

Biography

Dragana Vilotić is an architect, exhibition and stage designer. From 2006 to 2014, she worked as a designer and supervisor of architectural and construction projects. Since 2014, she has been working at the Sub-Department of Art and Design, at the Department of Architecture and Urbanism, at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad. She is a designer of spaces for various events – art exhibitions, music concerts, theatre shows and her research is in the field of theatre, scene design and universal design.

TACTILE SCENOGRAPHIES

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain the process of creating artwork for blind and visually impaired people based on principles of scene design which raises question of boundaries between life and art since blind people experience space differently from people who can see. Borders of architectural space are not always recognized as such if person cannot see, so it was hard to locate border between life and art in process of creating this tactile artwork.

Example of tactile artwork *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)* made in collaboration of Citizens' Association "ReAktor" Novi Sad and Sub-department of Art and Design (Department of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad) points a way for transferring spoken word into multisensory experience and importance of relation between space, sound and materials in conceiving ideas both for artwork and exhibition design. In case of artwork for blind and visually impaired people scenography becomes what Sodja Lotker defines as expanded scenography or performative environment which questions the activity of looking at scenography because looking happens with the whole body.

Keywords: blindness, multisensory, scene design, expanded scenography

1. INTRODUCTION

In year 2023 Citizens' Association "ReAktor" made project named *Come In-Inside* in order to expand theatre audience in Novi Sad and asked four visual artists to create tactile artwork based on poems of four contemporary poets. Primary idea was to include this project in theatre festival Sterijino pozorje in order to make possibility for blind people to come to festival and experience art. In 2024 "ReAktor" gave me a chance to be part of this project. This time it was named *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)* so together with teaching assistants Dragana Pilipović (PhD), Vladimir Savić (PhD) and Katarina Ketih Zaharijev (MArch) I made collaboration of third year students on teaching course *New Approaches to Design of Space in Art and Culture* at undergraduate studies of Scene architecture, technique and design and fourth year students on course *Scene Architecture – Design of Architectural Space* on same studies at Sub-department of Art and Design at Faculty of Technical Sciences (University of Novi Sad). Also one student of master studies of Scene Architecture and Technique took part in it¹.

Important goal highlighted by organizer of "ReAktor" project, visual artist Darija Dragojlović, was to display this installation in theatre foyer during festival in order to encourage artists, cultural workers and institutions to reconsider theatre art form in innovative ways since it is inaccessible to people with impaired eyesight.

In this paper I will explain process of creating artwork for blind and people with impaired eyesight, based on principles of scene design which raises question of boundaries between life and art since blind people experience space differently from people who can see. Final outcome of this project was making art part of these people's lives so aim of this paper is to explain how scene design helped in this process.

2. TACTILITY, VISION AND BLINDNESS IN THEATRE

In context of theatre that is predominantly based on vision, tactility as very rare opportunity for audience, is interesting topic to think about. Also it is not just the case with theatre, it implies for majority of contemporary art.

Patrice Pavis gives three points of view on tactility in theatre (Pavis, 2021). First implies to social convention of touch broken during the 60's in USA and Europe avant-garde theatre through performances which included change in way that audience receives those performances. Second point of view is on effect of tactility in the theatre based on materiality of scenography and stage space – sand, fire, water, which activate senses of audience. And third is based on audiences being able to indirectly (through an actor) take part in "cultivation" of "theatre material" during performance – in a way audience is touching tangible elements of theatre performance through an actor. His observations highlight use of certain materials that trigger multiple sensations – for example fire activates sensation of temperature and touch, vision and possibly smell. Also he refers to immersion in theatre that gives audience higher level of interaction just by watching actors on scene, but we can conclude that these interactions are based on eyesight.

In history of theatre there are examples that rely more on speaking, so hearing compensate other senses, including eyesight and touch. Elizabethan theatre was shaped around spoken word. There was no decor, scenography was reduced to some props but writers of that era, and specially Shakespeare, incorporated great imagery in text of their plays. Poet Patrick Gillespie explains imagery in literature as "any passage that evokes any of our senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, organic or kinaesthetic". Jennifer Rae McDermott even makes assumption that Shakespeare is "individual prone to synaesthesia – the condition where the simulation of one sensory pathway causes second sensory experience", in other to explain his highly imaginative plays and verses (McDermott, 2012, pp. 72). Architecture of Elizabethan theatre is based on small distances between audience and actors, so McDermott also highlights additional influence it had on behaviour and jostling of people in the audience and increased awareness of their and other people's bodies,

