

## **The dramaturgy of the landscape and its participants**

**By prof. Claes Peter Hellwig**

The Meeting place project that we have developed and continue developing has as basis the trans-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary meeting. Such meetings obscure a more basic and, for me personally, more central question, dramaturgy. The Meeting place project's basic premise is that the narration, the textual level, is based on the landscape and the participants, which affects and changes the dramaturgy for all involved. I will try to present some of the dimensions that one may encounter and follow into this new field that is emerging.

The Meeting place project positions us thus opening a new field in between the field of the landscape architecture/urban planning and the field of the performing arts. At the same time, the concept of the performing arts has undergone a series of changes. Traditionally, the field is divided into a series of stage forms that have historically represented the field, but which are becoming increasingly dissolved: opera, musical, theatre, classical ballet, dance, dance theatre, performance, happenings, circus, live art. It is today difficult to maintain any kind of orthodoxy. Some try; opera tries with respect to music theatre. But the mixing and hybridization that we experience today makes it possible to talk about the performing arts field as defined by the use of it, rather than by aesthetics. By forms of use, I mean forms such as psychodrama, event marketing, historical and other live games, educational and improvisational theatre, among others. The field is defined by its users.

To understand the dramaturgical development of the performing arts in recent decades, we must examine the classic drama and the epic drama compared to the current dramatic forms of the performing arts. One of the best and most effective descriptions of precisely these differences does Bernd Stegemann present in the following text on modern German performing arts:

“One can say that dramatic theatre produces a community of feeling and identifying spectators whose presence is sentimental because it is directed backwards. On the other hand, epic theatre in contrast produces a community of astonished spectators, who come to know the familiar as strange in order to experience the changeability of the world as possible. Their present is coined by a faith in the future. The postdramatic theatre produces pictorial puzzles in which the audience can no longer decide whether what they are seeing is a sensual irritation or a semantic effect, whether it is play or reality, whether it is meant or it really happens. This oscillation in perception generates a special form of presence. The self-reference of the modern subject, which is always experienced as a relation between at least two conflicting levels, becomes an aesthetical paradox of a self-referent perception. Thus, the presence of perception becomes aware of itself and expands into a broader presence. One perceives and realizes one's own perception at the same time. In this way,

the broad presence lays itself over the past and the possible future. The oscillations of postdramatic theatre become a feast of self-referentiality in which the contradictions are no longer psychologically or socially justified but rather become aesthetic games.

The other tendency of postdramatic theatre derives not so much from the visual arts but from Brecht, to the extent that it could also be called post-epic theatre. Here, the play on two different levels, as Brecht asked for, gets adopted, but without having recourse to the social position of the actor. It is no longer the political individual that tries to become aware of his or her class and, emancipated, stands in front of the audience, now the performer makes his or her own presence become the foundation of the stage presence. As a result, the techniques of realistic acting become mostly expendable because of the mimetic ability of creating a different situation on stage so that the actual theatre situation is no longer necessary. The actor becomes a performer, which means that s/he enters the stage not as an acting subject but as one who is experiencing the world and reality.”<sup>1</sup>

I will soon come back to Stegemann's concepts and try to show how the Meeting place project uses the achievements or the changes that the performing arts have made in recent years.

### **What is dramaturgy?**

What do I mean by dramaturgy? The classic dramaturgy has the purpose to create conditions for the most efficient communication of a specific content to a specific audience. This applies whether you engage in political demagoguery, commercial film or the performing arts. What is effective is of course valued differently. Hollywood measures the efficiency of revenue. Performance artists might measure it in how many people leave the show or how much scandal it caused.

Very often, we miss that there is dramaturgy both in the conscious staging but also in the performance of the unconscious. When Turner in the 1960's showed basic differences between performative strategies in theatre and politics, there is a clear distinction in the dramaturgical approach. He showed differences in how open or hidden the staging is, but also how the relationship with the audience is customized by the desire to communicate different aspects of what is staged.

