

Left: The second floor gallery at Ryerss Mansion, a site of composer Phil Kline's *Locus Solus* project



Below: Ryerss Mansion blueprint and exterior

"The more one explores and the more one gets to know, the more one sees. Sooner or later one is bound to find the Hidden City, those numberless little back streets of old houses, or old houses newly restored...that slip through the city from one river to the other..."

NATHANIEL BURT, *The Perennial Philadelphians* (1963)

Resonating Space

BY THADDEUS SQUIRE



NO ART, whether monumental or ephemeral, can avoid the imprint of space. The idea that there exists “neutral” or “sterile” space for art—space that allows the art to speak for itself without regard to its spatial context—is a highly questionable notion today. Yet this presumption about the severability of art and space, drawn largely from classical artistic practices, has maintained a curiously high degree of purchase within the fine and performing arts, as evidenced by the frequent lack of consideration given to space in many artistic and curatorial processes. To situate a performance or artwork outside the proscenium theater or gallery no longer reads as sharply critical or carries the avant-garde tenor that it might have had twenty-odd years ago. But in this “post-political” era in the relationship between space and art, there is much more at stake. As artists and curators struggle increasingly to create artistic meaning and value for audiences, the role of the site, and its potential to literally “ground” art in a community and serve as a connector to audiences are becoming more central to the conversation around the meaning of art within our broader cultural fabric. Space, more than ever, is imbued with the power to create, amplify, thwart or undermine artistic meaning and value.

Concepts such as “non-traditional” or “alternative” space, as well as “site-specific” and “installation”—all of which have become integral ideas in contemporary practice—strongly suggest counterparts. As a consequence, they have created a pervasive and dangerously false dichotomy between practices that integrate con-

sideration of space into artistic or curatorial process, and those that do not. I argue that there is a great deal at stake in removing these distinctions from practice today, so that space, whether traditional or alternative, may always be an integral consideration in the artistic and curatorial process.

Describing the norm against which a space becomes alternative or a practice site-specific is challenging. The most general answer may be found in the early 20th-century avant-garde rebellion against the proscenium theater, gallery and museum, which were then—and perhaps remain today—the prototypes for traditional, or “non-alternative” space. Traditional spaces such as the theater or gallery are often regarded as empty vessels or receptacles, capable of accommodating a great volume and diversity of art. It may also be implied that creative practices that use these kinds of venues often leave profound spatial consideration out of their creative processes, or at best consider an idealized, abstracted space. Art needs to enjoy a high degree of independence and mobility to move freely from venue to venue over time. As Ludwig van Beethoven composed his monumental *Symphony No. 9*, was he thinking about the space of the Kärntnertheater in Vienna, where the work was premiered in 1824? Most likely not.

Yet, we find history rife with examples of artists deeply engaged in spatial dialogue, even in the context of more traditional spaces, artworks, interpretive frameworks and practices. Gustav Mahler regularly re-orchestrated or revised his own works and those of his predecessors to fit to the acoustic and other aesthetic needs of different halls, curatorial contexts and modern tastes. An extreme example of this practice was his revision of Beethoven’s ninth symphony, which he transformed in 1902 into a chamber version for performance in the intimate setting of the Secession Building in Vienna. The revision was

designed to create a kind of musical-visual installation to surround the unveiling of Max Klinger’s sculpture *Beethoven*. Here, working with historic repertoire, and in the context of a rather conventional sculpture exhibition, Mahler becomes an early practitioner of installation, joining various artistic and historical elements to fit a space. It is arguable that his approach was demanded both physically and philosophically by the Secession, whose space defined a political and aesthetic alliance between the arts at the dawn of the 20th century.

The genre designation installation, which is synonymous with site-specific and increasingly applied to a staggering range of visual and performance work, implies a mode of curatorial and creative work that is both custom-created for a space and also permanently or semi-permanently tied to the space, physically and conceptually. These modes of practice are also often associated with notions of alternative space. There seems to be a presumption that with alternative space, the presence and influence of the space is foregrounded for both artist and audience, and is presumably integrated into creative and curatorial practice. As with the above example, we find a degree of play in these ideas as well, in particular in the idea that installation involves an unbreakable tie with space.

In June 2006, Peregrine Arts presented the world premiere of composer Phil Kline’s *Locus Solus* in Philadelphia. The work is based on the 1914 proto-Surrealist novel of the same title by Raymond Roussel. In the novel a fictional genius-inventor and collector, Canterel, takes a group of visitors on a tour of the wild and eccentric menagerie of curiosities housed on his estate, *Locus Solus* (“Place of Solitude”). The work had been originally conceived by Kline as a concert music-theater work for violinist Todd Reynolds, singer Theo Bleckmann and Talujon Percussion Quartet to be premiered at The Kitchen in New York. When

the work—yet unwritten—was bumped from the venue’s schedule in 2005, Kline and I began a conversation about how to present it in Philadelphia with an eye toward site-specific treatment. I searched for sites focusing on the themes of science, invention and collecting pathologies that emanate from the novel and eventually happened upon Ryerss Museum & Library, the little-known former home of 19th-century merchant and passionate collector Joseph Waln Ryerss. Built in 1859 and currently operated by the Fairmount Park Commission, the mansion is home to Ryerss’ wildly eccentric and incongruous collection of 20,000 objects from around the world. Kline fell in love with the site and developed an installation-based compositional approach for the piece, which was staged throughout the house, taking audiences on a simultaneous visual and acoustic tour of the collections of both Canterel and Ryerss.