¹ Students authors of tactile installation *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)* are: Andela Jakanović, Anja Kодиć, Doroteja Dević, Ivan Nikolovski, Ivana Ačanski, Isidora Pokrajac, Jelena Kajtes, Jovana Dugonjić, Jovana Katić, Jovana Miletić, Katarina Blažić, Lara Dragaš, Lena Jankov, Lidija Mijatović, Marianna Travia, Marija Mladenović, Marko Župljanin, Marko Čizmanski, Miona Grujić, Nikoleta Radojičić, Sara Škvorc, Snežana Popin, Tanja Stefanović, Teodora Milovanović and Veronika Pavlov.

communication and presence (McDermott, 2012, pp. 72). Her hypothesis is that Shakespeare, amongst other poets, uses the “liminality of the physical senses to test newly emergent ideas of inwardness and individual consciousness” in English renaissance literature. At this point, it is important to emphasize that blind people state that they “see images” so they have developed imagery and vision, it is just not based on eyesight. In study *Perspective and the Blind* Barbara Ansaldi makes distinction between hedonic pleasure and aesthetic pleasure for non-sighted people: “the first one is immediate reaction to the contact with an object, while the second is the result of a complex mental processing triggered by the sensory input.” (Ansaldi, 2019, pp. 6). She also explains intellectual re-creation of image “built through the sensory, objective data coming from tactile perception that interact with imagination. It is a process that requires a way more intense effort of memory and abstraction if compared to sight; the final destination, though, stays the same: an aesthetic experience which is not generated only by sensory inputs, but also from an intellectual process influenced by a series of “subjective variables” (cultural background, personality, past experience, sensitivity etc...)” (Ansaldi, 2019, pp. 6).

I would like to mention that in brief analysis of theatre plays I found blindness as topic in portrayal of blind characters, such as Tiresias and Oedipus in Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex*, Gloucester in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Pozzo in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Hamm in *Endgame*. These are just a few examples as illustration, but deepened research and analysis can certainly be topic of another text.

3. ROLE OF SCENE DESIGN IN ARTICULATION OF SPACE FOR ARTISTIC EVENT

One of basic principles of scene design according to Tatjana Dadić Dinulović in book *Scene Design as Art* (Dadić Dinulović, 2012, pp. 285) is that it “relays on the primary need to establish and articulate the space for an artistic event”. This principle had important role in creating artwork for blind and people with impaired eyesight because encounter of blind people with art is rarely possible. Cultural institutions in Serbia are often inaccessible and justification usually refer to fact that lot of cultural institution are located in protected buildings or areas and it is impossible to adapt them to needs of persons with disabilities. Turns out that architecture as built structure and environment is in fact obstacle for some people and scene design as practice of designing and articulating space for event could make some improvement in quality of space.

I want to point that there are no persons with disabilities, but there are environments that are making some people’s lives more complicated and disable them in living their lives freely. Selwyn Goldsmith in his book *Designing for Disabled – The New Paradigm* adopts term architecturally disabled persons and says: “They are disabled because architect who designed the building did not anticipate their needs, or did not care about them. Congregately, they are people whom the architect can disable but whom he need not disable, or not disable as severely as he commonly does.”² We could say that architecture is physical platform on which we deliver performance of movement by passing through it but it is evident that buildings of cultural institutions in Serbia demand standardization of body to fit the architecture.

Before we started developing idea for tactile artwork we chose space for installation to be foyer of Novosadsko pozorište – Újvidéki Színház which is located on corner of two streets in city centre. Foyer is on ground level and accessible from small square. It also serves as exhibition space and it is equipped with hanging system for posters, drawings, photographs. Program of this theatre includes plays performed in Hungarian, on two stages. Productions are simultaneously translated to Serbian and it is first theatre in Novi Sad to incorporate subtitles in Russian for recently settled growing population in the city. Besides multilingual character this theatre is well known for excellent physical acting ensemble performing dramas, operettas, musicals, vaudevilles etc. Audience certainly appreciate bodily expression and body conscious program of this theatre which I find subtly visible on two symmetrical murals painted on main facade facing busy street.

In process of developing tactile installation and articulation of space of artistic event it was very important to have consultants. Mentors and lecturers, Mirjana Isakov and Snežana Nikolić from Elementary and

² In Preface of book *Designing for Disabled – The New Paradigm* architect, Selwyn Goldsmith, inventor of idea of dropped kerb in 1960s, explained meaning of terms medically disabled, financially disabled, and added term architecturally disabled

Secondary Boarding school “Milan Petrović” which is bringing up, educating, supporting, and empowering children and adults with all kinds of needs, gave us a lecture. It was devoted to principles of universal design and articulation of space for events for blind and people with impaired eyesight. They talked about entering and moving through space, audience interaction, design of pedestals and information about exhibition and extremely important instructions about tactile and visual perception of art. Our artistic event unfortunately did not have developed seamless mobility chain which would secure independent preparation for coming to event, transport through the city, coming to the building, attending event and leaving back for all the people, because it requires improvement of built environment, city transport, facilities, services and information. But it is evident that scene design as practice of articulation of space for artistic event is important part of this chain.