The assumption I make is also based on the psychologist Erwin Goffman's theories according to which we engineer and participate in the staging of ourselves and our surroundings, both consciously and unconsciously. The identity that is created in this way is entirely built on the relationship with other individuals and groups, and largely expressed through performativity, from how we portray our individuality to how we shape and create our group affiliation. The inter-subjective perspective shifts the attention on the actual meeting, and makes us all co-actor performers, whether we like it or not.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernd Stegemann, “On German dramaturgy”, *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (2016), p 48

<sup>2</sup> Erwing Goffman, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1956)

The performative feature permeates society and is part of human life at all levels. There are also a lot of studies on animals showing their ability of performativity. They engineer situations in play or stage themselves in the struggle for a mate. Almost all play behaviour, whether performed by animals or humans, is rooted in what Gregory Bateson called meta-communication and is thus an important part of performative behaviour. The staging of the group affiliation has the same meta-communication in rituals and play and is often there to strengthen the group.<sup>3</sup>

In all this, of course, the dramaturgy forms a way of storytelling. The classic dramaturgy has, since Lessing created the concept, been part of an awareness raising activity and a carrier of an emancipatory idea. An idea which is very clearly seen if one considers the significant innovators Artaud, Brecht and Boal, who all stand for the idea that the stage should have a different meaning than entertainment. Artaud's starting point is the idea of a theatre that will give the individual an almost ritual experience, while Brecht and Boal reinforce the idea of a theatre of political changes.

Because the drama is entirely dependent on how the meeting with the audience is portrayed and how the specific content is communicated, it works through dramaturgical limitation of a well-used dramaturgical approach as a signal system of genres and forms of performative practices. The usual renewal in the performing arts is changing the dramaturgy by borrowing elements of other genres. The developments over the past hundred years also copy and transform a lot of dramaturgy forms of other areas such as media, movies, games, sports and more.

The Swedish theatre researcher Willmar Sauter launched a model of how the classical stage experience could be described:

**The sensory level**

The physical encounter between the spectator and the theatre situation, theatre room, etc.

**The artistic level**

The audience's knowledge of the conventions and tools used.

**The fictional level**

The audience identify with the story and the characters, which is the basis for an emotional intellectual experience.

Sauter believes that experiencing fiction goes from the sensory level through the artistic to the fictional level. However, it is still a classic transformation of subjects into objects for the audience described. To understand what happens to the post-dramatic performing arts, we need to look at how all these parts work.<sup>4</sup>

**The subject's changing role**

The clearest dividing line between the performing arts today and thirty years ago, is the approach to the audience. The classic stage drama was based on a subject's transformation

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Bateson, "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" (1972)

<sup>4</sup> Wilmar Sauter, "The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception" (2014)

into the object of another subject in real time and in the same room.

But much of the development in performance and dance etc. was aimed at trying in various ways to find strategies that made it possible to avoid that a subject is transformed into the object of another subject. The actual result was a lot of interesting dramaturgical strategies trying in different ways to change the relationship between the actor and the audience.

Much of this is based on a new vision of human beings as subjects. The idea that man is a creative being, allowing these activities to interact in some form of spiral, is not new. If the older form of identity became impossible to maintain after the post-structural revolution in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rescue was the inter-subjectivity concept. This movement in psychology believes that we create and recreate our identity in relation to others. Art becomes a tool in this type of processes, and the possible form of which the subject develops identity without necessarily having other didactic goal.

We see today a series of dramatic art forms that develop strategies making the subject in the audience and the subject on stage establish a more equal relationship. But also making the objectification impossible as a result of the theatrical situation. One of the most effective ways is to make the audience subject a co-actor so that the actions of the subject never will transform into objects. A great example is Gob Squad's "The Kitchen", in which parts of the audience are invited to participate by replacing the actor. In the end, there are just audience members who play in the show.

### **Brecht**

If we compare it to Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung* technique, we see how the opposite means to achieve this functionality are used. In the theatre of Brecht, the audience share their objectives as social elements. Brecht shows the audience a subject that gives the audience the critical role of an object.