The resonance and dialogue between the work and its chosen location added a galvanizing layer of meaning and interpretation—both for the work and the site—that would have been lost in a more conventional performance space. It may be difficult to imagine *Locus Solus* extracted from the space of Ryerss, but the idea has been proposed to tour the work to other sites that resonate with the “gentle madness” and legacy of passionate collectors. Though not originally conceived as site-specific, *Locus Solus* became such on its road to presentation, and in the process acquired a rich and very unique ability to tour while retaining (paradoxically) its site-specific import.

RESONATING SPACE

Peregrine's current projects offer three more variations on the conversation between art and space. In March 2007, we will present composer Fred Ho's *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Suite* (1998), in partnership with Temple University. *Black Panther Suite* is a multi-media and live jazz "vision quest" about the life and times of Malcolm X. An older work, *Black Panther* has toured extensively through conventional theater venues, yet for our presentation, we chose to partner with the Freedom Theatre, Philadelphia's oldest African American theater, located on North Broad Street. Freedom Theatre's building was a former meeting place of the Black Panthers. Not only is the history of the site tied to the subject of the piece, but also the Theatre in general is connected to an African American community in North Philadelphia for which Ho's work may be very new, but the topic at its heart nonetheless familiar and perhaps profoundly contemporary. In this case, the work is historic and unchanged and the theater space conventional, but the choice of site and organizational partner transformatively significant.

This season Peregrine is also producing a new installation of British composer Gavin Bryars' landmark work *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969). Bryars created the piece with variable instrumentation and the invitation to artists and humanists to "intervene" with the work's open concept, blurring the boundaries between creative authorship and interpretation. For our intervention, Peregrine is focusing on the life and legacy of the famous Philadelphia book collector Harry Elkins Widener, who perished on the Titanic and whose collection figures as one of the greatest monuments to humanism of our time. Working with the archives of the Rosenbach Museum & Library, whose founder, A.S.W. Rosenbach, was Widener's mentor and book dealer, Peregrine and New York's Ridge Theater will create a music-theater installation of the work in Lincoln Hall of the Union League of Philadelphia, where Widener was a member. The project is a partnership with Temple University, whose students will perform, and the Abraham Lincoln Foundation, whose mission is to preserve and interpret the League's history. Here an historic work is created anew by engaging the rich fabric of Philadelphia's social, industrial and scholarly history and positioned in the seemingly unlikely, but powerfully appropriate visual and historical space of the Union League.

Of final note is Peregrine's largest production, *Hidden City*, which is a festival-exhibition of site-specific art in under-known, obscured or endangered heritage sites throughout Philadelphia, produced in partnership with the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. The project, which is intended to become a triennial, is slated to open in spring 2009 and will prospectively encompass roughly 30 sites and 25 artists/projects. At the core of *Hidden City* is a mission to balance in equal dialogue artistic and humanistic investigation, and to explore new modes of reciprocal interpretation between historic sites and artistic practices as well as community engagement. This mission will necessitate an extensive and very intimate conversation between the sites, their communities and the artists, making *Hidden City* an engine for the ideas at the core of this article.

The foregoing examples illustrate that distinctions between traditional/non-traditional and site-specific/non-site-specific, with regard to space and artistic practices, are highly flexible and dubious at best, and are most interesting and potentially meaningful if left

Left: Ryerss Mansion

Right: Founders Hall at Girard College, one of the sites for Peregrine Arts' *Hidden City* project

that way. All space adds a dimension of meaning to art, and all art may be brought in conversation with space. Even the most generic theater or alkaline gallery space inserts itself inexorably in the dialogue between art and audience. The curatorial and artistic dialogue necessary to engage space can happen in many ways and on many levels, ranging from the history and significance of a site, to matters of pure architecture and acoustics. By far the deepest and most effective approach to engaging space is to regard it as an essential collaborator in the artistic or curatorial process. In Peregrine's mission to multiply meaning and value for art, our lack of space has become one of our greatest artistic and operational assets. At every step in the development and positioning of projects, site is compelled to be our most important collaborator.