Ann Heylighen collected range of empirical material in study about how disabled people experience and understand the built environment. She says that blind people experience different building elements such as floors, ceiling, walls as one - as whole, and “people who are born blind consider furniture as part of that same whole, suggesting that they do not distinguish between fixed building elements, such as a wall, and movable objects, like a sofa” (Heylighen, 2019, pp. 5). She defines sound as extra boundary in space and mentions experience of professor Hull who liked sound of rain because it makes possible to him to perceive different silent objects from a distance by making different sounds against the windows, in the driveway, on the bushes, on the street (Heylighen, 2019, pp. 6). These observations point out the important role of theatre means, such as sound, in making art for blind and states the necessity to develop artwork in strong relation to space which is important principle of scene design.

4. TACTILE INSTALLATION AS EXPANDED SCENOGRAPHY

Principle of scene design in theatre, or scenography, is transfiguration of space of story into the stage space. Scenography is defined by architectural context and it is conditioned by performance shaped with different stage means. Scenography also determines the way in which audience participates in spectacle, and that makes spectacle complete. In case of artwork for blind and visually impaired people scenography becomes what Sodja Lotker defines as expanded scenography or performative environment which questions the activity of looking at scenography because looking happens with the whole body. Different possible meanings of the term scenography Tatjana Dadić Dinulović gives in book *Scene Design as Art* and highlights Sodja Lotker's expanding of term scenography to a spatial situation which holds dynamic relation of artist and audience thus making a socially responsible space.

Tactile artwork *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)* is based on transfiguration of poetry into multisensory experience and it was determined with idea that the blind audience, audience with impaired eyesight and other audience (wearing sleeping mask) could experience this installation. Concept of this installation is based on touching a “rope“ of different materials, leading audience parallel to sound of voice reading a poetry. Passages of poetry are connected to the feeling of touching the ropes made of materials with different thicknesses and textures. Rhythm of movement is dictated by voice and different ambient sound which appear between verses. In the end all those sounds transform into sound of violin playing music.

In first part of process, during workshop with poet and dramaturge Jelena Anđelovska, students created collective poem with cross-poetry method. Then this written text was transformed into spoken word – we recorded reading of poetry by student Jovana Katić. Since spoken word and sound is leading audience through installation, audio description of physical parts of installation was necessary, so we added a voice of student Marianna Travia as a guide. Another voice that was part of this artwork was from students who were mediators on exhibition and helped audience to put headphones and masks if necessary. All these voices represented sound of small student society which was telling how they feel through the verses, sounds and tactile characteristics of materials. Reading of description of installation and instruction for moving blended well with verses so border between material and designed aspects of installation was blurred with poetics. Construction carrying “ropes“ was made of metal and “ropes“ were made of nautical rope, elastic transparent tubes, fitness rope, guitar strings and gauze (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Tactile installation *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)*, Photo: Stefan Stefanovski, 2024

Placement of installation was determined by condition that it has its own space inside foyer so it was further away from entry into theatre hall. Passing vestibule of theatre students placed poster of the artwork which was designed by standards for vision of people with impaired eyesight – it had black, white and yellow colour scheme, simple design and easy readable typography. Also tactile path and tactile map with drawing of space and information in braille (in Serbian and Hungarian) leading to installation were added so audience could orientate to a place where they could pick up headphones and experience tactile artwork (Fig. 2). Audience was coming on nights of performances played at Sterijino pozorje festival and responding very well to this multisensory experience as some kind of intro and preparation for beginning of the theatre show. Also individuals and groups came during the daytime since theatre foyer was open.

5. CONCLUSION

After participating in creation of artwork for blind and people with impaired eyesight I wrote this paper trying to come closer to their experience and understand role of art in their lives. Use of voice, spoken word and sound as guide for movement and feeling of placement in undefined, vast space of the world perceived as such from point of view of blind people, should be reminder and interesting topic to think about for theatre makers who want to broaden theatre audience. Touch and tactility in controlled conditions and safe spaces like galleries, museums, theatres and cultural institutions give opportunity for building complex aesthetic and intellectual responses, so it is important to make possible for these people to enter and move through these institutions in Novi Sad because it is only way to provide direct social connection. Since architecture established as an obstacle in our built environment, scene design as practice of articulation of spaces of artistic events can help in making art part of people's lives. Theatre and art events have ephemeral nature so it is required to always consider possible relation of artistic content and art form with space and architecture.



Fig. 2. Tactile map of tactile installation *Touch a Word (Tactile Scenographies)*, with braille in Serbian and Hungarian (Photo: Tanja Stefanović, 2024)

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