The clear objectification of both the audience and the actors is accomplished by putting both in a historical context. The subject will catch sight of his/her objective role in the historical/political context, and thus, both the stage and the auditorium are unmasked. The amazing thing is that both the action on stage and the audience have dual roles. The switching of focus between displaying the actor and the role that is shown has its counterpart in the auditorium where the audience are both subjects as individuals but also acting the role of a critical audience.

Brecht's epic theatre technology can be seen as a common thread in a whole line of post-dramatic dance and performing arts forms. For example, in the German group Rimini Protokoll's performances that are built on Brecht's displaying theatre, the focus is on the object. At Rimini Protokoll, we, as the audience, should face "witnesses" who are themselves on stage presenting us their story. Rimini Protokoll has developed a series of techniques, all of which are based on an engineering reality, often by allowing the audience to meet a person who tells us and shows us his/her expertise. The audience can never be sure whether it is a true story, or how much of an authentic person they meet. Uncertainty can be like in the project "Calcutta 2004" The history that the Indian call centre employees lead

the viewer into can be either for real or fiction. The way to use the site as a factuality that changes by telling what is really involved is not new. Creating uncertainty as to whether what we are involved in is for real or fiction has repeatedly been a strategy of supernaturalism and other performing arts forms. In 1964, Ken Dewey, Charles Markowitz and Mark Boyle created a bus tour where passengers could not distinguish if what they saw was staged scenes or London as it was.

## **Boal**

The Brazilian Augusto Boal introduced a range of techniques to create a theatre that promotes change and gives theatre back its political significance again. Boal's book "Theatre of the Oppressed" (1972) was almost like a bible for theatre workers both in the third world and here in Europe. I remember myself when he was here in the late 1970's and did a workshop in Stockholm. We were totally enchanted by all the opportunities that we had to create a public situation that was so far from the ordinary of the performing arts. With different strategies for the Hidden Theatre and later for the forum theatre, he created a shift of focus from the stage and the actors to the audience and the co-actor.

Boal's forum theatre has borrowed much of its strategy from Brecht, with his use of the direct speech to the audience to make the audience transform into the subject. But Boal was also greatly influenced by the Brazilian pedagogue Paolo Freire. By letting the audience decide and dictate what happens on stage and what the actors will be acting, the audience are in a reverse process and become the objects of themselves. The audience explore the objective function, and in this way, the role is made visible. But the situation can also be discussed in relation to real political/social situations outside of the theatre.

## **From meetings to events**

As long as we are talking about experiences that a subject may have of other subjects, we can call them meetings. Meetings are governed by the same rules that apply to the "real world" and the performing arts. If we escalate to experiences of events of a different scale, which can no longer be experienced as the result of a single subject or a small group, we will see something else. In reality, such events are experiences like thunderstorms or traffic jams etc. In the performing arts, it is more difficult, but firework shows, really big festivals and sporting events are good examples. In the borderland between art, spectacle and sports, there are events that can be either categorized as events or only be experienced as events by a subject.

With the Meeting place project, we move the boundary between a subject's experience of a real place and the staging of the location as an object. The focus will be on the event that changes the image of the place, but also the subject's function in the event. There are thus two movements that twist together and create a new experience by changing the audience's experience from being a passive audience to an active participant. The subject becomes aware that there are several levels, but also that there are different ways of relating to the action/event. Focus is shifted away from the action and the event towards the presentation and the interpretation, and is on a process of reflection and lived experience.

These strategies are of course not unique to the Meeting place project, but is used in a range

of performing art forms that move in this borderland: live games, psychodrama and others, where the participants are in a role play. As in the above examples, one needs artists who use these strategies and who are aware that they will lose their power over the event/situation/experience when opening it to the participants. I define power in a classical way, as an asymmetric control of resources in social situations. This power gives the holder the ability to control other individuals' results and experiences. The artist or the creator of a meeting simply has to surrender part of the power of the experience to get more audience participation.

### **Immersive Theatre**

Many of the productions that we see today, and to which the term immersive theatre applies, are trying in various ways to maintain control and power over the scenic events, and thus, in reality, only give the audience an apparent sense of participation. In immersive theatre, the audience is, of course, given many more choices and opportunities to experience the work than in conventional theatre, with its clear division between audience and actors. However, in immersive theatre, the work is still very largely governed by a fixed narrative, even if the micro-level can contain completely improvised parts, as it is designed as a theatre. It is interesting to note that the audience's opportunities for different individual experiences are often not matched by the opportunities to take active part.

