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At the borders of scenography

Rachel Hann

Foreword for *Scenography and Art History* (2021, Bloomsbury) edited by Astrid von Rosen and Viveka Kjellmer.

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I always feel that scenography works best at a border. If you arrive to this book as an art historian, border thinking is one key for unlocking its potential for art history. Indeed, I encourage you to think of scenography as the crafting of borders. Whether in terms of disciplines or materialities, scenography weaves border feelings by highlighting the intersection of distinct stagecrafts, media, and ontological spillages between the politically contrived and 'the real'. In doing so, it leans on a cross-disciplinary range of subjects, techniques and processes that exceed the institutional contexts of theatre. Historically, scenographic practice has been conceptualized as a lesser form of architecture, akin to a potemkin village or painted backdrop, that serves only to communicate a preexisting message. Contemporary approaches to scenography embrace a more holistic account of how the combination of materiality, light, scent, or even temperature evoke feelings of place. The interface of scenography and art history provides an apt context from which to re-map and re-think the underlying borders and anti-theatrical biases that frame scenographic cultures. Whether the critical possibilities of a stage set or the multi-sensory experiences of gardens, I

encourage you to consider how scenographic techniques are present in a range of staged material cultures that intervene, irritate or complicated normative flows of space and place.

To aid the navigation of scenography's various expansions for those new to the subject, I offer three provocations to keep in mind when reading this book. First, scenography is never one 'thing'. Scenography is a combination of distinct stagecrafts (such as light, sound, costume and set design) often involving the labours of numerous designers and technicians, along with directors and performers. Anyone involved in the crafting of stage places. This reading of scenography transgresses and re-thinks the, I would argue, clumsy translation from Ancient Greek as 'scene painting' or 'scenic writing'. I personally prefer to imagine the labour of the *skēnē* in Greek theatre as a material intervention into the normative 'flatness' of the orchestra, which, in turn, re-imagined theatrical place. Rather than a descriptive object, the *skēnē* was a radical place orientating [--page xvii--] device that materialized on and offstage worlds, re-ordered theatrical spatial politics, and presented 'space' as an integral medium of theatricality. Moreover, *skēnē* in the original Greek denoted a 'tent or hut'; a temporary structure. My usage of scenography stresses this temporality and I urge you to consider scenography as an act of 'tenting' when reading the essays in this book. Yet, these are tents that can be made from light or sound, as well as wood or fabric. If the act of tenting is in some way formative of scenography, the envelopes of feeling or interventions with place that feature in this book become all the more accessible. Beyond a focus on scene painting, scenography as tenting exceeds its historical descriptive function to embrace a potential for proclaiming, irrupting and highlighting orders of place more generally.

Second, scholars of scenography have in the last decade transgressed a focus on definitions (what is) to focus upon what scenography *does*: how it affects, channels and shapes stages. I

propose to you that this has challenged the determinist assumption that stages precede scenography or, more directly, there are no stages without scenography. For instance, stages can be as technologically complex as the Royal Albert Hall or a square painted on the pavement. Both of these examples evoke latent potentiality for action, attention or reflection of stages that, crucially, are crafted through means of scenography (raised platforms, lighting rigs, lines on concrete, imaginative frames). Whether in a theatre, a public square, or in your own living room, stages are enacted through techniques or frames of technologies, materialities and imaginations. I summarize these techniques and frames as being scenographic in form and execution. Some may read this statement as all-inclusive, where scenography now relates to anything and everything. I navigate this critical distinction by arguing that whereas all scenography is scenographic, not all that is scenographic is scenography. I condense this position into the idea of ‘scenographics’, which as a collection of place orienting traits exceed a *crafting* of scenography (in theatres and as a profession) to include the *orientating* traits of scenographic cultures. Indeed, I stress the plurality of crafts, orientations, and imaginaries that frame scenographic traits with the addition of an ‘s’.

My proposal for scenographics, which frames some of the debates in this book, seeks to account for the multi-sensory and multi-media assemblages that promote, enact, or reveal feelings of place: whether in a play, a gallery, or the interiors of your home. While these are most directly evident within politically contrived interventions (from Christmas trees to visual merchandising), I propose that scenographics point towards a methodology for investigating the place orientating techniques and political narratives that culturally position bodies [---page xviii---] and peoples within a spatial imaginary of world. To study scenographics is to study how world imaginaries are encountered through material cultures. From encounters with maps to media representations, scenographics account for the often

seductive techniques for cultivating feelings of belonging, of country, of border, and, ultimately of world. Essentially, scenographics afford a timely lens for art historians to investigate how world feelings are engineered, affirmed, or enacted through art practices and everyday life.

Third, scenography exceeds strict definitions or expectations regarding its relationship to theatre making. Undoubtedly, scenography is integral to the art of crafting theatre stages. Scene changes in a production often present the greatest challenge to a design team. The transition from scene to scene – through a combination of lighting shifts, sound design and even costume changes or stage mechanics – affords an insight into the multiplicities of sensory and worldly experiences more broadly. Yet the integral role of scenography and scenographics in theatre making has been often at odds with how performances are analyzed. Oddly, scenography is still an emerging area of scholarship in theatre and performance. At the turn of the millennium, scenography was at best labeled ‘theory for theatre designers’, and therefore only relevant to this defined group, or at worst dismissed as being ‘merely background’ to the core subjects of dramaturgy and acting. In this regard, a book devoted to the interfaces of scenography and art history is long overdue for numerous reasons. I suspect for many theatre and performance scholars there was an assumption that the design labours of scenographers would be an easy fit with the analytical forms of art history. Nevertheless, as the authors featured in the pages that follow deftly argue, art history has been as ready to dismiss scenography on the same grounds that, until recently, allowed theatre and performance scholars to brush it off as purely decorative (as a practice) or vocational (as a form of thinking). The marriage of these subjects is, consequently, a welcome and exciting addition to the growing library of scenography scholarship and its many possible futures beyond theatre.

Given the above context, there is something of a fighting spirit to scenography that is willing to open itself out to new ideas, methods and techniques that transgress the limiting frames placed upon it historically. The authors featured in this book offer a series of positions on how this affirmative willingness to disciplinary crossing ideas might afford art historians. In that regard, scenography is always multiple and, in this border of flux, resists straightforward definitions of authorship and genre. Indeed, if you read this book through the lens of scenography as a crafting of stages, this may lead you [**--page xix--**] to questions such as; What if scenography is an art of crafting borders? What are the agents, techniques and practices of feeling borders? How do stages act like borders and what does this have to offer art history? In asking these types of questions, you gain insight into the willingness of scenography to reach beyond the regulated spaces of theatre and open out to other horizons inclusive of art history and beyond.