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ART SEEN: INTERNATIONAL

STAGE SET STAGE // ON IDENTITY AND INSTITUTIONALISM

by Tina Gelsomini

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Scene: The evening of January 16, 2014. Paul Desmarais Theatre, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. The lights are dim. The screen has just gone dark to swallow up the wood-paneled walls of the enclosed theater. The barely audible shifting of bodyweight in cushioned seats reaches through the silence.

Enter stage left: Dorit Margreiter, visiting artist & co-curator of the January 16th film program. As the lights go up Margreiter makes her way slowly along the carpeted floor to the front of the room, to rest against the theater's central structure alongside curator Barbara Clausen. Her positioning immediately places her both on and off stage, caught on the margins of our frame. With her appearance, the immediate, immersive effects of the film screening have been disrupted. Applause gives way to discourse. The discussion is ignited. The fourth wall is broken.

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The evening's film program is part of *STAGE SET STAGE: On Identity and Institutionalism*, SBC Gallery's exhibition project that breaks the traditional vernissage-run-close exhibition standard. While the gallery's main space in Montreal's Belgo Building remains the nexus of the exhibition, featuring an interactive research-station installation, *STAGE SET STAGE* claims a plethora of spaces across the city – in which curated workshops, performances, talks, and screenings are cranked out tirelessly over a five-day period. Our evening in the CCA's Paul Desmarais Theatre is only one such occasion, isolated physically – but thematically woven back into the larger threadwork of the exhibition.



Josiah McElheny, *The Stone Barge*, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archive, 1934. Photo by Frank Bell. Logo by Conny Purtil and Josiah McElheny.

In a series of works that continuously allude to the instability of starts and ends, the curators' talk takes place roughly halfway through the screenings. The evening, instead, is opened by Oliver Husain's *Purpled Promises* (2009 / 10'), a short experimental film that obsessively draws the curtain for a spectacle that will never begin. Within Husain's screen, a simple free-standing metal curtained frame is pulled back by a gloved hand only to reveal a second one behind it; a fan flutters aside to expose a box; a close-up on the box's hole reveals another frame in the distance; an entrance manifests within an entrance until the screen goes black. Then, a man's dramatic voice booms through the speakers and darkness, warning us that the stage itself is falling in on us. His narration depicts us stumbling through the theatre to escape, bumping into other theatergoers in a chaotic break for the exit. Yet as we reach the door, the voice tells us, it becomes just another gateway; an Alice lost in Wonderland frenzy of mad beginnings. Experiential by design, Husain's opening film deliberately hyper-sensitizes us, provoking an acute awareness of our body's relation to the space we inhabit and those who share it, at the same time that it invokes the performative nature of those spaces.

Similar notes are struck in Katrina Daschner's *Parole Rosette* (2012 / 8'), screened just after the artists' talk, in which an all-women performance is played out on the sumptuous stage of the Teatro Regio in Turin. The sharp, militaristic performance of two groups of queer couples, one dressed in near operatic garb, the other group in leather bondage, is intercut with close-ups of the theatre itself. A buttocks is exposed. The camera jumps to the theater's seats, filling the frame with a supple red rounded cushion. The cuts create the sensation that the movement of the performers precedes the architecture, effectively reasserting their agency over the space.



Wu Tsang, *Wildness*, 2012, HD video (video still), courtesy of the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York

In Wu Tsang's documentary *Wildness* (2012 / 72'), the interactions between space and body are far more wrought with tension. *Wildness* is set almost entirely within the confines of the Silver Platter, a bar in LA's MacArthur Park that has been the meeting point for the Latin LGBTQ community since the sixties. The community's sovereignty over the safe-space is jeopardized by the appearance of the filmmaker and DJs NGUZUNGUZU, magnetically drawn themselves to the power and history of the Silver Platter, as they begin a weekly non-Latino, progressive performance and dance party at the bar. While the various tensions unfurl, both on-stage at the Silver Platter and on-screen in Tsang's film, the institution works as the stabilizing voice and visual of *Wildness*. Heavy narration structures the film, partially recounted by Tsang with moments of clarity spoken by the imagined personified voice of the Silver Platter. The neon sign of the bar is shot from the sidewalk, and works as an equally important staging device, with variations of the establishing shot recurring multiple times throughout the medium-length film.

The final two works selected by STAGE SET STAGE's main curator Barbara Clausen and guest curator Dorit Margreiter are Josiah McElheny's *The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture* (2012 / 30') and Margreiter's *Broken Sequence* (2013 / 8'). While altogether singular in execution, Margreiter affirms that both works engage with utopian blueprints gone wrong. Faux-documentary *The Light Club* traces the plan for a fictitious queer-utopian light room of Tiffany glass, using the actual Vizcaya mansion of Miami as its imagined site. A collage of still and moving images, archival photos of actual historical figures and modern views of the grounds shot largely in black-and-white create a picturesque and oft humorous depiction of Vizcaya's Light Club.

While McElheny relies heavily on voice actress Zoe Leonard's voice-over to contextualize the story, Margreiter's *Broken Sequence* opts for silence, or perhaps more pointedly, an absence of words to construct her narrative. Margreiter shot the film over two separate visits to China's Wonderland, an amusement park outside of Beijing whose construction began in 1996 and petered down shortly after. *Broken Sequence* begins and ends with long shots of what appears to be construction, but is actually the tearing down of the site. Artificially inserted sounds of crunching gravel are dispersed throughout the film, which lingers over one site and then the next, revealing the abandoned turrets in the open farmland of rural China. Concerned less with storytelling and more with creating a space for questions, Margreiter mediates on the simultaneous presence and absence of a structure – the simultaneous building and breaking of place and culture.

While each of the works may stand stronger alone than as a cohesive unit, the program of *STAGE SET STAGE* knowingly entangles us in an overlapping, disjointed assemblage of our inhabited space. As Clausen and Margreiter give their final remarks, the lights do not revert to dimness. The theater's doors remain open. Applause once again fills the theatre as the curators discreetly bow out of the frame.

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