Immersive theatre is clearly blurring the boundary between actors and audience, but in the performing arts, such participation is not that obvious. In Punchdrunk's "The drowned Man" (2013), the apparent relative freedom of the viewer's participation is essential. An example is the Children's Underground Theatre in Stockholm (Barnens underjordiska scen), where the audience (children) are the actual participants. Just like in Punchdrunk, the actors control the course of events, but the much more permissive playfulness allows participants in all seriousness to say that they help to create the event. If you go to Teater Katapult and others, who involve the audience/participants in improvisational theatre by giving them roles, and in many respects the audience create the event, we have taken yet another step away from a script-bound narrative and the passive participant.

The Swedish company Poste Restante's performance "Dinner Club" is an absolutely brilliant example of how the audience is actually assigned a role and where the whole concept is based on participation. They create a school to teach the social norms of the 1950's by means of a course and a dinner, invite us to this mixture of different parts and create an event/performance that is entirely dependent on the audience wanting to participate. Poste Restante's actors function as course managers, and the participants are students who soon feel that they are part of a great spatial staging of an era. Poste Restante is quintessential for the play-oriented and participating performing arts. Through their careful work on spatial conformation, which is always based on a real environment, they show respect for both the place and the visitors/participants.

### **Site-specific - Live Art**

Site-specific art is a concept of the 1960's and 1970's that developed freely from the American minimalist approach, where the viewer is in a spatial relationship with the work that is specific to the location, and this relationship is the work of art as much as the artefact

itself.

The trend towards site-specific art as part of the artist's action is easy to follow. One of the things this particular development is trying to solve is the problem associated with the arts throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By trying to get away from being a commodity in a market, the artist tried to be just art. Another aspect of the movement into site-specific art is the idea of trying to take art to the "people". That means removed from the galleries and museums and taken into the street. Site-specific art thus becomes a social dynamic tool to seize the political dimension of art.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles' works from the early 1970's are interesting because at an early stage, they pointed the way to transforming artefacts into events and site-specific events. Her washing of the stairs in front of art museums or other official buildings do not just lift up the place, but also the unseen work of a profession without any status. She focuses on both the place and the event in a way that is completely new and gives the social role of the female artist a new meaning.

Understanding the importance of the development takes its cue from the happening movement, the Fluxus movement and the action revisionists in Vienna in the 1960's, towards the document-based installation art and the development of performance-influenced performing arts as Forced Entertainment and other theatres. The transformation of fine art into performance shows the importance of Peggy Phelan and makes her essay "The Ontology of Performance" extremely important.

"Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being (...) becomes itself through disappearance."<sup>5</sup>

By emphasizing disappearance, Phelan focuses on performance as non-material and non-represented. It is something transient that cannot be retained, which constitutes the event. There is finally a matter, of course, of whether the radical art and especially the performing arts should avoid their own materiality.

Deidre Heddon has a similar approach in her book "The Politics of Live Art". The very term, Live Art, signifies an art practice that locates itself *between* forms – art, but not as we know it, or theatre, but not as we know it. Live Art enacts a challenge to established histories and categories of practice and therefore to ways of doing and seeing, and also to ways of packaging, selling and consume. It is a form that is ephemeral and fleeting, that enacts a resistance to the commodified, exchangeable art object, providing a means for bypassing the art market and prompting the establishment of alternative, artist-led venues and networks. The aesthetics are about the present moment, of the here and now, and enable an

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<sup>5</sup> Peggy Phelan, "Unmarked" (2006), p 52

immediate encounter, an event between the artist and the spectator, troubling habitual relations of production and consumption, activity and passivity. If we start with the idea of the place and the event and the participants altogether creating the meeting place, it is a short step to talking about the emancipatory power of the meeting.<sup>6</sup>

The French philosopher Rancière has in recent years formulated one of the most interesting articles on art and criticism, saying that it is by balancing the tension between the two logical forces and by working on the border that art has the capacity to be critical. But he warns that romanticizing art can make it lose the platform for political activism.