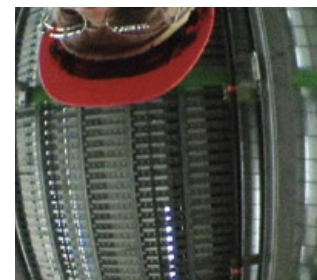
Peregrine's low-volume, project-based curatorial model and long-term commitment to projects makes this approach possible. More traditional producing and presenting organizations that are designed around high-volume, season-based programming and fixed venues must contend with both the virtues and vices of dedicated space. A home space does offer logistical ease for high turn-over production, and can become a familiar beacon and safe haven for audiences. On the other hand, dedicated space also can become a liability, not just in terms of operating sustainability, but perhaps more significantly in the way it can rob an organization of the flexibility to grow and change with practice, and can even become, in some cases, a literal



and symbolic *barrier* between programs and new audiences.

Lack of adequate performance and exhibition space has been a perennially hot topic of conversation within the Philadelphia arts community. Perhaps this deficit is more illusory than real. Philadelphia—maybe more than many cities of its size—possesses a staggering variety and abundance of space, if one is willing to keep looking beyond the proscenium and white box. Peregrine's *Hidden City* is designed to be a mechanism for exploring the uncharted social, historic and artistic space of Philadelphia. It also is meant to inspire a broader and deeper approach to artistic and curatorial practice in general—one in which art permeates the space of our Hidden City, transforming sites from convenient meeting places for artists and audiences into powerful catalysts for meaning and significance in contemporary culture and society.

Thaddeus Squire is the artistic executive director of Peregrine Arts.



PCAH Awards its First Interdisciplinary Grants

THE PHILADELPHIA CENTER FOR ARTS AND HERITAGE last year announced a new Interdisciplinary Professional Development Grant (IPDG) program, designed to increase the capacity of Philadelphia artists to create work drawing from disciplines outside of their principal areas of practice. This year, IPDGs funded five such investigations.

Miro Dance Theatre received support for travel to the Netherlands and Germany to meet with artists and organizations involved in explorations of new media in the arts. Through visits to the V2 and Piet Zwart Institutes in Rotterdam, and the Netherlands Media Art Institute and The Waag Society in Amsterdam, Miro's artistic directors were able to investigate possible uses for audio, visual, and interface technologies as tools for performance and composition, laying the groundwork for a deeper investigation of the ways humans interface with technology and the degree to which they can control or be controlled by it.

Theater and visual artist **Whit MacLaughlin** was awarded a grant that allowed him to consult with international experts in virtual reality technology at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications and the Ars Electronica Fest in order to explore virtual space as a medium for artistic expression.

Group Motion Multi Media Dance Theater received a grant to collaborate with composer Philip Kline to develop a series of site specific pieces featuring "mov-

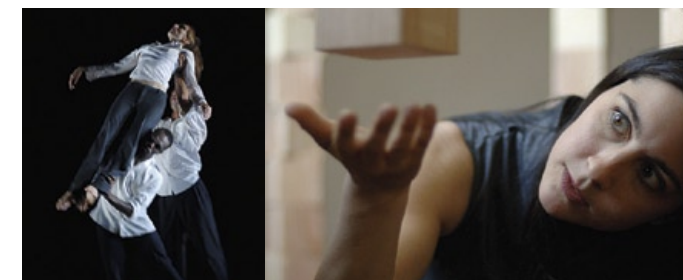
Clockwise, from top left: Composer Phil Kline; Choreographer Nichole Canuso and MIRO Dance Theatre (photos: J.J. Tizio); Peter d'Agostino walking in a tunnel of the LHC (Large Hadron Collider) at CERN, Geneva, the world's largest particle physics laboratory; Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative Director Paula Marincola

able music" emanating from electronic playback devices attached to dancers' bodies. The project will focus specifically on the meaning of public art in the consciousness of Philadelphians.

Visual artist **Peter d'Agostino** conducted research for a collaboration with several quantum physicists, gaining knowledge in the phenomenon that occurs when matter meets anti-matter—what physicists term a "puff of light." D'Agostino seeks to develop work that will give equal status to science and art, so he set out to learn first hand the research methods and techniques employed by quantum physicists.

Nichole Canuso Dance Company received funds to embark upon a one month exploratory/training process with Director Jennifer Childs in order to enhance the company's capacity to perform works that employ theatrical methods.

The IPDG program is co-directed by PMP Director Matthew Levy and Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative Director Paula Marincola. Marincola believes that interdisciplinary work is especially fertile ground for inspiration. "Artists are often intensely curious about and stimulated by disciplines other than their own. I think that kind of curiosity is one hallmark of creative individuals of all kinds—they



see analogies in and find inspiration from many places and many modes of thinking and doing. Supporting collaborations for artists with other kinds of specialists and practitioners from outside their immediate areas of expertise ultimately enriches and expands their practice. It also allows them to explore and research within parameters that they themselves define.

"There is a long history in avant-garde practice of artists working in an inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary manner. What we're doing at the Center now with these IPDGs is simply recognizing that this way of working has become increasingly attractive for many artists in our community as well. Our hope is that by providing seed money at the early stages of inter-disciplinary explorations, we're also laying some groundwork for future large-scale projects of ambition and high achievement. That such major projects might eventually be commissioned by Philadelphia institutions and premiere in our city would be icing on our cake!"