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Portable Theatre

The Paperback Stage

Daniel Sack

You think again of a theatre that would fit within your life. Your daughter's early bedtime, the nightmares that have started to wake her in the dark hours. You think of the difficulty of it all, the coming and the going at the same time and place. Years ago, you began sketching hypotheses for imaginary performance when you couldn't make it to the real thing and when the actual event so often left you wanting more. You think too of being at home and locking down. How you've found yourself turning to those more portable media—the drawing, the print, the photograph, the page—looking for ways these stills can cross back over into live time. You think of those who cannot cover the price at the door, those who cannot even get to the door, relegated offstage to the no-man's-land between nation states, itinerants constantly on the move and longing to stay longer. What a bold and tired project, to build a house with only three walls and to destroy it once its time had passed, when so many want nothing more than a stable house to remain. Whole structures held together for only so long, arranged for travel in crates or suitcases, checked in. What would it mean to have a theatre that did not rely on such grinding mobility, such extreme expenditure?

As so often these days, you look instead to your shelves, take down another book and begin to read. The armchair traveler, you pick something short. This one says "77 min; 232 pages" on the cover, a promise you think you can keep. *01: Ant Hampton: 77 min. Borderline Visible*, the spine says. *Time Based Editions*. The back explains: "This book is the printed half. The other half is sound. The two come together between your hands and ears." A QR code and hyperlink below lead to a 77-minute audio recording, and—donning headphones—a man's voice gently directs your movement through these pages, occasionally reading alongside you but far more often telling you a longer and more private winding story of a journey to the shores of Europe, where the issue of refuge has been negotiated for centuries.

It is not an easy read, alighting on horrific acts and unfathomable loss, nor is it a simple reading: you hear strands of music, field recordings laced with the cries of swifts and swallows, snippets of conversation intercede. In the book, isolated words excised from the recorded voices cascade diagonally across a blank page like poems of erasure happening before your eyes. There are many, many more images than text filling whole pages in succession. Photographs of the mundane edges of things: of streets, of shattered ruins, stray dogs, and bracingly blue waters, screenshots. They are full of the suggestive texture of one's lived passage through a foreign scene, the sensitivity of a stranger pricked by accidents and coincidence. Indeed, it is less a reading than a listening, less a book than a "place for looking"—in Greek, *theatron*. It is a theatre.

And then there are the novel ways this audio journey activates its material counterpart, the book, directing you to cover parts of a page, to skip around according to its own idiosyncratic order, to revisit certain pages so that they become landmarks for orientation. You find yourself caressing the surface, being told to imagine it a stone inscribed with braille or lined with the scrabble of time. Again and again, conventional reading is upended. Passages of text are encountered upside down so that letters return to their roots as alien symbols. There are road signs and shattered monuments in many languages, graffiti on walls. There are spans of black pages. At times you are told to close your eyes and listen—another kind of blackout.

In other words, the book activates you, too. It makes you a participant full of momentum as it keeps its appointed time, offering two spells for you to pause and stretch your legs—automated intermissions—before diving into its flow again. Time should play differently across a page: you should be able to stop for another cup of coffee, to reread that line when your attention drifts to whatever is making that tapping sound in the next room. You are so used to being the reader-as-writer, the one in control. A last vestige of autonomy where you maintain a certain plot as your own, this territory that you have inherited. But this book is made live and relentlessly moves in jumps and starts across so many absences: from the diaspora of the Sephardic Jews expelled eastward from Spain in 1492, to the atrocities of World War I, to the ongoing horrors of border policing happening in Greece today, to a more solitary forgetting—the merciless sentence of Alzheimer's. And on and on, in delicate chords of resonance. Throughout, T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, itself composed of fragments from the ruins of civilization, keeps reappearing. You directly face whole pages from this modernist ur-text and often glimpse scant passages peeking from behind the scenes as if it were also a constant shadow to the scene. ("Who is the third who walks always beside you? / When I count, there are only you and I together.") It provides a repertoire of structures for seeing these scattered events, as would a tarot deck,

the voice tells us. And like a tarot reading, much of the act of interpretation is left up to you.



The artist Ant Hampton has long used automated devices to compel people into playing out unrehearsed live encounters. Beginning in 1999, originally as part of the company Rotozaza (with Silvia Mercuriali), Hampton created audio-led scripts for single participants and groups to perform for themselves and for each other. These latter delegated performances were termed *autoteatros*, suggesting the world of automation—as in *Extra People* (2015), a performance that commands groups of fifteen participants to fulfill tasks recalling the labors of those disciplined by the machinery of Amazon’s fulfillment centers—as well as the autobiographical register drawn out by requiring someone to act without the guise of character or voyeur. If an earpiece first offered a means of prompting, the book offers another. Beginning with *The Quiet Volume* (2010), a trio of collaborations with Tim Etchells (of Forced Entertainment) turns to the device of the page to conduct two participants into a shared event. Other works provide sets of instructions or scripts for their audiences to undertake, in the manner of Fluxus and other precursors from the 1960s. The exigency of lockdown inspired the ongoing project *Showing Without Going* (with Caroline Barneaud of Théâtre de Vidy-Lausanne), which developed an online archive offshoot cataloguing related contemporary endeavors that untether performance from the unsustainable model of the tour and the exclusionary terms of contemporary theatre. All offer ways of making theatre in the aftermath of theatre.

Hampton frequently collaborates with other artists, pairing his sensibility with like-minded but divergent practices. This dialogic tendency corresponds to the way the works relate to their participants as co-creators. Our agency may be highlighted in specific moments where a decision is invited or compliance foregrounded, as when the script you read tells you to tear up the sheet in your hands (*OK OK*, created with Gert Jan-Stam in 2011). But there is also always the lingering possibility that one can take an adversarial approach to the directives, to act alongside the text without passive acceptance or shutting it out. What kinds of reading practices might these new forms of book, these new kinds of theatre allow?