"There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action."<sup>7</sup>

Assuming that the meeting between the place and the event and the participants is essential, and creates a specific situation, it is a short step to speaking about the meeting as an emancipatory force. For Alain Badiou, who argues "that truth is an experience, an 'Event', that occurs in time as a rupture, a break, an interruption of the static, overdetermined structures of everyday occurrence. Thus performance figured as event foregrounds its potential to act as a 'disruptive' temporal force that gets at something like the real, something 'more true' than the representational regimes governing other areas of cultural life."<sup>8</sup> In my view, Badiou's thought has a natural connection to the anthropological concept of liminality.

### **Turner and liminality**

For the Meeting place project's concept, liminality is extremely useful and goes back to the anthropologist Victor Turner's use of the term. He contributed by reintroducing the concept of liminality in the anthropological discourse. Turner and his followers devoted themselves to understanding the cultures as fundamentally dynamic and to make society a dynamic dialectical process rather than a static thing. He thought of culture as a constant struggle between structure and anti-structure. He developed his concept of liminality from a three-part model that Van Gennep created to describe transition rites (rites de passage). Van Gennep describes a process in which individuals shift status in relation to other members of society:

1. Disengagement in which the individual is removed from society and his/her identity.
2. The liminal stage in which the individual is kept separate and under observation.
3. The comeback, reunification, or post-liminal stage, in which the individual is re-integrated into society but with a new status.<sup>9</sup>

The liminal time is an intermediate stage in which the individual is removed from his

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<sup>6</sup> Deidre Heddon, "The Politics of Live Art" (2012)

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, "The Politics of Aesthetics" (2009)

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, "Being and Event" (1988, 2013)

<sup>9</sup> Victor Turner, "From Ritual to Theatre" (1982, 2014), p 44



normal identity and social differences while he/she is on the verge of a personal social transformation.

Turner believes that liminality creates a condition he calls "communitas". For Turner, communitas is a temporary social formation in which solidarity and equality stand in opposition to a normative structure, that means a deconstruction of the normative order, and thus becomes for Turner a vision of a culture's very essence. However, this is temporary structured and defined to be the dialectic way to re-insure the existing order.

"I have used the term "anti-structure" to describe both liminality and what I have called "communitas." I meant by it not a structural reversal but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses."<sup>10</sup>

Turner's theory is that communitas usually occurs on liminal places where the social order of the ordinary society is set aside, which means for instance carnivals, holidays and rituals, where the change from one social status to another may take shape. This can also be seen in how influential the countercultural forces from the 1960's are, in that they re-emerge again and again in contemporary models of resistance and solidarity. Just compare Reclaim the Streets movement and others, which to the chagrin of many precisely recreated the carnivalesque celebration/demonstration in any way that challenged the existing order. But as much, it had its roots in medieval costumes.

Although the Meeting place project does not have the grandiose ambition of creating communitas which temporarily will tear up the social order, there will still be opportunity to create liminality, where we as participants leave everyday life and see ourselves and our surroundings with new eyes, and maybe get some new experiences.

### **The logic of opposition**

Claire Bishop criticizes participatory art by stating that it is not interesting in itself, but requires a political social content. I am inclined to agree that participatory art requires a given common interest and an area or a dilemma to explore, and should be based on the participants' social and political situation. I do not mean that the participants must necessarily be able to identify with their role in the work of art, but rather see participation as an opportunity to explore an alternative function. Chandra Talpade Mohanty made me aware of this requirement for political action which challenges our conventional view of subjectivity and activism.

