Düsseldorf Academy of Arts in the stage design class run by Professor Karl Kneidl, who took it over in 1974.

Since 1978, she has been working as a set and costume designer and has created some 200 stage areas for theatre, opera and music theatre all over Europe, which are anchored in the real world, and yet dislocated, hybrid spaces. Viebrock's architectural settings are temporary as befits theatre and can therefore take more risks. Life does not have to be lived in her spaces but rather, they live themselves only for a short time and shift the rules of statics and status.

Her design for *MEDEA IN CORINTO* (*MEDEA IN CORINTH*) presents the sculptural architecture of a two-storey building: the lower level is a kind of car park with concrete supports and control barriers, while the level above is a *bel étage* inspired by the 1960s architecture of Schauspiel Frankfurt theatre, whereas the interior is based on Albert Speer's Reich Chancellery for Adolf Hitler. There is a roof terrace at the top complete with Parthenon frieze. Here, the verticality of history, rooted as it is in the earthly realm, is turned upside down. A white one-family house is enthroned on the pinnacle – a kind of utopian model. This unreachable shelter for the family destined to be destroyed in this play offers sanctuary to Medea in the end. For this is where the quadriga lies hidden, the chariot in which the fleeing murderous mother floats away – and with her, the house of refuge.

In the stage set for *20TH CENTURY BLUES* history transforms into sculptural architecture. At the turn of the millennium, Viebrock designed this completely emptied space for a melancholic song recital directed by Christoph Marthaler, with whom she had been collaborating for many decades and had invented a completely new kind of (music) theatre, working with musical and literary material from a contemporaneous perspective and opening it up to current themes to be newly questioned and freely combined.

The inspiration for *20TH CENTURY BLUES* was the big old gallery in the upper storey of the Natural History Museum in Basel. The previously installed display cases and pictures on the floor and walls of this more than a century-old hall remained only as shadowy markings. The vocalists, lit from above by huge skylights, sang modern symphonic songs. The space now emptied of its trappings presented the absence of the past like a *menetekel* and at the same time as if liberated for the new century. Every so often, the actors sank into the fragile parquet floor. Finally, the number of people on stage doubled, each standing next to their clone – referring to the sinister promise of natural history at the close of the 20th century.

In her model for *WOYZECK*, directed by Jossi Wieler in Stuttgart in 1986, the buildings of the Hessian village appeared like toy houses, put in position by a powerful hand. Viebrock's shift of proportions became evident from ladders leaning against a wall. She found this image while travelling for research related to Georg Büchner through what, at the time, were still poor Hessian hamlets: ladders for sale were propped against the wall of the prison in Butzbach. Büchner's inclusion of literary quotes finds a correspondence here at a visual level.

The models on show demonstrate the diversity of the architectural settings, fragments, rooms, squares, factory halls and sites, oscillating between inside and out. One keeps sensing or seeing pointers to the National Socialist era: the terrible foundation of our present times. In addition, there are appliances that underline and throw into question the functions of the spaces, such as fans, radiators, lifts, boiler, waterpipes, cables laid over plasterboard.

For her exhibition at the Skulpturenhalle, Anna Viebrock has reemployed the material for the stage set designed for the operetta *GIUDITTA*, which was performed at the Bavarian State Opera in 2021. This in turn was a reused and reworked stage set that she had created for the music theatre 44

HARMONIES FROM APARTMENT HOUSE 1776 in Zurich in 2018. The stage set that had served its purpose in Munich transformed in the absence of a theatrical context in Neuss into a sculptural installation. The rather bare walls loom large in the space, indicating a path while also serving to obstruct it, propelling us around to their rear and blocking our view. As soon as we enter, we are confronted directly by the proscenium of the small variety theatre of GIUDITTA, with the central black Cella by Thomas Schütte soaring up behind it, which Viebrock has turned into a plinth for her welcoming words: HEUTE DEM-NÄCHST ENDE (TODAY SOON THE END). Anna Viebrock sends us through her installation backstage, into a three-dimensional image. She alters our viewpoint and pace with her architectural setting, leading us towards walls, windows and cabinets. We make our way along narrow passages and through tectonic glades, searching for the centre, from where we might hope to gain an overview. Where we could make an appearance, or art could make an appearance. The parquet floor is perhaps such a place, or perhaps the area in front of the panelled wall, locations that frame us with warm wood, instead of technical rear surfaces with lettering. The windows hardly offer any illumination, no clear views. This discomfiture is novel and exciting. It is a radical progression within Anna Viebrock's practice of connecting the stage set and public auditorium with each other. The actors and actresses are absent from this exhibition, as is Franz Lehár's music he composed in the early 1930s. Nor is the story told of Giuditta, who moved to Africa with her lover at the end of the war, returned alone and had to perform as a variety theatre dancer. Marthaler's critical staging of this operetta (and its period of origin) augmented Lehár's composition with selected contemporary music, including songs by Hans Eisler/Bertold Brecht, Ernst Krenek/Franz Kafka and Viktor Ullman/Ricarda Huch. Thus, the well-known aria "Das Leben ist lebenswert" (life is worth living) was also put into context; the aria and indeed the whole GIUDITTA libretto had been co-authored by Fritz Löhner-Beda,

who was murdered in Auschwitz. The material from the stage set of this highly topical production has been reconfigured by Viebrock for this exhibition; it no longer fills the Bavarian State Opera stage, but tackles Thomas Schütte's Skulpturenhalle instead. This no-longer-needed stage set now continues to exist in a new form after the theatre production has ended. It has become an echo chamber fanning out in a cubist manner, redolent of love, pain, nationalism, war and loneliness.

At the same time, it is also made up of parts of the stage set for 44 HARMONIES FROM APARTMENT HOUSE 1776. This piece was a homage to John Cage, a montage (not only) of religious music from America since Independence. The small 'chapel' constructed from rough plywood boards was inspired by the wooden churches in Methodist parishes. The turquoise-coloured, wood-panelled walls were a discovery Viebrock made in a multipurpose hall in Nuuk in Greenland, while preparing for the piece performed there entitled ±0.EIN SUBPOLARES BASISLAGER. In the artist's workbooks, excerpts of which are presented here in facsimile, there are sketches, photos, ideas and fabric samples for the costumes. In GIUDITTA, the design on the protagonist's dress is also used for the upholstery of the club armchairs, a generous floral pattern such as was common at the time in entertainment facilities.

"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones." Viebrock notes this statement by John Cage in her workbook for 44 HARMONIES. Anna Viebrock brings to fruition her new idea of theatre, of art, of a non-illustrative free approach to history and stories. Like here at the Skulpturenhalle, where she activates the stage set from Munich and uses the space created by Thomas Schütte in a constructive and critical manner transforms it in a way that initiates new, unconventional perspectives, movements and encounters.