The publishing initiative Time Based Editions, launched in 2023 with *Borderline Visible* as its first volume, both extends this life-long investigation and sets out in a new direction. It offers, as the website puts it, “a series of books binding print to time, merging sound with paper.” Each volume is the work of a different artist and can be read/heard alone or in programmed groups, where the turn of a page would constitute a common choreography. (Two more volumes are forthcoming at the time of writing.) The co-director of the series, David Bergé, has used books, installations, and the walking body to create what his website describes as “photography

without cameras." Time Based Editions offer another medial displacement—performance without theatres. Both Hampton and Bergé are familiar with more literal opportunities for displacement within the European Union: Bergé divides his time between Belgium and Greece, while Hampton hails from the UK, but chose to live in Germany post-Brexit. *Borderline Visible* faces the relentless brutality of involuntary dislocation, traveling to the peripheries of Europe to confront the crisis of forced migration.

Borderline Visible begins as the story of two people—Hampton and the artist Rita Pauls—setting out on a journey from Switzerland to Turkey. Pauls falls sick and Hampton continues the wander alone, relating to the reader/listener as a kind of surrogate companion and self. His telling keeps switching between “I” and “We” and, folded into daily experience and memory, distinctions blur between writer/speaker/reader. A prior collaboration had instigated this journey. Typing “Germany” into a map, the two had traveled to the site where the pin dropped, marking the arbitrary center of this nation and the beginnings of an investigation into the German language that neither spoke. A picture in *Borderline Visible* layers these moments atop one another: the digital map of the country with its cartoon pin; a cursor hovering over a second view of the map zoomed into topographic close-up; and then a photograph on the ground with a hand pointing its index finger at some indistinct center of a tree-lined field. Beginning at this “center” of Germany, they spent a week hitchhiking randomly across country, asking each driver the same question: What in your opinion needs to be said? These answers, memorized and spoken together in sync onstage, became the basis for the performance *Mouthpiece* (2019). As Hampton tells it, they thought this a methodology for “slow travel” and an “eccentric ethnography,” so when they were invited to repeat the experiment in Turkey, from whence Pauls’s Sephardic ancestors hailed, they agreed and set off.

This nexus of images around the problem of the map and the indexical gesture gathers additional resonance as *Borderline Visible* unfolds. Again and again a finger points at a mark on a map or, contrarily, at an uncertain spot amid a view on the ground, marking the difference between a name, laden with the violence of history, and the place it describes. These are answered by other maps with dots clustered across the undifferentiated blue of the Aegean Sea. Each records an instance of “pushback,” a euphemistic term for the often-lethal acts of border police who send migrants back to the sea, abandoning them in small dinghies to fend for themselves or literally throwing them overboard. Later there are photographs of another wasteland of dried stone and earth, punctuated by countless small wedges of wood, each painted with a five-digit number that stands in for the unknown body buried within. Picture after picture of this vast cemetery of the unclaimed and unnamed, until that familiar hand enters the frame and points off into the distance. *Borderline*

Visible holds its fragile net of relations and implications aloft stretched between those two indexical gestures: one pointing to the center of Germany, arguably the center of the European Union; the other pointing out to sea and into the cemetery, where the innumerable bodies of those trying to enter its borders have been lost. If the outside constitutes the inside, facing this unmarked and unclaimed spot, too, Hampton says, “feels like being in the center of something.”

Nested in the center of *Borderline Visible* sits a small cache of pages that you do not visit during the performance. You see them only after the fact, reading Hampton’s reflections on the photographic act in a way that transitions the book back to its more familiar form. He writes:

Travelling alone, I took photographs as a means of defense by deferral, flinging affect into the future: so often, the here-and-now felt saturated, too much to cope with. Going over the images later and making sense of things through writing became, it seems, the second part of this survival process—an attempt at collecting and connecting these “tiny sparks” into a redemptive constellation.

The photograph is, as Barthes, Sontag, Benjamin, and others have shown, a peculiar kind of indexical act. It proclaims “this was here; I saw this,” with a spark that only catches light retrospectively. Encountered on its own, silenced, much of the book titled *Borderline Visible* could be an album of a traveler’s photographs haunted with the traces of absent bodies, the edges of ruins, outskirts, and shorelines. There are only a few human interlopers on the scene, an accidental photobomb. But, prompted by sound, you constellate these images in time; the book-as-performance becomes a kind of “survival process” that illuminates those excluded from the country of the visible. You think of the swallows and swifts that keep clustering across these pages, those fugitives that, as Hampton puts it, “slip effortlessly across borders” so fast that they can only imprint shadows on the scene. That moment when, flipping the pages in the manner of a hand-powered cinema, you bring them back to flight again.

The page before you is the final page. It is the last page in this offering within the last issue of a journal that you have spent many years following. You first encountered it in your college library, where you pieced together photographs, scores, and first-hand accounts to imagine events that had happened before your time. You’d not yet read Amelia Jones’s argument that documentation of performance lived on beyond its pages, but you knew implicitly that you’d joined that ever-growing body of witnesses, had performed at their side. How far you’ve traveled, all this time sitting in your chair. Even as you leave this beloved venue behind—indeed, as you find yourself increasingly absent from all theatre, looking elsewhere for a live

art—other endeavors are already underway. This book—a ruin animated by a voice, your pointing finger, and gaping eye—is the most compact of touring companies. You pass it on to others hand to hand, a theatre no longer exhausted but on the move, attentive to matters far more pressing than star turns and standing ovations. To you, it seems, one version of a theatre redeemed.

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