"Alvarson, Ford-Smith, Abzaldúa and Sommer revolt together thus a serious challenge to the liberal humanist vision of subjectivity and activism. In different ways, highlighting their research questions regarding memory, experience, knowledge, history, consciousness and agency in stories emanating from the (collective) self. They advocate a definition of activism that are multiple and often contradictory but always historically rooted in specific struggles. This concept can be understood only through the *opposition's* logic, not by

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<sup>10</sup> Victor Turner, "From Ritual to Theatre" (1982), p 44

*identification's logic.* <sup>11</sup>

We may borrow the concept of the opposition's logic and connect it to the Meeting place project. The place is local and clearly embodies something which in many ways goes against globalization as a tool for economic interests to establish colonial relationships with the local community and its inhabitants. The global economy means to colonize our reality and our minds and make us victims. It has a counterpart at the local level which redefines the very interesting and contradictory concept of activism. For my part, the work we did with the Meeting place project in Brazil was an eye-opener to see how important this opposition's logic is to understand how the post-colonial situation makes its presence in Sweden.

### **The transgression of the private and the public**

The process of making the artist's body and the body of the spectators signficatory and historical and unruly and set to each other in relationships and in time was formulated by Miwon Kwon as the process from private to public in her excellent book "Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity". <sup>12</sup>

The Meeting place project twines this process, allowing both the audience and their bodies to be elements of the process. It is the body that moves in a public space and gives resonance to the space with its actions. But it is also a public space that one steps into/out of. That in turn affects the audience/participants through the materiality and the historical roots which are the result of other people's thoughts and work. This creates the multi-layered relationship in a public space and an action in a situation, which altogether creates an event that can only be seen as a process with no real beginning or end. Or rather as a series of renegotiations of relationships that lead to new generalizations, which in turn create new behaviours, which in turn alter the experience and leads to new generalizations, which in turn create new actions etc.

### **The Brechtian dilemma**

The dilemma that Brecht and his successors are grappling with is, of course, how the subject should be able to get out of the situation of being an object or become the object of another subject. The post-epic drama that we face today is in many respects based on both Brecht and Boal, but usually without their attempt to achieve a political result. If we add Live Art and the developments undertaken in fine arts and dance, we get the basic dramaturgical grip of post-epic theatre. That is a performer which showcases a meta-situation where the subject cannot be separated from the actions performed, and where there are no objects to portray, but rather a situation to examine together with the audience, or to play with. The common focus of both the creator and the participant is the problem, an area, a subject of investigation. By attaching this meta-situation to the idea of participation, the site-specific room is enhanced, which creates possibilities for a meeting where the exchange of experiences goes both ways. But it also creates a meeting where an actual space and one or more participants create an event that deepens the experience and

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<sup>11</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminism without Borders" (2003)

<sup>12</sup> Miwon Kwon, "Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity" (2004)

creates new qualities in the meeting.

The theatre room was once a room for examining issues affecting the society in which both those on stage and those in the audience shared their ideas of the world. The theatre space is an artificial room and still a guarantee that the investigated fiction is formalized, and that reality is held outside in the right way. The connection fiction versus reality is central when it comes to the performing arts with their complex relationship to the work and the audience. This diverse and complex, but also very safe, situation is of the kind that Turner and anthropologists would say is necessary for us if we try to see ourselves and others in a new way.

When the Living Theatre once in 1968 created the show "Paradise Now" and played it at the festival in Avignon, they invited the audience to participate in the Love-in, a protest in which they threw off their clothes at the end of the show. When then the group, headed by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, took the audience, now naked, out in the street, the scandal was a fact. The scandal is not that the Living Theatre is parading naked in the streets of Avignon, but that they do it with the audience in the public space.

The Meeting place project uses mainly public places and we give the actual space new features. We bring the connection between fiction and reality as a game or a meta-position. But the proposed situation is in any way equal for everyone whether they operate the work or are only part of an ordinary audience. We all get to lift our eyes and take in the bigger picture. It becomes apparent that we as Mohanty have the possibility to see the space as part of political activism.

"While global capitalism does not care a jot about the people or the environment in any single place, because it can always move on to other people and other places, means the place-based civic activism on the contrary, a commitment just for specific people at specific locations, for their safety and well-being "<sup>13</sup>

I do not mean that the Meeting place dramaturgy always leads to political activism or political consciousness, but it has the potential to change our view of reality in the most fundamental way. Whether we are the creator of the work/meeting or the participant, something has changed.

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<sup>13</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), p. 261